CHAPTER I

Language and Gender

Our individual speech does not... free us in any simple way from the ideological constraints of our culture since it is through that forms that articulate those constraints that we speak in the first place.

Cora Kaplan

Language is the most powerful medium of representation. The categories and distinctions of any given language are often considered natural and they subscribe to the external reality. But language is not simply a vocabulary shared by a given group of individuals. It is a system that constitutes meaning. Joan Scott observes: “Without attention to language ... one imposes oversimplified models on the world” (Hermann, 1994:359). These models perpetuate conventional understandings. When critically approached, language opens up new interpretative possibilities.

Besides the established objectives of language, there are a few hidden motives for linguistic discourse. Language is one of the forms of covert politics used by the power structures that govern the society. It is one of “the politics extended by other means,” as Althusser points out (Rivkin and Ryan, 1998:297). It is rather a form of “politics that does not look like politics,” as James C Scott phrases (Duncombe, 2002: 89). Politics is manifest in different forms in society. Every politics has its strategies to strengthen and perpetuate itself. Language, as a system that constructs meanings and constitutes categories, is the main force behind
the perpetuation of any ideology. Francine Wattman Frank enumerates the diverse functions of language:

Language combines the functions of a mirror, a tool, and a weapon:
...[language] reflects society...human beings use it to interact with one another ... [and] language can be [used] by groups that enjoy the privileges of power ... to legitimize their own value system by labeling others ‘deviant’ or ‘inferior.’ (1989:108)

According to Frank, language reflects and transmits the culture of the society on the one hand and serves as a powerful weapon with which the dominant group maintains their value system and hierarchy on the other.

Feminist researchers on language, expose the oblique patriarchal agenda behind linguistic discourses. They argue that language is one of the strategies used by men to fortify and perpetuate patriarchal ideology. All patriarchal discourses radiate the power relations between women and men. Patriarchy creates an elaborate web of structures through language which reinforces and justifies male dominance. Sexism in androcentric language can be seen as a systematic relation of power: “…all speech events in patriarchal cultures have as part of their context the power relations that holds between women and men” (Cameron,2006:16). Poststructuralists think that the signifying practices of a society are sites of struggle. Linguistic relation is in the form of Choamskian competence and performance, which is similar to domination and subordination in power structure.
Feminism originated in the west as a response to the social situation of male domination and female subordination. Many feminists have understood “woman” as a gender which is a social/cultural construct. Gendering of language first began when linguists classified nouns as masculine, feminine and neutral. “Sex” meant a biological difference whereas “gender” referred to a “linguistic” category. Linguists used the term “gender” to refer to grammatical categories based on sex, but independent of sex difference. Later feminist theorists borrowed this term to refer to social behaviour which is not biologically innate but sociologically acquired. There is a clearly defined distinction between sex and gender in the feminist agenda. Sex is a biological construct, that is pre-natally determined, and something that the individual possesses rather than something that she or he does. Gender develops post-natally through experiences and impressions from the society. Therefore, gender is not something a person has, but something woman and man develop, do or perform. Biological differences are seen to be irreducible, but the meanings built around that differences are constructed. Simone de Beauvoir argues that femininity is socially constructed and it has nothing to do with biology or psychology. She remarks: “One is not born woman, but rather becomes, a woman” (1960:295). De Beauvoir underlines the uniqueness of the female gender and remarks that the image of a woman is subtle and intricate. According to her, the characteristics associated with women and their oppression are not essential but have been acquired for cultural and political purposes.
Realising oneself as “male” or “female” is a social decision based on cultural norms. Language, as a significant carrier of cultural norms, plays a crucial role in labelling one “male” or “female.” The statement that “the child is a girl” is a linguistic expression of gender. Anna Livia and Kira Hall point out that such a statement of gender is not merely descriptive; it is prescriptive. This statement prescribes norms for the child to grow up and behave as a girl (1997:12). This is part of social indoctrination: “Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife, /they cried” (Das, 1991:12). Phallocentric language that appropriates gender identity imposes a conventional model. Kamala Das challenges the customary ingredients of gender dichotomy in the tradition bound Indian society: “Then I wore a shirt/and a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of/this womanliness” (1991:12). By defying the dress code that symbolizes gender identity, she attempts to discredit the discourses that categorize certain behaviours as male-specific and others as female-specific.

The label “female” confines one to domesticity. Creativity has been taboo for women. Attempts have been made from the very beginning to overlook women’s talents and their creative endeavours. In Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot, Lady Montage is referred to as a “weeping poetess.” According to Emerson, the American liberal thinker, a woman should not write; she would rather inspire men to write. Artistic and creative attempts by women have been considered unconventional, if not abnormal. In Henrik Ibsen’s Doll’s House, Helmer reminds Nora that she is a wife and mother. She should subordinate any other inclination to these conventional roles. Nora can either love or work. She cannot do both at the
same time. Nora becomes an unconventional woman when she replies;” That I don’t believe any more. I believe that first and foremost, I am an individual, just as much as you are” (1910:30). A creative woman has no place in a patriarchally structured family and Nora’s fate is not different.

Virginia Woolf’s lament that Shakespeare’s sister could not have the opportunities of her brother is significant in this context. The emerging of a female writer was a rare possibility until the end of the eighteenth century (1975: 48). In the nineteenth century, customs, laws and manners were a little relaxed and this resulted in an unusual output of women’s writing, mainly fiction. In the Victorian age when Wuthering Heights was published by Emile Bronte, Charlotte Bronte wrote the preface under the pseudonyms Ellis Bell and Action Bell. Bronte sisters remained anonymous and used pen names to evade the hostile impression that awaited a woman writer. In the patriarchally surcharged literary world of the nineteenth century, Emile Bronte tried to prove that literature is not an exclusively male domain. She was well received by Victorian England but fell from favour when her real identity was disclosed and her texts were dismissed as typical feminine literature, which requires no serious critical attention. Her misrepresentation of her gender was a subversive quest for identity through a literary career, especially in an age when the literary conventions and the rules of the genre were rigid. An examination of the annals of literary history exposes the glaring absence of women’s voice. In this context, Deborah Cameron observes: “If we look at a society’s most valued linguistic registers… we find women for the most part silent and in many cases silenced” (1998:3). The right to express oneself
has always been a male prerogative. The dominant male denies freedom of expression to the female. They condemn “the Other” to silence, to invisibility.

The canon of Western literature resounds with the absence or silence of women not because they are less proficient but because the males find it a productive space to fill. Xaviere Gauthier observes that woman’s silence or muted speech has been a source of inspiration to men. According to him women have been mute throughout history: “…and it is doubtless by virtue of this mutism that men have been able to speak and write (Marks, 1981: 162)

Woman's unresponsiveness often elicits greater response in male writers. Edgar Allan Poe speaks at length about the woman who is dead. In “The Raven,” the speaker mourns unconsolably. But the beloved's "messenger," has only one word, "Nevermore."

Men have always enjoyed supremacy in the domain of language and have exploited its potential and shaping power to create and propagate the ideology of male dominance and female subordination. The myth of linguistic origin that makes language a male forte is the Biblical account of Adam naming God’s creatures. Male dominance over language began with the first man. Scripturally, woman is denied access to language. It is said in the Book of Genesis that God described reality through the act of speech and named the objects of desire: “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ And there was light” (Gen 1.3). Later, God handed over the power of naming to man, in the absence of Eve: “Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast in the field and every bird in the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them: whatever the man called every living creature, that was
his name"(Gen.2:19). In the Biblical myth of naming, it is observed that woman is not merely silent, but in a way totally absent. Language is developed and controlled by the male sex. Women have no role either in the development of language or in its innovations. Encoding and decoding language do not form the rightful legacy of women. Patriarchal institutions recognize the unique potential and the shaping power of language. The male writers vigilantly guard the domain of the written word from encroachment by women writers, thereby avoiding the insertion of female-centred subject matter into the male tradition. When monopolized by men, language becomes a vehicle for the transmission of patriarchal ideology.

In patriarchal culture, gender is a mode of thinking that projects masculine as hierarchically superior to feminine. The asymmetrical man/woman binary is so thoroughly embedded in our institutions, thoughts or actions that it appears to be natural. It is therefore difficult to approach gender as something not given but accomplished, not natural but constructed. But feminists like Penelope Eckert and McConnell-Ginet refuse to regard gender as biological. According to them, it takes a lifelong process of socialization to make one “gendered"(2003:15). Gendering is a social/cultural process practiced uninterruptedly in society. Kulick and Schieffelin also argue that children are not “empty vessels” into which something like gender or culture is deposited (Duranti, 2006: 352). One’s gender emerges through interactive process in which individuals accept, reject, or modify the cultural and gender norms in which they are socialized. According to Candace West and Don. H. Zimmerman, gender is something we do. It is the interactional activity that people universally manage through social encounters: “Doing gender involves a complex of socially
guided perceptual, interactional, and micro political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures” (1987:126). For them, gender is not an attribute or a variable but an achievement. Discursive psychologists see gender as something constructed in and through discourses. From their perspective, gender identities “remain relatively fluid, capable of adapting to the particular social settings or contexts in which people find themselves” (Edley, 2001:192). According to them, gender is fluid and dynamic and is constructed communally through the interactions involving the operation of power. This is because some of the ways of understanding the world are culturally dominant or hegemonic (Gramsci, cited in Edley, 2001: 191-92). Feminists view patriarchal discourses as strategies used to subordinate woman in the hierarchy of gender.

Conceptualization of gender as an interactional activity necessitates an enquiry into the structure of language. According to Saussure, biological difference has nothing to do with the hierarchical representation of “male” and “female.” Saussure views linguistic phenomena as a dynamic, relational system of oppositional difference. Structuralists put forth the theory that linguistic signs are arbitrary and relational. No word can be defined in isolation from other words. In this context, Saussure remarks: “Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of others” (1966:114). No sign has a meaning of its own. A sign produces meaning through its similarity to or difference from other signs. The differential functioning of the sign indicates that gender is not related to any innate sexual qualities of the subject, but to the opposition to the sign of the other gender. Paired opposites
“male” and “female” acquire their meanings mutually. It is the absence of the characteristics included in the male that designates the female. Male is one which is not a female, not superior or inferior. Saussure also observes in *The Course in General Linguistics*: “…in language there are only differences without positive terms” (1966:120). Saussure posits that it is futile to search for positive transcendental grounds for meanings external to the language.

Linguistically speaking every piece of language has the same value. But this equanimity is disrupted in linguistic practice. Language as a system which structures and constitutes the world is built on the dialectical foundations of Western philosophy. Western metaphysics has always been defined as structured by binary oppositions which exist in a hierarchical mode and have been accepted as universal. The binary oppositions have been extended to the realms of gender to restrict female identity. Gender is identified in language by the binary opposition man/woman. In the widely accepted oppositions such as presence/absence, mind/body, man/woman, positive/negative, order/chaos, language/silence, speech/writing, good/evil, all the first terms emerge as self-sufficient while the second ones are presented as accidental. Feminists Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray point out that all first, over-valued terms in the binaries go together and dominate over the second term. This kind of patriarchal and irrational valuation makes the female associated with silence and absence and the male with language, and presence. The Othering of the female is a natural outcome of the subordination of the latter element in a system of binary poles or opposites: mind / body inner/ outer, family/ society, living room/ hearth, public sphere/private sphere...
and so on. Sexism is inherent in the system and speakers and writers who use this system actually construct man and woman as unequal.

Language is phallocentric in its symbolic order and andro-centric in its structure. The most effective way to expose the patriarchal values and systems that undermine the individuality of women is to confront the politics of language. An understanding of the male-centred language reveals its oppressive structures. In the case of human referents, feminine terms exclusively refer to members of the female sex whereas masculine terms are used as both sex-specific and sex-neutral: that is, masculine terms are used for both members of the male sex and the human beings in general. In this context, Richard Gilman writes:

The nature of most languages tells us more about the hierarchical structure of male-female relationships than all the physical horror stories that could be compiled…that our language employs words man and mankind as terms for the whole human race demonstrates that male dominance, the IDEA of masculine superiority is perennial, institutional, and rooted at the deepest level of our historical experience. (1971:174)

Gilman hints that males have encoded sexism into the language to consolidate their claims of male supremacy. Superiority of male, accepted in the natural order, is reflected in the structure of language and is effectively reinforced in patriarchal writings. Women writers fail to shape a reality that is advantageous to them using a language saturated with male bias.
An overview of the linguistic elements of the androcentric language shows that women do not enjoy the same space as men. Feminists are concerned with the gender-neutral use of gender-specific terms like “he” and “man.” Consider, for instance, the linked statements: Man is a rational animal; he has the power of discretion. The use of these terms has been extended to cover both men and women. In the sentence, "the student should bring his identity card,” the male pronoun "he" stands for both individual males and individual females. When used as a general referent, the male pronoun includes females as well. This is a convenient and oblique way of making women invisible. Such use of gender-specific terms diminishes the importance of women and blankets them under a male term. When the terms man and he are used in a gender-neutral way only the male image will evolve; the female image, that is included, becomes totally invisible. The he/man usage supports the visibility and primacy of men and the identity of women, who form half of the population, gets submerged in the identity of men. In this regard Sheila Rowbotham remarks: “If she enters mankind, she loses herself in he” (1973:33). The use of generic masculine like layman, forefather, and old masters and so on subsume all humanity in the terms man, father and master. Women are never recognized in general or as representatives of humanity. Language thus trivializes women. Captions like “Industrial Man,” “Political Man,” and “Social Man” never conjure up images of women, though these also are meant to include women. Camera operators whether male or female are called “cameraman” and a business executive is titled “businessman” as if a woman with camera skills or business skills never exists. The effect of he/man image on
thought and reality is highly disastrous to the identity of women. In this regard, Dale Spender remarks:

The introduction of he/man into the structure of the language has helped to ensure that neither sex has a proliferation of female images: by such means is the invisibility of the female constructed and sustained in our thoughts systems and our reality. (1980:154)

Gender-free use of masculine terms leads to the reinforcement of male image. Neither men nor women see the female sex encompassed in the symbol he/man.

Sexist language often misleads. It is often gender-inaccurate and gender-ambiguous. When “man” is used as a generic term the sex of the referent becomes vague as woman’s presence or absence remains unaddressed. Feminists find such sexist usages offensive and they suggest alternate usages. Using inclusive terms or using separate male and female terms for job titles helps to put women on an equal footing with men. “Spokesperson” includes both sexes on a par with each other whereas “spokesman”/ “spokeswoman” helps to make the sexes visible. Advocates of non-sexist language prefer the title “chair” to describe the head of an academic department rather than the female-exclusive “chairman.” It is discriminating to designate married and unmarried women with different titles. Using "Ms" as an inclusive term to designate women irrespective of their marital status is the suggested remedy. Even the generic "man" as part of larger words or phrases can be changed. Instead of using the term "mankind," it is easy to substitute "humanity," "human beings" or even "people." Even a common term like "manmade" can be changed to "artificial" or "synthetic." Instead of trying to "man a project," one can
“staff a project” or "hire personnel.” But it is difficult to find neutral words and to keep them neutral in cultures in which words acquire meaning from a sexist frame of reference. In this regard, Erica Wise and Janet Rafferty comment:

Our language may be so infused with a tradition of inferred masculine referents that even the seemingly neutral words now in vogue “person,” “adult,” etc may lead to muscular inference. (1982:1189)

Such usages represent the world as if it is peopled exclusively by men. Reality is falsified through the ambiguous and inaccurate use of gender-specific terms.

Gender-specific terms are often used, as if they are gender-neutral. According to Janice Moulton, this use is a kind of symbolic insult to women (Vetterling-Braggin, 1981:105). Feminists like J. Penelope and Dale Spender argue that language is a male conditioned discourse designed to perpetuate male dominance and to suit male purpose. There are many terms in English that encode a male worldview which subordinates women or renders them invisible or silent or pictures males as the standard or the norm. In English there are several gender-specific terms that betray a pattern of male bias. Dale Spender finds that there are more words for males than for females in English. Most of these male-identifying words are semantically, socially and culturally positive (1980:15). For instance, an unmarried man is positively designated as a bachelor. But, a woman of the same status is called a spinster and it assumes a negative connotation (1980:17). It is an example of social denigration. Spender points out that words used for women are more sexualised than words used for men.
She cites the example of “professional.” The statement that “She is a professional,” is likely to be understood as she is a prostitute. This implicit sexism of language is one of the reasons for the subordination of women. This masculine-oriented use of language is connected to the masculine value system. This linguistic process influences our ways of thinking. Thus, the patriarchal ideology gets internalized in the social psyche.

On a close analysis it can be seen that there is an overemphasis to sex difference in English. It seems inevitable that one should know the sex of the person concerned before using the third person pronoun. In this regard, Marilyn Frye comments:

> If I am writing a book review, the use of personal pronouns to refer to the author creates the need to know whether that person's reproductive cells are the sort which produce ova or the sort which produce sperm. (1983:22)

The use of singular personal pronoun is impossible without knowing the sex of the person one is referring to. This tendency to make sex relevant where it need not be considered as the key to the context is an instance of sexism practiced in language. The gender ambiguity of the first and the second person pronouns is another case of illustration. The emphasis on sex difference in language is deliberate and it contributes to the male dominance.

Feminists also oppose androcentric occupational and professional titles. They argue that gender-specific terms like “poetess” or “lady doctor” denoting profession or occupation suggest the confirmed state of maleness in the norm of
these functions. Women who write poems or who are professionally doctors seem to be deviant versions of poets and doctors. The use of sex-linked modifiers is patronizing and it suggests that a particular sex is the norm for some occupations. Dale Spender refers to this sexism:

One semantic rule which we can see in operation in the language is that of the male-as-norm. While this rule operates we are required to classify the world on the premise that the standard or normal human being is a male one and when there is but one standard, then those who are not of it are allocated to a category of deviation. (1980:10)

Spender finds the classification scheme which divides humanity into those who are plus male and those who are minus male very offensive.

Luce Irigaray observes that man-made languages with marks of ownership in grammar, vocabulary and connotations of gender facilitate the suppression of the feminine. Patriarchal bias can be traced in the way gender is attributed to words. The animate and cultured are designated masculine whereas the inanimate and uncultured are assigned feminine status. Whatever connotes greater value is masculine and things of less importance and use are feminine: a sofa (un fanteuil) is masculine but a chair (une chaise) is feminine. All higher class goods are gendered masculine. It is impossible to be totally free of these rules while writing. So she suggests the remedial measure of working from within the patriarchal discourse. Women writers should try to infect the male discourse and bring about radical changes from within. This is the method of "leaving open the possibility of a different language" (Irigaray, 1985:72). Feminist literary criticism
has played a decisive role in breaking the logocentric tradition and challenging the supremacy of the privileged concepts and values in the patriarchal systems.

Feminist criticism reveals that language, as a tool of communication, is saturated with male bias. Sexist view can be projected in descriptions even without using any generic masculine or in openly disparaging descriptions. A deliberate marginalization of women can be seen in newspaper reports on atrocities committed on women. Though it is woman who is subjected to torture, the focus is always on the man who is the offender. Deborah Cameron quotes a newspaper report on an incident involving a married couple: “A terrified 19 stone husband was forced to lie next to his wife as two men raped her yesterday” (1998:11). Man is the subject of the main clause and the assault on the woman is pushed back to the subordinate clause. Her identity is that she is “his wife.” Cameron offers striking examples of writing that take the males as the norm without using any particular terms which one may object to:

The lack of vitality is aggravated by the fact that there are so few able-bodied young adults about. They have all gone off to work or look for work, leaving behind the old, the disabled, the women and the children. (1985:121)

Here the phrase “able-bodied young adult” is obviously used in such a way as to keep out women.

John L. Austen speaks of “performative sentences” that can change the world. When one utters “I do take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife” (under the proper circumstances), that very utterance changes the world for him
(1975: 5-6). In this sense, sexist language creates a sexist reality. According to Nelly Furman, the traditional marital pronouncement helps to perpetuate gender-discrimination and male superiority:

> In the sentence ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’ the word ‘man’ refers to the essence of a male being, and the word ‘wife’ describes woman, not as a person, in her essence, but as a dependence that is to say, simply as a relational sign.

(Green, 1985: 64)

When marriage is thought of as a verbal deed, the choice of words clearly indicates how the marital relationship is viewed.

Theories or postulations in circulation about women have a very powerful impact on the conception of their identity. All discourses on women highlight the essential difference between the sexes and justify male dominance. Church upholds the superiority of man and insists on woman’s submissiveness. Joan Cadden refers to the “scientific” finding that men have greater heat than women which allows them to purify their souls. This makes them superior (1993: 171). According to Sandra Lipsitz Bem, nervous system has a fixed amount of energy which, in the case of women, is reserved for her reproductive organs. If it is spent on developing her brain, it would be harmful to her health (1993:10). Freudian and Jungian psychologies present the idea of man as self or normative and woman as the Other or deviant. According to Freud, biology is destiny. “Penis envy” or “castration complex” results from a sense of inferiority in women.
Discursively constructed gender identity reinforces the essentialist theory developed from the biological difference between men and women. Essentialism justifies the boundary between the sexes. In this context, Jane M. Bing and Victoria L. Bergvall observe: “If women were the same, they might ask for the same privileges enjoyed by men. The boundaries between the sexes needed to be reinforced…. ” (Coats, 1998: 500). Naturalising inequality is the first step towards discrimination. Feminists discard biological determinism as patriarchal justification to withhold women from power, political or social. Toril Moi echoes the feminist concern when she comments: “…what was decided among the prehistoric Protozoa cannot be annulled by Act of Parliament” (2001:85). Simon Baron Cohen’s categorization of women as “empathisers” and men as “sympathizers” depict woman and man as psychologically different. Such a classification limits women’s choices. Simon Baron Cohen believes that niches appropriate to men do not accommodate women. In this regard, he observes:

People with female brain make the most wonderful counselors, primary school teachers, nurses, carers, therapists, social workers, mediators, group facilitators or personnel staff People with male brain make the most wonderful scientists, engineers, mechanics, technicians, musicians, architects, electricians, plumbers, taxonomists, cataloguists, bankers, tool makers, programmers or even lawyers. (2003:182)

There is a hidden political agenda behind this apparently harmless discourse. Deborah Cameron challenges this view. She observes that male definers of “male”
and “female” conveniently place women on a lower stratum by highlighting the difference between the two sexes. Cameron unravels the real nature of this choice of vocations in “Men are from Earth, Women are from Earth”:

Female brains are better suited to occupations like nursing and primary school teaching, which apparently do not involve any systematizing, but only the ability to empathize—and of course to live on a much smaller salary than a plumber or an engineer. (2006:144)

Contemporary discourses try to present man and woman as different but equal. But it needs to be noted that when difference is naturalized inequality is institutionalized.

Binary perception of gender assigns different roles to men and women. The assignment of role behaviour is an important way of keeping men and women in their “proper sphere.” Individuals and groups are subject to boundary policing. Those who stretch the boundaries of their sex role are either silenced or labeled deviants. Active women become “aggressive bitches” and nurturing men are ridiculed as “wimp” or “sissy.” Culturally defined gender roles mediated through language and literature, restrict both sexes: “Existing sex role standards exert real pressure on individuals to behave in prescribed ways” (Inge, 1970:5). Traditional male role, though not always comfortable, is never as inhibiting as traditional female role. In this regard, Elizabeth Janeway remarks: “…the fence around women’s place is more apparent to those living inside it than to those outside in men’s world” (1971:23). Women are always at the receiving end,
especially from the angle of language. K.K. Ruthven remarks that language is specifically a woman’s prison: “…linguistically speaking, women are doubly disadvantaged in being (as it were) prisoners of the male prisoners in the prison house of language” (1984:59). Women are the captives of a male-centred discourse; they are forced to endorse the patriarchal ideology institutionalized by men. They are often left to a cloistered life; they live their cocooned but turbulent life with no troubles to the male world.

Gender-dichotomy on which man-woman relationship stands reduces woman to a mechanical tool designed to serve man. Women are always considered appendages of homes: “Be embroiderer, cook or a quarreler/…Fit in, belong, said the categorizers” (Das, 1991:13). The various institutions in society insist that women fit in the framework of gender roles. In the poem “The Suicide,” Kamala Das voices woman’s predicament:

I must pose.
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman,

Gender identity enforced and perpetuated through language, compels women to pretend. Every woman desires to defy conventions and discourses that conform her to linguistic passivity. But Das realizes her loss of identity and inability to dissent from her object position in the phallogocentric language.
Within the framework of patriarchal dominance, woman is relegated to the periphery, to “the back of the car,” forced to “sit still in boats,” “while at the prow, stern, wheel he draw.” This exclusion and marginalization make life miserable. Deliberate suppression of female competency stifles women. Women’s poetry brings out the common experience of oppression shared by women. The protagonist in Margaret Atwood’s “Bored” sighs in frustration: “I could hardly wait to get/ the hell out of there to/ anywhere else” (1995:91). The problem that the protagonist faces is close to ennui. It is, as Betty Friedan remarks: “…that bored, diffuse feeling of purposelessness, non-existence, non-involvement with the world” (1963:267). The bored woman sits looking, “looking hard and up close at the small details.” The protective all-knowing man enjoys being guide to the woman. He thinks that she is inexperienced and ignorant; he points out and names the things that she has seen: “He pointed/ such things out, and I would look/at the whorled texture of his square finger, earth under/ the nail” (1995:91). The silence is epigrammatic. Woman cannot name or express her problem in the ordinary male-centred traditional language that is closed to the female perspective.

Denial of opportunities for women is justified on the ground of the ideology of domestic fulfilment. Society always expects man at the helm. Talented women find life disastrous. Always playing a secondary role is unbearably boring to them. In her poem “Planetarium,” Adrienne Rich makes an attempt to revive the forgotten figure of Caroline Herschel, the astronomer. Herschel was doomed to obscurity on account of her female identity whereas her brother was accorded all the honour. "Planetarium," is an attempt to bring to life the erased subaltern, to rehabilitate
women absent in history. The astronomer symbolizes the patriarchal exclusion of female figures. Many women have had their merits stolen or denied because intelligence is considered odd in women. Intellectual women have been usually considered deformed. The speaker laments her lot:

I have been standing all my life
in the direct path of a battery of signals
the most accurately transmitted most
untranslatable language in the universe
I am a galactic cloud so deep so invo-
luted that a light wave could take 15
years to travel through me And has
taken I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind. (Gelpi, 1975:38)

She states that her ordinary life as a woman, the one who suffers pulsations, is justified, if translated into images in her poetry. Her poetic images have a power of relieving the body and reconstructing the mind, which was logically affected by these pulsations. By placing her artistic function as a poet more important than her biological function as a woman, Rich challenges the gender identity patriarchy conferred on her.

Theories about femininity and masculinity propagated through male writings create a mindset in men and women favourable for the perpetuation of male
hegemony. The real life experiences of women are overlooked in male centred writings. Female perspectives on marriage, familial relationship and love have been unheeded. Women are not supposed to have a perspective different from that of men in the orthodox patriarchal system. What women want in actual life is not a master but a friend. They protest against being dictated. In this context, Atwood writes from her own experience, in the poem “Is/Not”:

You are not my doctor

you are not my cure

nobody has

that power, you are merely a fellow/travellor. (1976:224)

The aggressive tone of the poem is unladylike. But Atwood adopts a masculine style; she is not sentimental or emotional.

The way we have been socialized determines the way we see the rest of the world. Patriarchal indoctrination explicitly trains female children to use language as a medium of submission. The restrictions imposed on women in the use of language deny her power to express herself. Robin Lakoff points to the practice of reserving stronger particles for men and weaker ones for women. This inhibits women from expressing their strong emotions: “The difference between using ‘shit’ as opposed to ‘oh dear,’ or ‘goodness,’ or ‘oh fudge’ lies in how forcefully one feels” (Cameron, 1998: 242). It is therefore difficult for her to give expression to strong emotions as Charlotte Bronte asserts, “women feel just as men feel” (1998:96). Some of Shakespeare’s characters give voice to this societal trend. King Lear praises Cordelia’s soft voice: “Her voice was ever
soft, "Gentle and low-an excellent thing in a woman” (Act 5 scene 3). In The Taming of the Shrew, Katharina, the “shrew” is despised for being outspoken and her sister Bianca is praised for her silence (Act 1 scene 1). Otto Jesperson presents language as ideally balanced between “masculine” and “feminine” elements. Men’s speech imparts variety and vigour to language whereas women are expected to keep away from vulgar expressions, thereby keeping the language within the bound of propriety (1922:237-54). It is frustrating that women should hide her emotions beneath the veneer of refined speech. Margret Atwood advises women to express their powerful emotions, to write: “Permit yourself anger/ and permit me mine/ which needs neither/ your approval nor your surprise” (1976:224). She does not want her anger to be “washed or cauterised,” and “needs instead/to be said and said” (1976:224). Atwood challenges patriarchal insistence on women to use veiled and indirect style of speaking and writing.

The linguistic constraints on women make it impossible to have a true representation of reality or identity either in speech or in writing. Patriarchal ideology, that insists on “femininity” inscribed with silence and passiveness, offers a set of choices. In the guise of a freedom of choice it cripples the non-normative group. It is obvious that the speaker has no say in deciding the list of choice which is determined by the dominant males. Language at once offers immense freedom to create a world and entraps the deviant group within its limit. Women find this man-made “language trap” inhibiting. It is seen that women are deemed insecure when they employ traditionally feminine modes of speaking, but
they are assessed negatively when they employ more assertive ways of expression. In this regard, Robin Lakeoff observes:

> If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does learn, she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion: in some sense as less than fully human.

(Cameron, 1998:242)

Women face a double bind with regard to the use of language. Entrapped within patriarchy’s language trap women are reduced to ineffective bilinguals deficient in performance of language. They are denied access to power since their linguistic performance underlines their inability to exercise power.

Language and communication are central elements of behavioural pattern and identity; the way one speaks has a strong impact on one’s interaction with others. In this respect language is an identity marker. Women have an apparently weaker position in language. According to Cora Kaplan, the difference in entry into the symbolic in the case of girls and boys as suggested by Freud and Lacan does not account for women’s inefficiency in performance of language. In her view, women’s apparently weaker position in language is set at two stages: Oedipal and puberty. At the Oedipal stage the girl child must acknowledge her “social sex difference and align herself with women and restricted speech” (Cameron, 1998:60). Puberty is an epoch that “distinguishes girls from boys by the appearance of adult sex difference and access to public discourse for men” (Cameron, 1998:61). Children at the Oedipal stage develop and follow the linguistic practices of the same
sex group. They are actually reproducing the political structure in which linguistic communication is embedded. Sex is of great importance in the politics of talk among adults. Relegated to the periphery, to the realm of the insignificant, women rarely get a chance to speak in public. In mixed sex conversation, especially in public spheres, women tend to make fewer and less elaborate contributions than men do. Kaplan emphasizes that women’s deficient performance of language has no relation to the Symbolic stage or Symbolic order. It is partly caused by the libidinal maturity and partly by socialization.

Women’s speech pattern is indicative of their self-image. Studies suggest that over-hesitancy, non-assertiveness, avoidance of swearing, super politeness and other such characteristics associated with female speech are suggestive of an inferior status. In this context, Pamela Fishman observes: “Socially-structured power relations are reproduced and actively maintained in our everyday interactions” (Cameron, 1998: 258). J.A. Fishman underlines that there is an analogy between linguistic structures of speech and power structures that govern gender relations in society. Social inequity reflected in language influences a child's later behaviour and beliefs. As they learn language, children absorb the cultural assumptions and biases underlying the real language use and view these as indices of social values and attitudes. As the child grows up he or she “acquires characteristics which are perceived as masculine and feminine” (Talbot, 1999: 7). Thus the child comes to understand that whatever is valued is termed masculine and whatever is devalued is termed feminine. Women, who find themselves in a socio-
economically less powerful position, naturally experience a conversational trouble that results from their inferior social position.

Typically female speech style, which was once a handicap for woman, has become an asset to her in the new world order. Changes taking place in the material conditions of economic and social life are responsible for this ideological shift. Men’s communicational ineptitude has been identified as a serious problem when “Sharing” has become the key feature of a successful nuclear family. Women’s verbal skill has been clearly identified and commended by contemporary counsellors, and employers. Unwilling to give women their due, the gender difference in verbal skill is again projected as an outcome of biological determinism. Women and men communicate differently because, as John Gray states, “Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus” (1992). This approach does not contribute to the concept of women’s superiority. Biological determinism decided the boundary of woman’s sphere and asserted man’s superiority in the world order of the past. In the present world order man’s communicational ineptitude is justified on the same ground; but he is assigned a sphere different yet not lower to his female counterpart. Customer care services, counsellors and cultural domains like media and politics all eulogize women’s openness, empathy and expressiveness which make them good communicators. But, Cameron observes that this is just a continuation of “that inglorious tradition of praising women in order to keep them in their place” (2006:145). She warns:

At bottom what they are doing is explaining, yet again, that there is no realistic alternative to the current social arrangement whereby
women are expected to spend their lives taking care of others, and men are not expected to reciprocate. (2006:145)

Cameron cautions women that literature that projects women as sensitive and capable and men as insensitive brutes appears to disparage men, but actually defends their privileges.

Patriarchal representations of the “feminine” follow the binary pattern. Attitudes, views and behavioural patterns are also gendered in patriarchal culture: women are encouraged to express emotions and men are conditioned to repress emotion. This is because emotion and sensibility are seen as “soft” and, therefore, “feminine” whereas rational thought and logic are more "serious" and hence “masculine.” Women writers, who identify with the pain of others, are classified as typically feminine and their writings are rarely exalted. This patriarchal bias gets exposed when Romantic poets, who venture out of their traditional "masculine" roles to acquire traditionally "feminine" characteristics, are acclaimed as the most sensible and emotional. Feminine traits when appropriated by male Romantic poets become valued. In this regard, Anne Mellor comments:

we often see the [male] poet appropriating whatever of the feminine he deems valuable and then consigning the rest either to silence or to the category of evil. (1993: 27)

The characteristics that seem valuable to these poets are emotion, compassion, love, and sensibility. In this context, Alan Richardson’s observation is noteworthy:

…if femininity was privileged by male writers during the Romantic period it was by the same token debased. If women were valued for
natural, intuitive feeling, so were children and idiots. (Mellor, 1988:16)

Richardson points to the double standard of the patriarchal reasoning. The finer sentiments found in women are dubbed as feminine and hence worthless. When the same emotions are found in men they are valued as great.

In the androcentric mode of discourse man is the enunciator and woman the enunciated. In such a mode, it is difficult for women to find a speaking position. Semantics of phallocentric discourses is problematic for women; it is semi permeable in nature: it permits patriarchal ideas, but prevents gynocentric views. Inequality of access or representation in discourses affects the meaning conveyed. As man’s perspective is universally accepted, what man means in a linguistic discourse is easily understood. Woman’s perspective fails to be conveyed; even when conveyed, its meaning is restricted by the prevalent beliefs in the community. In this regard, Sally McConnell-Ginet remarks: “…it is easy to reproduce notions with widely established currency and difficult to produce unexpected or unfamiliar ones” (Cameron, 1998: 206). Women cannot even manage to mean what they say. A sexist political structure always produces meanings in favour of the dominant male group. Whether an utterance or expression is sexist or not depends on the context. In the patriarchal context where ladies are projected as a frail group who needs man’s protection, the expression “Ladies first” becomes sexist. In this context, Susan Ehrich and Ruth King observe:

Linguistic meanings are to a large extent determined by the dominant culture’s social values and attitudes, terms initially introduced to be
non-sexist and neutral my lose their neutrality in the ‘mouths’ of a sexist speech community and/or culture. (Cameron, 1998: 164)

In patriarchal culture idioms and expressions easily acquire sexist connotations. As long as sexist patterns exist, women find it difficult to express their perspectives to men. Reforming the language is also not easy. In this regard, Cameron observes: “...In the mouths of the sexists, language can always be sexist” (1985:125. She means that it is our attitude and ideology that make language sexist.

Linguistics sexism is at work not exclusively in women’s use of language. It also works in the antagonistic patriarchal culture’s depiction of woman as worthless and passive. The stereotypes perpetuated in print culture and visual culture incapacitate women and confine them to their private sphere which poses no threat to the power structures of masculinity. Literary representations have a tangible effect on the lives of people. So male writers follow the non-symmetrical binary system in the creation of characters. Women are entrapped into a gender dichotomy in patriarchal discourses Archetypal images from the Bible, fairytales and classical mythology create cultural stereotypes which in turn influence the writers in their depiction of women’s identity. In literary writings women are either “Eves or Marys, Madonnas or Magdalenes, damned whores or God’s police” (Ruthven, 1984:72). In all children’s literature women are moulded in a gender dichotomy modeled on the fairytale character types. Even in the portrayal of women in children's cartoons this pattern is followed. Fred Flintstone has always been portrayed as the big powerful man whereas Wilma still continues to be the little wife, confined to her domestic chores. George of the Jungle is always there to save
Jane in misery and Jane is never capable of saving herself. Patriarchal image of the brave hero who overcomes hurdles to save the helpless damsel in distress tells us that the adventurous man belongs to an ever-widening world whereas the meek woman’s place is the home. It is seen that in the male literary canon woman has no autonomy; she can exist only as "male defined masks and costumes" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:19). This is because man determines the canons and controls value systems.

The bipolar nature of sex has influenced the perception of gender as a binary. Male and female have been overlaid into various binaries like active/passive, dominant/submissive, norm/other, rational/irrational, serious/trivial, and so on. This pattern is followed in private and public spheres. The images of women that male writers portray are based on this hierarchical perception. In Joseph Conrad’s *Heart Of Darkness*, the hero Marlow is surprised at the limited experience of women: “It's queer how out of touch with truth women are,…” (1988:27). Throughout Conrad’s novel light, activity and thought are associated with masculinity, and darkness, passivity and emotion with femininity. Shakespeare’s perception of women and men and their various roles and responsibilities in society is patriarchal. He echoes the stereotypical Renaissance thinking that women are physically, emotionally, intellectually and morally weaker and they exist exclusively for male sexual gratification. When Lady Macbeth decides to become an "active" partner in her husband's deadly mischief, she needs to pray: "Come, you spirits, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the
toe top full/ Of direst cruelty!” (Act 1 Scene V). This suggests that it is not "natural" for a woman to be cruel.

Androcentrism is embedded with structures of knowledge inimical to female identity. In androcentrism a pervasive masculinism delineates women from a male perspective. Male perception of women is biased and the phallocentric language re-enforces this biased, sexist view. The poet, who perceives in his sweet-heart beauty, freshness and fragrance, conveys the message that it is the physical attributes that make a woman, her man’s ideal love object. Robert Burns eulogizes the beauty of the beloved:

O, my love’s like a red, red rose,
That’s newly sprung in June:
O, my love’s like the melody
That’s sweetly played in tune. (Ferguson, 2004:694)

Such acclamation of beauty in male writings projects woman as a showcase piece for male gaze. It is an act of commodifying and showcasing woman. The lover, who overlooks intelligence, response or spirit in woman, endorses the parameters of femininity. Patriarchal representations of the “feminine” suppress reality and contradict the essence of woman.

In patriarchal societies, where women are traditionally excluded from literary canons, women have to content with the male concepts of the female. Male authors depict females as objects in creative discourses. In male art and literature women either fit to the passive “feminine” role patriarchy has assigned them or rebel against such roles and get punished for not conforming to the patriarchal
agenda. Evan Boland points to the feel a woman gets while reading male authored texts: “I was entering a beautiful and perilous world filled with my own silence, where I was accorded the unfree status of an object” (1995: 237). Such female objects are stereotypes created by patriarchal minds and they become models for male constructed representations. Women writers, who seek to construct an identity, miserably fail to get a model from the traditional canons to work upon. In this context, Adrienne Rich observes:

….she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salome, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together. (Gelpi, 1975:169)

In literary history or in literary canons woman is conspicuous by her absence. Literary history is a story of “anxiety of influence,” in which the relationships of authors are represented as in a family tree. Literary history is punctuated with the feuds between the literary father and the literary son as mighty opposites. Literary canons have been monopolized by male literary patriarchs.

Silence constitutes woman’s identity in the patriarchal culture. It is taken as her acceptance of femininity. Madonna’s silence is acclaimed as the model. Literary giants of the androcentric literature support this genteel tyranny of custom. Many of the passages in Shakespeare reflect male view of women. There are many
Shakespearian characters who consider silence as a virtue in women. Coriolanus greets his wife as “My gracious silence, hail!” (Coriolanus, Act2, Scene 1). In the Bible women’s silence or erasure is conspicuous. The Bible is narrated from andro-centric perspective throughout. In the Epistles, believers are usually addressed as "brethren." In the genealogies of the Old Testament wives or mothers are rarely mentioned. Whenever a woman appears in a narrative she is usually referred to as the wife of a certain man as for instance, Noah's wife. God is often described as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exodus 3:16) But, Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel are totally ignored. This androcentric perspective continues in the New Testament. When people are numbered in the New Testament it is the men who are numbered. In Numbers 1:2 the "sum of all the congregation" is found by counting "every male." In Mathew 14:21 we are told that "those who had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children." Patriarchy leaves limited “space” for women in life as well as in literature. This kind of erasure cultivates in women a negative image of themselves.

In literary history woman is represented by silence and absence. Tillie Olsen speaks of woman’s silence as unnatural: “the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot” (1979:11). In the structure of a literary text created by a female writer, the paradigmatic elements assume greater importance than the syntagmatic ones. The meaning of the text is derived from the space between lines rather than from the lines. Anne Sexton’s “The Silence” emphasizes the significance of silence in feminine culture: “My room is whitewashed, / As white as
a rural station house/ And just as silent” (1981:318). The protagonist is shut up in a room. She is acutely aware of the silence that hovers around her: “the white statue” behind her, and the “white plants/growing like obscene virgins” (1981:318). The whiteness suggests a deathly pallour. She tries in vain to conquer the silence with words:

I am filling the room
With the words from my pen.
Words leak out of it like a miscarriage.
I am zinging words out into the air
And they come back like squash bulls.
Yet there is silence.
Always silence. (1981:319)

Sexton voices woman’s inner hunger for self-expression and the emptiness she feels when her attempts at self-definition fail due to the inefficacy of proper language. The silences and voids in a female constructed text provide the missing links to interpret the text

Atwood’s “Spelling” is a testament to the power of words and it portrays the victimization of powerless women without words. Her reference to the “Ancestress: the burning witch” whose mouth is “covered by leather to strangle words” alludes to the forced silence inflicted on women in patriarchal culture (Ferguson, 2004:1056). Her witch is symbolic of women who try to break the silence through writing. “Spelling” begins with the description of her daughter learning to spell:

My daughter plays on the floor
with the plastic letters,
red, blue & hard yellow,
learning how to spell,
spelling,
how to make spells. (Ferguson, 2004:1056)

Women need a voice because power is inherent in language: “A word after a word/after a word is power” (Ferguson, 2004:1056). Both reproductively and verbally, women are denied voice. From the little girl on the floor, trying to spell, Atwood shifts the focus to the silenced woman:

I return to the story
of the woman caught in the war
& in labour, her thighs tied
together by the enemy

So she could not give birth. (Ferguson, 2004:1056)

Historically, the enemies who tie her thighs together are the Nazis, but the reference is to men in general. Male oppressors silence women’s creativity, both biological and artistic. They are bent on controlling women’s reproductive capacity as well as their literary creativity. According to psychoanalytic feminism, patriarchy’s exclusion of women from the literary canon results from “womb-envy” (Minsky, 1996:100). Only women have the power to create her own species within herself. Men debar women from artistic creativity to make up for their lack of reproductive capacity.
Women poets sometimes use silence as a form of strategy. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak suggests that in the case of subalterns like women silence should function as a technique of resistance. She has in mind not voluntary silence, but conspicuous absence of speech in strategic contexts. It is not simply a passive act of submission or repression. It is a means of challenging the “monologue” of dominant discourses. It ruptures the power play between speakers and listeners and creates a favourable condition for the “invisible,” the “unspoken.” In Sexton’s “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward,” “the case history/stays blank” because the anonymous girl refuses to answer the questions put to her by the doctors (1981:24). The female speaker symbolizes silence, the internalized female voice in patriarchy. She uses her silence as a strategy to resist the construction of a male text: “The doctors chart the riddle they ask of me/and I turn my head away” (1981:24). It is an attempt to regain an autonomous female identity and consciousness.

Voicelessness is powerlessness. Michel Foucault associates language with knowledge and power. He observes that it is a dangerous relationship: “…speech is no mere verbalization of conflicts and systems of domination, but it is the very object of man’s conflict” (1972:216). The ability to spell – to use words- was not always granted to women. The power to name things entitles man to own them, so language leads to the privilege of ownership. Patriarchal constraints have always kept women away from literary pursuits. Women who come out of the snare of silence by defying conventions are regarded as witches. In this regard, Alicia Ostriker observes: “Unsubmissive woman is unnatural, a physical monstrosity”
In Anne Sexton’s poem “Her Kind,” Sexton identifies herself with the image of a possessed witch who is symbolic of power (1981:15). According to Alicia Ostriker, the history of American poetry is a tale of confinements:

Throughout her existence the woman poet has needed to be proven virtuously female to legitimize her vocation as a poet. In the nineteenth century the genteel poetry and the genteel ideal of femininity, which stressed the heart and denied the head, was a perfect glass slipper; those who were not Cinderella had to shed blood to fit, and those wounds are not healed yet. (1986: 220)

Androcentric culture has always been hostile to women writers. These cultural constraints haunt women writers and make them unsure of their creative faculties.

Adrienne Rich speaks of “verbal privilege” in the poem "North American Time." When one uses language to say something, one is privileged because one expresses something that many fail to express. Rich categorizes individuals into three groups; those who choose words and thereby become responsible for all that they write, those who remain silent and those who never have a choice:

It doesn’t matter what you think.

Words are found responsible
all you can do is choose them
or choose
to remain silent. Or, you never had a choice,
which is why the words that do stand
are responsible
and this is verbal privilege. (Gelpi, 1975: 114)

Those who "never had a choice" are oppressed by the lack of a language to express themselves. The one who has the choice of language possesses “verbal privilege.”

In "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," Rich comments on her feelings towards books. She at once loves and fears: "love and fear in a house /knowledge of the oppressor / I know it hurts to burn" (Gelpi, 1975: 40). The speaker is under a strange amalgam of emotions, love and fear.

In a patriarchy, man is the custodian of language. He exploits the latent content of language to effect the subordination of women. Patriarchy is a kind of interior colonisation practiced within the society or the family. Woman’s inability to explore the male-centred language keeps her subordinated. It is imperative that women should seize the language that men have developed. It is only by possessing the power of words that one can see through the constituted reality. In Margret Atwood’s poem “You Begin,” the mother who shows the child the first steps of writing tells: “Once you have learned these words/You will learn that there are more/words than you can ever learn./The word” (1987:54). Atwood thinks of words as the stepping stones to greater and greater knowledge. She advises the child to “smudge your own world; your own picture into what you believe is right in this world” (1987:54). She means that one can build one’s own world through one’s words.

Of all literary genres, poetry offers women more space for resistance. Poetry’s tradition of concentrated insights and brevity of form makes it the right medium for women to challenge these controlling concepts that have locked them
out. In this regard, Lilian Mohin observes that feminist poets “intend to expand, perhaps to burst all these ideas, and each small poem, each act of consciousness-raising, is part of the great collective work” (1979:1-2). She means that poetry is a space for collective resistance. Adrienne Rich explains how her poetry serves her explorations: “In setting words together in new configurations, in the mere, immense shift from male to female pronouns, …it lets us hear and see our words in a new dimension” (1980: 248). Rich alludes to the privileged position of poetry as a metalanguage in patriarchal culture.

Poetry, the metalanguage of a high culture has always been a male domain. High language, the language of public sphere, of political and literary domains, of high patriarchal societies, is denied to women. Emily Dickinson speaks of verbal imprisonment that is women’s lot in patriarchy: “They shut me up in prose/As when a little Girl/They put me in the closet/Because they liked me “still” (Johnson, 1960:613). But feminist poets of all cultures have found it the most fertile terrain for confrontation. In this regard, Lucia Trent comments that women are better fitted than men to be poets: “…poetry is essentially the art of sympathy--and sympathy is essentially the province of woman” (1934:17). According to Trent, unselfishness is the basic requirement for poetry and the experience of maternity makes women fit for the poet’s post. Lucia Trend’s observation that poetry is the voice of woman challenges the androcentric assumption that womanhood is a hurdle to literary pursuits, especially poetry. It is the most effective critique of the paternity theory of art.
Women poets deliberately appropriate the available language for an authentic depiction of their identity. But woman’s written language reflects her female subjectivity. In any hierarchical social structure there is a rigid division between the speakers and the listeners. Man, who has authority, speaks with confidence. He is confident that he is heard. The marginalised woman also speaks. She speaks louder and she is also heard; but she is not acknowledged. People in power are automatically listened to and so they gain voice. They have the privilege to decide whether they should listen to or not when the subaltern speaks. The marginalized is at the mercy of the privileged. When woman’s efforts at communication are met with indifferent silence, she is frustrated. This leads to alienation. Her failure to be heard and understood results in isolation. She is haunted by a sense of inadequacy. This frustration at failed communication leads to self-blame or anger. Women writers express a wide range of moods on the biased patriarchal culture. Anger, sense of isolation, desire to denigrate the self are all observed in women’s writings. In this context, Dorothy Livesay tells in the poem “Unquiet Bed”:

The woman I am

Is not what you see

I’m not just bones

And crockery. (1967:39)

Women protest against the patriarchal perspective of women as a commodity to be displayed / enjoyed.
Patriarchal language with its overtones of sexism reinforces the sense of inferiority in women. The ideological constraints of the culture inhibit women from creative endeavours. The intra-gender and trans-gender prejudices make it difficult for women to skillfully explore the language for non-phallocentric discourses. The androcentric nature of language hinders them from authentic expression of their experiences. They undergo a forced silencing. When the female poet attempts to define herself, contrary to the practice of being defined by her relationships with men, she experiences difficulty. Speaking or writing in formal symbolic language is difficult for female writers. Male scorn of female creativity negatively affects the image of women who attempt to write. Male authors attack women writers by constructing labeled characters like Mrs Malaprop who cannot use language properly. This is an oblique attempt to establish that “language itself was almost literally alien to the female tongue” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979:31). Women unconsciously internalise this lack of linguistic proficiency and the feeling of being less masterly haunts them. In this regard, Jim Stewart observes that Virginia Woolf had such problems with T.S Eliot. Eliot’s criticism of her novel, *The Years* baffled Woolf: “Eliot being more masterly could get in the way of Woolf’s writing” (Merli, 2004:159). According to Rich, there has always been a difference between men and women when they take pens to write:

No male writer has written primarily or even largely for women, or with the sense of women's criticism as a consideration when he chooses his materials, his theme, his language. But to a lesser or
greater extent, every woman writer has written for men even when, like Virginia Woolf, she was supposed to be addressing women. (Gelpi, 1975: 171)

Attempts to counter the overwhelming male presence can be seen throughout women's writing. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who in her lifetime had won greater fame than her husband, found it necessary to denigrate the self in the face of the male Other.

Women writers always feel the weight of male domination in their perception, thought and use of language. They try to transcend or subvert this hurdle, but often fail. In “The Dead Heart,” Anne Sexton laments:

    How did it die? I called it EVIL.
    I said to it, your poems stink like vomit.
    I didn’t stay to hear the last sentence.
    It died on the word EVIL.
    I did it with my tongue.
    The tongue the Chinese say, is like a sharp knife;
    it kills
    without drawing blood. (1981:439)

She openly confesses that the razor sharp criticism of the hostile readers/critics disheartened her. No doubt, the impact of acculturation was so strong on her that the savage criticism of her poems could easily develop in her the feeling of being a failure.
Specifically feminine discourses that highlight obedience, inadequacy, or dependence of women demand silence from women. Women’s sense of marginality and inefficiency registered in their consciousness haunts them. Patriarchal conviction that defeminises a woman writer inhibits her self-expression. Such cultural restraints and linguistic restrictions often overcome the liberal humanist discourses of equality, liberty, determination and rationality. Such contradictory discourses inhibit women’s literary endeavours. This results in the conflict between the creative artist and the domestic woman. The split-self indicates that the assertive woman writer finds it difficult to adhere to the domestic discourse of the submissive domesticated woman. The split-self is a manifestation of the conflict between the true writer and the true woman. In this context, Ostriker observes: “true writer signifies assertion while true woman signifies submission” (1986:6). Atwood also observes that the state of being a woman is incompatible with the state of being a writer. She alludes to this conflicting status in the title poem of her collection Two-Headed Poems: “The heads speak sometimes singly, sometimes / together, sometimes alternately within a poem. / Like all Siamese twins, they dream of separation” (1987:24). The split-self between the creative artist and the domestic woman is the most literally productive conflict in a woman. Adrienne Rich also confesses that she has never been free from the split–self motive:

Looking back at poems I wrote before I was twenty-one, I’m startled because beneath the conscious craft are glimpses of the split I even then experienced between the girl who wrote the poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by
The androcentric nature of language is not problematic for women writers at the outset. This is because women, who are confined to domestic sphere, need language only for domestic discourse. The sexual politics in language used for domestic discourse is not immediately explicit. But a woman writer finds this language inadequate to express or define herself. She realizes that the language of domestic discourses conforms to androcentric structure of female dependence and feminine inadequacy.

Women have a very complicated relationship with the androcentric language. Women poets writing within a male tradition are forced to identify themselves with the mute objects of poetry, Nature and the silent Other. The female poet has no voice as a synthesizing, self-expressive ego. She is not her own subject. Women who use male-centred language are forced to use patterns of expression that are alien and alienating. When they adopt male-centred language, exclusively feminine experiences remain unarticulated. The feminine mystique, which Betty Friedan calls “the problem that has no name,” for instance, is an identity crisis which no available language can describe (1963:9). It is an exclusively feminine problem that patriarchy can never comprehend. But Friedan asserts that passive doll-like existence as woman is likely to lead her to “a devastating boredom with life” (1963:4). Sexton, in spite of her flirtatious parading and glamorous posing, was plagued by the difficulties of being a woman in the male dominated society. Sexton opens up in an interview:
All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children….I was trying my damnest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can’t build little white picket fences to keep the nightmares out. (Colburn, 1988: 334).

Sexton does not feel comfortable in the pre-set sphere which demands domesticity as the supreme quality of a woman. Women like Sexton find the destiny of a mother and housewife, which society maps out for them, stifling, repressive and even dehumanizing. But they miserably fail to express their agony in the available language. They find the male-centred language inadequate to express their role crises.

Women have realized their predicament. Feminist writers struggle to depict woman’s image that is reflective of reality. They try to challenge the dichotomous presentation of women: passive, feminine objects praised for their decorative traits or active, powerful, menacing women condemned as “bad” and “evil.” But the available language is inadequate to convey their views. Love in patriarchal terms is “submission,” total surrender and self-effacement. Female ardour cannot be expressed in this language. Atwood expresses her thoughts and feelings on the inadequacy of language in expressing “love” in her poem,
“Variations on the word Love”:

…This word

is far too short for us, it has only

four letters, too sparse

to fill those deep bare

vacuums between the stars

that press on us with their deafness. (1981:50)

She observes: “this word is not enough but it will have to do.” She considers it a “single vowel in this metallic silence.” The poem, "Two-Headed Poems," also echoes the same concern. Atwood longs to have a different language since she finds the existing language ineffective: "…so precise / and secret it was not even/ a code, it was snow, /there could be no translation" (1987:24). She means that she cannot encode or decode the language.

A woman poet finds the rigid structure of the closed-endedness of male centred language difficult to overcome. It contains cultural elements antagonistic to female identity. In this regard, Adrienne Rich remarks: “In the interstices of language lie powerful .secrets of the culture” (1979:24). The patriarchal values embedded in the formal symbolic language make it an ineffective medium to express reality from a woman’s perspective. Helene Cixous, in the essay “Castration or Decapitation,” emphasizes the significance of the politics of language and the role of language in perpetuating male hegemony:

as soon as we exist, we are born into language and language speaks (to) us, dictates us, dictates its law, a law of death: it lays down its
familial model, lays down its conjugal model, and even at the moment of uttering a sentence, admitting a notion of “being,” a question of being, an ontology, we are already seized by a certain kind of masculine desire, the desire that mobilizes philosophical discourse. (1981:45)

The essential structure of language is masculine and its underlying spirit is an urge to dictate. Cixous asserts that the gender bias in the androcentric language inevitably penetrates into the female discourse and misrepresents women.

Written history has always been “his story” and women, as a marginalized group, must rediscover the history that has not been written. According to Rosemary Haughton, “to know the history women must struggle with a language that can tell it, … not from the point of view of the conquerors but from the point of view of the …marginalized” (1985:viii). Culture has taught women that public speech/writing, especially the use of high language, is a man’s prerogative and it is not “womanly” to dare into the male domain. But an urge to protest against the male definition of women and a desire to be on parity with the male writers drive women out of the “asylum in the corridor” into the domain of literature (Morgan, 1991:22). Creative writing offers them the platform to reject the powerful representation as the Other and represent their experiences as the subject/the self. But the male-centred language is an ineffective medium to articulate experiences that are unique to women. So she is confronted by the immediate necessity of finding an appropriate medium of self-definition. She needs an equally compatible but differently structured language, powerful enough to subvert male-centred
paradigms. In order to write authentically, she has to remake the language that silences and oppresses her. The man-made language is tailored perfectly to the needs of men and it needs to be altered if and when women use it to tell another story that threatens male supremacy. In this context, Shoshana Felman remarks:

The challenge facing the woman today is nothing less than to reinvent language…to speak not only against but outside the structure…to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallicacy of male meaning.

(Warhol, 1997:18)

This language must be equal but opposite to the male-centred language and must be equally compatible for both creative and personal discourses.

The relation between men and women in patriarchy is one of domination and subordination. Women are socially conditioned to accept their subordination. Sexual colonialism is practiced with the consent of women in all societies. In spite of gender difference, all writers use androcentric language for their discourses, both creative and critical. Women’s use of the male-centred language is parallel to a colonial situation in which the subject people use the language of the colonizer. It is in this sense that Adrienne Rich calls the male-centred language the “oppressor’s language” (1971: 39). Women’s use of the male-centred language is a sign of their subordination in a patriarchal society. Androcentric language is a subversive force that thwarts women’s struggle for autonomy. In this context, Adrienne Rich observes in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”: 
The awakening of dead or sleeping consciousness has already affected the lives of millions of women... But there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find language and images for the consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us. (Gelpi, 1975: 166)

Rich means that women poets cannot find a reliable model to construct their female identity. This situation is aggravated by the inadequacy of the language they work with.

Feminist philosophy of language advocates changes in the male-centred language. Feminist writers believe that patriarchal discourses, both oral and written, subjugate women. Language should be purged of male bias for an honest depiction of female experience. Patriarchal systems of thought impose norms and values, as if they were natural. The marginalized women must criticize these norms. They must try to find a space of their own in the realm of language. As language cannot be evolved from vacuum, women writers have to use the existing male-centred language as a base in their effort to evolve a female-centred language. It is in this context that one should analyze Claudine Herrmann’s description of women as *Vole uses de Langue* or female Prometheuses. Lucy Irigaray calls them “Thieves of language.” Women have to begin with the male-stream language and remould it to suit their needs, especially the objective of exclusive female self-expression. They have to reshape the male-centred language in such a way as to suit the female purpose of honest self-expression. Re-vision of male perspective has helped women break the male hegemony over language. One of the methods of evolving a
gynocentric language is the revival of obsolete languages of female-centred communities or their equivalents or the residues of languages. Women writers can construct a true female identity deconstructing myths that embody patriarchal values.