CHAPTER II

Language and Sexuality

Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism:
That which is most one’s own; yet most taken away

Catherine Mackinnon

Sexuality has been identified as a key issue in the feminist agenda since 1960. Feminists argue that sexuality is not naturally evolved but socially conditioned; like gender sexuality is also culturally defined. Culture plays a significant role in creating modes of sexual behaviour. Meanings of sexuality are culturally and socially mediated before subjectively expressed. Social learning moulds, modifies or represses the innate sexual urge in human beings. In *Sexual Conduct* John H. Gagnon and William Simon analyse sexuality within the theoretical framework of social scripts. According to them, sexual practices emerge from the socially accepted norms of sexuality:

Scripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses, and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience. (2005:19)

The evolution of scripts is related to the sociology of sexuality. Scripts are the approved norms that everyone takes up, internalizes and endorses through a process of acculturation. This is an attempt on the part of the authors/artists to consider
sexuality within a non-biological, social and psychological framework. Culturally created female identity is inscribed with the patriarchal concept of femininity. Patriarchy assumes that female sexuality seeks fulfilment in male sexuality and projects it as the reality. Culture defines woman as, “genitally defective, sexually pure, and personally self-effacing” (Ostriker, 1986:63). Woman is represented as willfully submerging her sexual identity within the phallic system. Socialization, that begins in the family and continues through patriarchal cultural institutions, inculcates in men and women the dynamics of domination/subordination with regard to sexuality. So it is projected that masculinity indicates sexual dominance whereas femininity points to sexual submissiveness. Thus, hierarchical gender differentiation is extended to a hierarchical sexual demarcation. In this regard, Catherine MacKinnon comments that genders are “created through the eroticization of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance/submission dynamic define each other. This is the social meaning of sex” (1989: 113). This socialization makes men think that women’s subordination is sexual and women learn that it is erotic to be sexually submissive.

Sexuality is the motive that conditions human relationships. Deborah Cameron believes that sexuality is linguistically/discursively constructed. Social and cultural institutions construct sexualities through power discourses and thereby control and shape human relationships. Language is the medium through which discourses are circulated, power is given as well as received, and identities are created and then categorized. According to Cameron, individuals and societies understand sexuality and gender through language: “Our knowledge does not come
exclusively from first hand experience: it is mediated by the discourse that circulates in our societies” (2003:15). Cameron indicates that one’s knowledge of sex and sexuality is mainly derived from linguistic representation of the culturally approved sexual practices. The language one uses to speak of one’s sexuality derives its meaning from the discourses in circulation and the language is the medium through which discourses are circulated.

According to Michel Foucault, sexuality is not a product of a pre-given essence. Knowledge of sexuality is structured through the use of language. He asserts that sexuality is constituted through discourse. Foucault defines discourse in relation to power. According to him, discourses are not some idealist depiction of thoughts: they are parts of the power structure of society. Discourses reveal the play of power in a given situation. Foucault argues that discourses are revealed not only in written texts but also in organizations and institutions. This is because those who have the power to define matters in their favour. They create reality through the processes of powers of definition. Discourses thus acquire the power of management. They manage individuals and population by confining them to an identity. Foucault argues that identity is an effect of power relations:

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, and imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise in himself. (1982: 212)

As long as power, regime or penal, rests in male hands, they define, decide and popularize female identity and sexuality in their favour and impose it as universal
truths. Language and discourse construct the idea of sexuality. This in turn reproduces gender inequality.

Feminist researchers point out that female sexuality or sexual practices are shaped by powerful discourses of “institutionalised heterosexuality.” Wendy Hollway indicates that there are potentially contradictory discourses concerning sexuality. Women position themselves within these discourses in different ways and represents sexualities accordingly. Hollway discerns three discourses through which men and women give meaning to their sexual experiences. First, there is “the male sex drive discourse” in which women’s sexuality is absent. Here man’s sexuality is conceived as “directly produced by a biological drive, the function of which is to ensure reproduction of the species” (Hollway, 1984: 231). Woman’s sexuality is the passive and complimentary “Other” of masculine sexuality that is wild and dynamic. Second, there is “the have/hold discourse” which is concerned with “the Christian ideals associated with monogamy, partnership and family life” (Hallway, 1984: 232). In this discourse woman’s sexuality is either confined to a marital relationship and is reproductively oriented or is understood as socially dangerous. Third, there is the “discourse of permissive sexuality” which views sexuality as something natural and, therefore, should not be repressed. In this discourse, women are allowed to have the same active sexuality as men. Even though it is gender-free in principle, gender difference in sexuality cannot be suddenly transformed. In this regard, Hollway observes:

The practices that a discourse re-produces are not neutral. The liberating effects of the permissive discourse were particularly
contradictory for women. Certainly the discourse enhanced men’s powers (men’s ‘rights’) to a heterosexual practice without emotional bonds. (1984:236)

These discourses institutionalize male sexuality and empower men to control female sexuality through the norm of heterosexuality. According to Hallway, the gendered identities people assume are shaped by these discourses: “…women and men are placed in relation to each other through the meanings which a particular discourse makes available” (1984:232). Women desire to have a sense of femininity in a world that is structured by gender relations and hence they choose the available discourse best suited for that purpose disregarding the true nature of their desire.

All the signifying systems of patriarchal culture deduce women to male terms. The social/cultural constructs underlying all human activity are inscribed with male bias. Women have no role in deciding or defining them which are communicated through discourses. Discourses play an important role in women’s passive acceptance of social relations that subordinate their identity to the male ego. The traditional, cultural, social, ethical institutions together weave the “web of bewilderment” around woman through their discourses (Das, 1973: 51) Discourses actually serve as coping mechanisms. They provide women with “knowledges and commitments … [that] constitute important resources for coping with everyday life” (Simon, 1992:86-87). It can be said that women are spoken/drawn into existence by powerful discourses that they eventually believe. In her poem “A Feminist’s Lament,” Kamala Das observes that in the male dominated society woman is expected to be satisfied with minimal survival facilities:
an ideal woman, they said, was but
a masochist. Trained from infancy
to wear the flannels of cowardice
next to her skin, trained to lie inert
under a male, committed by vows
to feed her, clothe her and buy for her
the 1000 sq. ft. flat with a loft
for storing, the debris of passing years. (1996:61)

According to Das, the vital feminine faculty is extinguished through training and
she is trained to be passive and “lie inert under a male.”

Sexuality is basically linked to socially produced symbolic representations
and gendered identities. Patriarchy misrepresents women either as saints capable of
rejecting sexuality totally or as the embodiments of temptation. Ordinary women do
not belong to these extreme positions. In the context of this paradigm, though
women acknowledge their active sexual desire, they are restricted by sexually
appropriate social behaviour. This attitude controls women’s desire and subjects
them to man’s exploitation. According to Foucault, sex is the focal point through
which individuals assert their power and control the marginalized. Woman’s sexual
identity in the male dominated world denies her a legitimate public space. In this
regard, Shari Benstock comments:

We are surprised and frustrated at the gap between what we want to
say and what we can say, at the grandeur of our desires and the
According to Benstock that the role-stereotyping denies women autonomy and leads them to self-effacement. This gap between desire and fulfilment leads women to frustration.

Jane Ussher states that the bipolar Madonna/whore discourse produces a conflict in woman. Here feminine sexuality is viewed as passively asexual or dangerously active (Choi, 1994:165). An active female sexuality and a respectable feminine identity fail to co-exist in the available discourses. This generates the idea that only men can be active sexual subjects and women’s role is to be passive objects of male desire. Such an idea restricts woman’s freedom to define her sexuality and makes her susceptible to sexual exploitation. In this regard, Deborah Cameron observes: “women are frequently in the position of not being able to have the sex they want, while at the same time they may be forced to have sex that they do not want” (2003: 29). Women are often written as objects of sexualization. A stereotypical text is inscribed on their bodies about their sexuality and it is used to create texts that devalue actual lived experience of women.

Cultural assumptions of male and female sexualities are reflected in the use of language. Male-centred language defines female sexual identity in a manner that reinforces active/male and passive/female dichotomy. The language used by scientists to describe biological process reflects and reinforces culture’s attitude towards male and female sexualities. The gendered metaphors in science and philosophy reveal male dominance and male bias of the female. Emily Martin observes that Gerald Schatten and Helen Schatten compare the egg’s role to that of a “Sleeping Beauty” awaiting the magic kiss of its mate which will instill life in her
(Keller, 1996:106). Martin exposes the gender stereotypes hidden within the scientific language of Biology:

It is remarkable how “femininely” the egg behaves and how “masculinely” the sperm. The egg is seen as large and passive. It does not move or journey but passively is “transported,” “is swept” or even “drifts” along the fallopian tube. In utter contrast, sperms are small, “streamlined” and invariably active. They “deliver’ their genes to the eggs…. (Keller, 1996:105)

Cultural definitions of male and female are projected on to the description of male and female reproductive processes. The use of gendered stereotypes in scientific imagery is a male strategy used to perpetuate stereotypes that limit mobility in women.

In “The egg and the sperm,” Emily Martin explains the implied sexism in the scientific language. It is a scientifically acknowledged fact that when the normal human male produces several hundred million sperms per day the female sheds only a single egg each month and that the egg lives for only a few hours. But in medical texts, images and words are carefully chosen to highlight the fragility and dependency of the egg. For instance, Bruce Alberts observes in Molecular Biology of the Cell: “Once released from the supportive environment of the ovary, an egg will die within hours unless rescued by a sperm” (Keller, 1996:107). Though innumerable sperms are wasted per day, there are medical texts that insist that the egg, “she,” is wasteful. Authors use breathless prose to describe the sheer multitude
of the spermatogenesis, ignoring the waste involved. In this context, Martin quotes from Vernon Mount castle’s *Medical Physiology*:

> Whereas the female shed only a single gamete each month, the somniferous tubules produce hundreds of millions of sperms each day. (Keller, 1996:106)

Sperm production is celebrated as a continuous process while egg production is considered inferior because it ceases with birth. Female seems to be unproductive. Emily Martin observes that authors like Bruce Alberts celebrate spermatogenesis as a feat accomplished; but they are worried about the degeneration of ovum: “…It is still a mystery why so many eggs are formed only to die in the ovaries” (Keller, 1996:106). Menstruation is viewed as a failure. Male reproductive process is described with intense enthusiasm whereas female reproductive physiology is described as degenerating. Emily Martin suggests a homologous description of male and female process:

> They might credit females with “producing” mature ova one at a time, as they are needed each month and describe males as having to face problems of degenerating germ cells. These degeneration would occur throughout life among spermatogonia, the undifferentiated germ cells in the testes that are long lived, dormant precursors of sperm. (Keller, 1996:106)

The assumption that women are sexually passive has become an established theory in patriarchal societies. Social interaction and androcentric writing propagate the
image of a sexually passive woman as the ideal. This image gets assimilated into the individual woman’s concept of her self.

In social interactions and androcentric writings, female sexuality and female sexual organs are subordinated. A study of the verbs that denote sexual activities shows that all such verbs take man in the subject position and woman in the object. Even in cases where the verbs refer to activities that can be performed by the parties concerned with equal involvement, the accepted language construction assigns the subject position to man, and woman becomes the object. Sex is represented as something done by man towards woman. Elizabeth Manning observes that the common practice is to use verbs indicative of sexual activities with man in the subject slot and woman in the object slot (Harvey, 1997: 43-46). It is men who make love to women and not the other way round. In this regard, Deborah Cameron observes:

> In the English language as such, there is no grammatical rule that prevents speakers from representing sex as something women do to men, or something women and men do together; but in a large sample of discourse produced by users of English, the preferred representation of it was as something men do to women. (2003: 30)

The role of language in constructing sexual identity is not insignificant. When sex is defined and categorized from the male point of view, it becomes unilateral, monolithic and biased against women.

Deborah Cameron, in “Naming of Parts” observes that a large number of items in the lexicon reflect and reinforce the culture’s negative attitude to active
female sexuality. Myths about male sexuality is constructed around the perception of “penis” as the uncontrollable Other. Cameron presents a list of terms associated with penis that is popular among the youth of America. For some, penis is “His Excellency,” “the mayor,” “the judge” and “rod of lordship.” All these suggest that man who possesses the “rod of lordship” is destined to rule. In this regard, Cameron observes:

The largest number however made metaphoric reference to the active role of the penis in sexual intercourse: screwdriver, drill, jackhammer, chisel, lawnmower… It is prototypically the female body and genitals that are screwed, drilled, hammered, trimmed…. (2006:154)

This sexual imbalance in androcentric language is a reflection of the instilled notion of male supremacy in the traditional patriarchal society. It underlines the fact that linguistic discourses are inimical to female sexuality.

Pornography is a form of language that defines male and female sexuality from a male point of view. In “A New Map of Censorship,” Ronald Dworkin observes that pornography is speech “advocating that women occupy inferior roles.” He comments that pornography reflects the opinion that “women are submissive, or enjoy being dominated, or should be treated as if they did” (1994:13). In this view, pornography is a political narrative that persuades its audience to believe certain premeditated ideas about women. Susan Griffin remarks that the pornographer tells a lie which all authorial voices have been telling woman and which she begins to believe and even mimics in life. If she feels in herself a
being who contradicts this fantasy, she begins to believe that she is wrong. Even as a small girl, she tries to mould herself to fit to society's image of what a woman ought to be. Even though there is a part of her which contradicts this pornographic image of womanhood, it is cast back into silence. Susan Griffin believes that the pornographer is scared of female body that arouses desire in him and therefore he tries to silence it through mortification. In an interview, she refers to the silencing power of pornography and its impact on women’s consciousness. She remarks in *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*:

… the silence we have inherited has become part of us. It covers the space in which we live; it is a blank screen, and onto this screen a fantasy which does not belong to women is projected; the silence of women the very surface on which pornography is played. We become other than ourselves. (1981:200)

Susan Griffin detects a silencing of woman all through (his)-story. It has become a palpable presence in the lives of women.

According to Rae Langton, people use words to silence one another. Pornography is a speech act that can silence women in three ways: “by ordering or by threatening;… by frustrating a speaker’s prelocutionary acts; and …by disabling a speaker’s illocutionary acts” (1993:320-324). Pornography prevents women from speaking of certain actions. It silences women, both illocutionarily and prelocutionarily. A woman's refusal to have sex is prelocutionarily silenced, if she is forced to have sex, despite her refusal being recognised. She is illocutionarily silenced, if her attempted refusal goes unrecognised. In such a case, according to
Langton, it is not a refusal. She suggests that pornography plays a key role in
making men less able to recognise women's refusals as refusals and more willing to
rape women even when they recognise women's refusals. Man’s power over woman
is sanctioned within marriage and so the wife’s body along with her property and
earnings become the property of the husband who can enjoy them with impunity. In
this context, Diane Richardson observes in *Rethinking Sexuality*:

In countries where rape in marriage is not considered illegal, this
may be interpreted as state-sanctioned right of a man’s access to a
woman’s body on the grounds of his right to sexual fulfillment
within marriage. (2000:102)

Patriarchy and state power join together to colonise female body and control female
sexuality.

The male view of female sexuality as depicted in literature influences the
thoughts and behaviours of individuals. Literary and linguistic representations of
masculinity and femininity are always male-centred. Men are always portrayed as
strong and dominating. Masulinity has always been linked to strength and
femininity to fragility. It is the socially constructed idea of masculinity mediated
through films, songs, fictions and fairytales that keep women under the threat of
sexual violence. Rape is the outcome of male aggression and patriarchy that silence
women. In this regard, Alicia Ostriker observes: "... the power to speak may rest
not only on economic, political, and legal power but on ordinary physical strength"
(1986:69). June Jordan describes a rape that subjects woman to silence:

…that man straddling
his knees either side of my chest

...while he rammed

What he described as his quote big dick
Unquote into my mouth
And shouted out: “D’ya want to swallow
My big dick: Well, do ya?”

He was being rhetorical
My silence was peculiar
To the female. (1980:13)

The poet says that her silence is characteristic of her gender and is symbolic of female submission and vulnerability.

Psychoanalysis offers the most phallocentric conception of sexuality. Sigmund Freud’s discourse on sexuality and Lacan’s rereading of it take away from women their right to acknowledge and define their sexuality. According to Freud, desire is a non-rational and non-conscious aspect of sexuality. Oedipus complex configures human desire and the desire that is excess or that need be excluded from normal adult existence is repressed into the unconscious. Freud sees the unconscious as a repository of repressed desires inaccessible to the conscious mind. But Lacan suggests that the unconscious is not a dark place of chaotic desires: it governs all factors of human existence and it is structured like language. According to him, condensation and displacement, the two main mechanisms of unconscious process, are essentially linguistic phenomena. They correspond to metaphor and
metonymy, the two poles of language. Lacan says that the contents of the unconscious are acutely aware of language, particularly the structure of language. Language exists as a structure in the unconscious before the individual enters it. According to Lacan’s theory, child must separate from its mother to enter the symbolic order. He declares the stage of separation from the mother as the “mirror” stage in which the child acquires a sense of the self. In the symbolic order the child learns to distinguish between its body and its mother’s. The child acquires language when separation from the mother is completed. He argues that once the child is separated from the mother he or she has the need to speak; to ask for whatever is needed. Hence, Lacan argues that the use of language is based on wants. Lacan highlights the patriarchal nature of language by assigning the central position to the phallus (1977:285). This centralizing of the phallus compels women to exercise language in such a way as a child asks for its wants. The primary signifier of a centralized phallus forces women, who lack the penis, into the margins of language. As they cannot identify with the language of their father, they are always alienated from language. Femininity is forced into the margins, into verbal exile, as the only language available is a masculine one. The masculine language available to them cannot accommodate them as female subjects.

Logocentric conception of knowledge and phallocentric conception of sexuality centralize man and marginalize woman. Women fail to represent themselves in the system which the French school of feminists designates as "phallogocentric." The Phallogocentric language is ordered around an absolute Word “logos” which is “masculine” in nature and which systematically excludes,
denigrates, and silences the “feminine” Other. Language is organized around the Phallus-symbol of authority. Linguistic constraints of the phallogocentric system deny subjectivity to women. Lacan’s Symbolic Order conveys that in order to be intelligible one has to adopt the values on which communication is predicated: the rejection and repression of the feminine. In this regard, Julia Kristeva observes:

Language as a symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother.

(1980:136)

The child’s entry into the Symbolic entails a forced separation from the mother’s body. Lacan’s theory of language denies the Subject position to women, it is reserved for men. Woman, who lacks the phallus, occupies a negative position in language. She takes the position of the “Other” in binary opposition. Woman is always defined in relation to the male Subject.

In the phallogocentric system a woman’s pleasure does not reside in woman herself. Women’s sexuality, desire, or pleasure can be articulated only within the phallic economy. In patriarchy, male writers highlight the fact that women gain pleasure by being beautiful objects for a men's viewing pleasure. Male writers and artists use a language which enhances visual pleasure, to portray women’s body. They create the images of women as sexually desired by men. Laura Mulvey’s comment on this erotic male language is remarkable:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male
gaze projects fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are looked at and displayed. With their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Warhol, 1997: 440)

Mulvey distinguishes between look and gaze. She observes that the male gaze requires an eroticized image of woman for gratification.

In the western tradition of love poetry men assume the subject position and speak out their desire of the beloved. The dominant masculine subject gazes and the passive feminine object takes pleasure in being gazed on and dominated. Basic relationship of dominance and possession is constant between the poet and the lady love. In Petrarchan and Shakespearean traditions of love poems, the male poet celebrates the beauty of a woman. She remains an unattainable object of his desire who inspires him to write poetry. It is difficult for women to write in this mode because woman in this tradition is the muse and not the poet. Gilbert and Gubar observe that Petrarch’s Laura “can never herself be a poet because she ‘is’ poetry” (1979:68). In the patriarchal tradition, writing is masculine. Laura Mulvey asserts that the act of viewing is always masculine in the patriarchal tradition (Warhol, 1997: 438-449). A reversal of the role cannot be imagined. According to Clare Pollard, female-poet/male-muse paradigm becomes too daring an innovation because “it both ‘feminises’ the man, and makes the woman the active partner” (http://magmapoetry.com/archive/magma-37-2/articles/the-female-poet-and-the-male-muse/). Traditionally, the poet uses the language of ecstasy to address the
muse. The desire of the poet to be possessed is actually the desire to possess. It is a relationship of both possession and enslavement that is described. So in this tradition, women can only be the muse. Carol Anne Duffy refers to this female-muse/ male-poet dynamics, characteristic of phallagocentrism in her re-visionist poem “Eurydice.” Orpheus, convinced of his need for Eurydice as his muse, visits the underworld. From the perspective of Eurydice, Orpheus’s attempt to rescue her is “the deal.” She is the object of exchange: “the prize” (1999:58). Gods are easily convinced of Eurydice’s need for “Gods are like publishers/usually male” (1999:58).

In the medieval courtly poems, the poet identifies his beloved lady with a reflecting mirror. The lover-poet makes an attempt to define himself through his desire for the beloved and often the beloved becomes the mirror that reflects his identity. Her response mediates to him his own image. His identity is established either through desire or response. According to Frederick Goldin, the lady as mirror is an instrument of idealisation: “the standard by which all things are judged, the ideal light by which they are known” (1964:78). In tune with the platonic discourses that associate man with reason and woman with matter, Goldin observes that woman is the passive formless mirror whose function is to reflect the idealised image of man: “a passive and glorified instrument of the lover’s desire, reflecting what she does not truly possess” (1964:98-99). The female identity, the female desire and its experience are insignificant in this context. Jan Montefiore also observes that female desire and female identity are exploited for male purposes:
In the mirror-lyrics, the lady’s experience and identity do not matter at all; she is the gaze that makes the knight real to himself, and what she sees and what she wants are out of the picture altogether.

(1987:111)

Montefiore suggests that just as the m/Other’s image grants the imaginary identity to the infant, the lady’s image grants the lover his identity. The lady is only a means of providing self to the man; a necessary presence that has to be separated for the lover’s acquisition of identity. She ends up as a blank mirror denied of all humanity. She exists as “thou” only to reflect “I” back to itself.

Feminists think that male-constructed texts are structured on the politics of gendered body. Helene Cixous observes that male texts encode "a libidinal and cultural--hence political, typically masculine--economy" that constitutes "a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, ... often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction" (Warhol, 1997:348). She points out that the textual politics is often undermined by the aesthetics of fiction. According to Cixous, “woman’s body has been more than confiscated from her,...” (Warhol, 1997:348). Moira P. Baker elaborates on Cixous’s observation and explains how woman’s body becomes the “uncanny stranger” in Renaissance poetry. Sydney fragments the female body and sings about the adorable pieces: eyes, lips, feet, breast, hand, hair, and voice in the first song of Astrophel. According to Moira P. Baker, the fragmentation of the female body is an attempt to prove the poet’s mastery of language and his control of woman:
For Sidney, the act of praising the woman is an act of self-fashioning as he dismembers her body and divests it of its autonomy. Through his stylized fragmentation and reification of the female body, he asserts his subjectivity as a poet, manipulating and controlling her objectified person. (1991:7)

The male lover fragments the female body and sings the praise of the pieces thereby reducing the women into “merely a collection of parts without human subjectivity” (Baker, 1991:12). It is a conscious attempt to deny subjectivity to women.

Ruthven also refers to the literary fashion of fragmenting the female body and offering it “piecemeal to the male reader for voyeuristic excitement” (1984:47). In Spenser’s “Epithalamion” female “forehead, cheeks, lips, breast, paps” are itemized and subjected to the male gaze. Ruthven considers this type of writing a part of "the cultural repression of women" (1984:48). The oppressive androcentric conception of female sexuality is manifested in such literary mutilations of the female body. In Fulke Greville’s poem, woman is without desire, flesh or subjectivity:

Love, the delight of all well-thinking minds;
Delight, the fruit of virtue dearly loved;
Virtue, the highest good that reason finds;
Reason, the fire wherein men's thoughts be proved;
Are from the world by nature's power bereft,
And in one creature, for her glory left

………………..……………………….
Her worth is passion's wound, and passion's physic.

(Grosart, 1894: 47-48)

Here female body is depicted as a granary of some abstract virtues. Depiction of female body as a corporeal, repository of virtues denies any scope of eroticism. It is an indirect way to overlook female desire and deny female sexuality.

Representation of the erotic in art and literature illustrates that women’s sexual needs and desires are totally erased from male canons. The suppression of the feminine has been a constant phenomenon in all ages and cultures. Women’s bodies and their sexuality have always been subordinated to the needs of men. The Duchess in Browning’s “My Last Duchess” is a victim of male desire to inscribe and fix female sexuality. Duke says he was unhappy about her disgraceful behaviour. He enlists a series of charges against the girl. Duke claims that she flirted with everyone and did not appreciate his “gift of a nine-hundred-year-old name.” His attentions pleased her only as much as “The dropping of the daylight in the West, /The bough of cherries some officious fool/Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule/ She rode with round the terrace” (Black, 2006: 712). As his monologue continues, the reader realizes with frightening conviction that the Duke in fact caused the Duchess’s early demise. When her behaviour escalated, “[he] gave commands; /Then all smiles stopped together” (Black, 2006: 712). This is the tragedy of every woman who asserts her sexuality.

Marian image and playmate image are male projections of women. Patriarchy expects women to be both as per man’s requirements. Whether as virgins
or whores women exist to satisfy male sexual urges. Playmate finds a place in patriarchy as long as she is willing to be a sexual object; but if she chooses to stray on her own, she becomes a whore. Patriarchy entertains a little bit of aggressiveness, intelligence and initiative in the playmate as long as she satisfies male sexuality. Man grades these images as good or bad depending on its serviceability to him. In this regard, M. Barrett observes:

The twin images of woman as, on the one hand, the sexual property of men and, on the other, and the ‘chaste mothers of their children… [are] the means whereby men…ensure both the sanctity and inheritance of their families and their extra familial sexual pleasure.

(1980:45)

If a woman asserts her identity/sexuality, she is branded as mad/fallen. It is a trap which ensnares her and steals off her autonomy, independence and identity. Women find this binding as Anne Sexton observes in the prologue to her poem, “The Little Peasant”: “Oh how the women/Grip and stretch/ Fainting on the horn” (1981:237). The miller’s wife in the tale, “The Little Peasant,” is the antithesis of the usual image of the sexually passive woman.

Feminists perceive that in patriarchal culture sexuality is organized around male pleasure. In patriarchal terms, women’s sexuality is expected to meet male sexual needs. Kamala Das’ “The Looking Glass” is an externalization of women’s humiliation and frustration in a male dominated world. A woman is supposed to satisfy the male ego by admiring man’s masculinity and
acknowledging her own fragility. The woman in “The Looking Glass” suggests the need to inflate the male ego:

Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier…. (1967: 25)

It is customary that woman should surrender her personality before the man. She has to reduce herself to a plaything to satisfy his lust. Erica Jong’s “Anniversary” presents woman as a victim of male sexual urge. Woman is reduced to a machine overworked by man to satisfy his lust and to beget his offspring:

Every night for five years
He chewed on her
Until her fingers were red and ragged
Until blue veins hung out of her legs
Until the children tumbled
Like baby kangaroos
Out of raw crimson pouches
In her stomach. (1973:100)

Woman’s body has been a site of oppression and exploitation in male dominated societies.

The male urge to bridle female sexuality is reflected in Anne Sexton’s poem “The Frog Prince.” Her blunt observation, “Frog is my father’s genitals,” leaves no doubt about the symbolism of the frog. It is a symbol of the phallic order. It is a
father-male-frog that repulses her. The frog, after becoming her prince-husband, literally imprisons the princess:

He hired a night watchman
So that no one could enter the chamber
and he had the well
boarded over so that
never again would she lose her ball,
that moon, that Krishna hair,
that blind poppy, that innocent globe,
that madonna womb. (1981:286)

Here the focus is on woman’s fear and aversion to being treated as a sex object. The princess has to accommodate the frog against her will. She has no choice but to obey male authority. This is the story of every woman. Marriage is enjoined on woman because it is her duty to “satisfy a male’s sexual needs and to take care of his household” (de Beauvoir, 1960: 447). Woman renders these services to the spouse and “in return he is supposed to give her presents or a marriage settlement and to support her” (de Beauvoir, 1960: 447). The princess is driven into marriage and the frog prince subjugates her by controlling her sexuality.

Nakedness forced on Black women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was misinterpreted as indications of lack of sexual restraint. Black women were portrayed as scantily dressed. Such portrayals depict black women as inherently licentious. But one experiences the culturally privileged web of dominance and subordinance in such portrayal of female bodies. In this regard, it is
worthy to note that Andrea Williams presents woman’s self as sexually victimized in the poem “Something to talk about”:

Perhaps she remembers
Her great-great grand mother
Who wanted to protest
But only rolled her eyes
And willed herself not to scream
When the white man
Mounted her from behind.

(http://www.ferris.edu/jimcraw/jezebel)
The doubly colonized black woman becomes the victim of the racially dominant white male sexual urge.

Female pleasure and female desire are misrepresented in phallogocentric writings. Female eroticism has been overlooked by male writers. Feminists assume that the demeaning female images of traditional English poetry have significantly influenced the ways in which women understand themselves. Woman’s sexuality is conventionally defined through the stereotyped opposition of virtuous virgin/ sexy whore. In traditional poems, flower imagery is used with a feminine connotation. Flower looks attractive but it is demeaning at the same time. Roses, usually associated with female sexuality, are beautiful; but they are vulnerable to decay. In “Adieu, farewell earth’s bliss,” Thomas Nashe observes: “Beauty is but a flower/Which wrinkles will devour” (Quiller-Couch, 1919:207). By associating female sexuality with flower, man, the maker of the poem, projects woman as an
ephemeral thing created for his pleasure. Flower (she) blooms for him, but the flower’s ecstasy in blooming is totally ignored.

What women want is misrepresented or subdued in phallogocentric culture. It is man who decides the nature of woman’s desire. Adrienne Rich observes in *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*: “Our desire is taken from us before we have had a chance to name it for ourselves (what do we really want and fear?) or to dwell in our ambiguities and contradictions…” (1993: xiv-xv). In “The Roof walker,” Adrienne Rich alludes to the phallic control of female sexuality: “A life I didn't choose /Chose me” (Gelpi, 1975:15). Rich has in mind the numbing effects of the patriarchal tradition that overlooks woman’s desires. She is frustrated and angry at the loss of the self. She wanders across unaware of what she has to do:

Was it worth while to lay –
With infinite exertion –
A roof I can't live under?
All those blueprints,
Closing of gaps,
Measurings, calculations? (Gelpi, 1975:15)

She searches for her identity but realizes: “My tools are the wrong ones/For what I have to do” (Gelpi, 1975:15). Rich alludes to the phallogocentric language that silences female desire. She expresses her inability to voice the frustrations in the available language.
Luce Irigaray proposes that language is inherently masculine, and, therefore, woman can never be a true subject in language. Irigaray observes: “Woman’s desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s; woman’s desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks” (1985:25). Kamala Das sings of the unfulfilled desire of women in her poems. The woman in the poem “The Freaks” finds the man near her repulsive as his cheek is “Sunstained,” mouth “a bark cavern” and teeth “uneven.” She longs for tenderness and love beyond desire but has to be satisfied with carnal desire devoid of warmth. Das sings of the void she experiences:

….The heart, an empty cistern

waiting through long hours, fills itself

with coiling snakes of silence…. (1991:42)

The “Coiling Snakes of silence” that fill her heart is suggestive of the unsatisfied desire that woman is forced to hide.

Feminist poets resent the gender-based polarities ingrained in culture. They strongly believe that the hierarchical perception is a distorted version of reality. They yearn for “relationships defined by mutuality and interpenetrations rather than by the culturally privileged grid of dominance and subordination” (Ostriker, 1986: 165). An analysis of feminist poetry reveals that women long for relations where affinity and interpenetration outweigh dominance and subordination. Unless hierarchy is eliminated, desire fails to be satisfied. The boundary between the Self/Other has to be dissolved to experience pleasure. Ostriker suggests that “the wish to kill/die” that pervades feminist poetry, indicates the need for an alternative
representation of female pleasure (1986:165). In feminist erotic poetry there is often a reversal of sex role. The lover, instead of repressing her feminine qualities, releases them. Lesbian poets write of lesbian body and the sensuality of love between women. Judy Grahn pictures the intimate encounter between two women in the poem “[I]n the Place Where”:

   in the place where
   her breasts come together
   two thumbs’ width of
   channel ride my
   eyes to anchor
   hands to angle
   in the place where
   her legs come together
   I said “you smell like the ocean. (1978: 261)

The poem is rich in its lesbian eroticism.

   Phallogocentric concepts prevent women from exploring and expressing their sexuality. According to Freud, women are not entitled to active sexuality. The woman’s pleasure lies in being passively taken over by man. Female body or female pleasure is overlooked. Woman is depicted as an object to be acted upon. In order to be a normal adult female, she should exhibit only passive qualities. Sex drive in men is characterized by virility whereas sex hunger in women is to be suppressed. Helene Cixous points out that in patriarchy and in phallogocentric discourses female sexuality is defined by the presence of the phallus. Sex is a pleasure for man and he
expects the female partner to titillate him. The parson cries out to the miller’s wife in “The Little Peasant”: “Bounce me off/Like a shuttle cock /Dance me dingo-sweet” (Sexton, 1981:238). Woman is psychologically socialized to the patriarchal sexist ideology and hence she partakes in the love act with the feeling that she is impure. Woman perceives herself as mutilated and weak. Her role is to arouse her mate sexually. Beauty and youth are so eulogized in patriarchal culture that the anxiety over aging and the consequent frigidity haunts her. The Miller’s wife in Anne Sexton’s poem “The Little Peasant” cries:

I am chalk white
With middle age

............... 

Lick me clean
Clean as an almond. (1981:238)

She is so programmed as to believe that yielding to his sexual demands would rejuvenate her. In this regard, Sheila Ruth observes:

In patriarchy, woman is objectified, passive, and self-abnegating, but authentic functioning sexuality is subjective, forceful and self-affirming. (1995: 232)

Ruth means that there is a difference between the expected experiences of conventional female sexuality and the lived experiences of authentic female sexuality.

For Lacan, woman exists only as an idealized fantasy –fulfilment for the incurable emotional lack caused by the separation from the (m)Other. Masculine
desire dominates speech. Woman can enter the Symbolic only if she internalizes male desire. That is, woman can imagine herself only as men imagine her. Helene Cixous follows Lacan’s pattern, and arrives at the conclusion that the female body in general becomes unrepresentable in language. Elaborating further, Cixous posits that female sexuality or female sexual pleasure is unrepresentable within the phallogocentric Symbolic order. Women are marginalized objects in this linguistic system. Women have to be forced out of their bodies to acquire language in order to become subject. As long as the centre is designated as the phallus, women can never move into the centre of the language. Hence women cannot write like women using the phallogocentric language. They write like men.

The conscious use of language is often designated as masculine and the unconscious feminine. According to Ruthven, “the dark continent of the unconscious is the place in which to serve for an authentically feminine specificity” (1984: 97). French feminists also contend that to know woman and to represent her without distortion one must search for her in the unconscious, in the language. Language symbolically substitutes the child’s desire for its mother’s body which is repressed in the unconscious. The Symbolic Order of language is actually the patriarchal social order of modern society, structured around the “transcendental signifier” of the phallus and dominated by the Law of the Father. The poststructuralist feminists argue that having no phallus women are closer to the margins of the Symbolic order whereas men are closer to the centre. Women can search for a gyno-centric language from their marginalized position. The stabilizing impact of the phallus is lesser towards the periphery and hence women are more in
the Imaginary than in the Symbolic realm of the unconscious. So female identity is related to a quest to retrieve the suppressed female body and female sexuality.

Traditionally, women have been denied control over their body or sexuality. Patriarchal discourses of power concerning the representation of sex inhibited women from exploring their body and verbalizing their sexuality. Alicia Ostriker observes: “One of the ways to recognize a poetess-which is to say a woman poet locked into sentimentality by her inhibitions-is that she steers clear of anatomical references” (1986:92). Women poets have to avoid references to body in order to gain access to the public sphere of “high culture.” According to Foucault, one of the methods to censure sex in reality is “to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present” (Rabinow, 1984:301).

Denise Levertov refers to this repression of sex in language in her poem “Hypocrite Women”: “Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak/ of our own doubts while dubiously/ we mother man in his doubt” (1967: 40). Levertov’s poem is her response to Jack Spicer’s representation of women as “hideous sex” (1975:55). She scorns women for not admitting their strangeness and suggests that they should explore their sexuality, instead of believing what “… a white sweating bull of a poet told us” (1967: 40). In The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the female body is a liability to the creative woman, since it has always been reproductively oriented: “… the woman is adapted to the needs of the egg rather than to her own requirements” (1960:29-31). According to de Beauvoir, woman is a victim of
culture. Until late twentieth century, writing the body, especially female body, was not considered noble. Transcending the body to achieve rationality is a man’s prerogative. Women have been restricted from writing about their bodily experiences. In this regard, Janet Price, and Margrit Shildrick comment:

What is at issue for women specifically is that, supposedly, the female body is intrinsically unpredictable, leaky and disruptive…the ability to effect transcendence and exercise rationality has been gender marked as an attribute of men alone – and further of only some men…such that women remain rooted within their bodies, held back by their supposedly natural biological processes. (1999: 2)

Woman’s body has been a site of oppression, embarrassment and pain in patriarchal culture. Hormones, menstruation and the possibility of childbirth make female body unpredictable, uncontrollable and private. This negative view of female body and female existence has silenced women.

In Speculum of the Other Woman Irigaray observes that phallogocentric representations victimize women by providing them with a language that is unfit to articulate their meanings. Thus, woman is alienated from her being. Both Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous observe that if women get a new language to speak about their sexuality, “phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory but also in practice” (Warhol, 1997:369). Women must recognize and assert their jouissance if they are to subvert phallocentric oppression at its deepest levels. Instead of submitting themselves to their marginalized position, they must resist it by stepping out and
rediscovering their sexuality, language and discourses. Women should start with the knowledge of their bodies and their sexuality which is absent or misrepresented in male-centred discourses.

French feminists regard female body as the autonomous producer of gynocentric language. They suggest that women should write with what they have instead of internalizing the concept of what they lack. A new language has to be evolved with the female body as the central signifier. Women must redesign their sexuality that is rooted solely in their bodies, and find innovative ways to represent the female jouissance. This is the way women can assume Subject position. They must subvert the phallogocentric system of stable and ordered meaning by creating a new signifying system. Thus they can resist the phallogocentric concepts and control of female sexuality. In this regard, Helene Cixous suggests:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into the history – by her own movement…Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it.

(Warhol, 1997: 347)

Cixous means that women ought to deconstruct the phallogocentric system. She wants women to develop new strategies to explore the relation between female bodies and a gynocentric language.
Irigaray exhorts women to write with their genitals: the same genitals disparaged by psychoanalysts should serve as a tool to write. Contrary to the theory that pen is the metaphorical phallus she argues that women’s writing must proceed from vulva. Irigaray finds that the psychoanalytic discourse is dominated by men as the right to speech is given to the possessor of the phallus. She proposes the metaphor of “two lips” as a counter hegemonic discourse. She suggests the metaphor of labia as a possible way to symbolize the specificity of woman’s being and sexuality. When women articulate through the “lips that never lie” sites of logocentrism will erupt (Montefiore, 1987:133).

Julia Kristeva postulates a theory which includes the female body in the symbolic realm. Kristeva redefines the Imaginary as the semiotic and suggests it as an alternative mode of signification to the Symbolic. The Semiotic is the physical basis of language, its sounds, tones, and rhythms, originating in the body. As the physical basis the Semiotic is “a psychic modality logically and chronologically prior to the sign: without this bodily basis there could be no symbolic, no language or culture” (Jantzen, 1999:195). As the discharge of drives, it is also associated with the maternal body which is the first source of rhythms, tones, and movements for every human being. According to Kristeva, signification requires both the semiotic and symbolic; there is no signification without some combination of both. Without the symbolic we have only delirium or nature, while without the semiotic, language would be completely empty, if not impossible. So this oscillation between the semiotic and the symbolic is productive and necessary in language. It is this oscillation that produces the speaking subject. Kristeva’s theory provides a speaking
position to women from where they can articulate feminine jouissance: “[the] poetic language (for whom the word is never uniquely sign) … reactives this repressed, instinctual, maternal element” (1980:136). She means that the poetic language for woman also partakes the experiences of patriarchal existence and the maternal body.

French feminists motivate women to write their body. Their support towards “inscribing the body” is a protest against the patriarchal vision that ignores female sexual pleasure. According to Cixous, poetry as a linguistic structure is closer to the unconscious, and hence closer to the suppressed female body/female sexuality. Poetic language is a flux: the chain of signifiers flows more freely and the meaning is less fixed, less stable. So women can explore the medium of poetry to write their bodies, write as women. Early women poets avoided reference to female body. But contemporary women’s poetry indicates a changing trend. Alicia Ostriker thinks that it is a sign of liberation: woman’s “muted parts… begin to explain themselves” (1986: 92). Kamala Das rejects the male-oriented language and defies the cultural norms that restrict women’s vocabulary and style. For her poetry is a medium not only to present a romanticized version of love and marriage but also to challenge the patriarchal restrictions on woman’s language. She mocks at the cultural codes of do’s and don’ts specifically developed to control female sexuality. Her language becomes ironic when she writes about “the jerky way he/Urinates” (1967:25) and displays her “two dimensional nudity” (1991:39). She dares to expose “the musk of sweat between the breasts” (1967:25) and look at the “ chests where/New hair sprouted like great-winged moths” (2004:49). When Das writes
about swelling limbs, growing hairs, the weight of breasts and the darkness of womb, she defies the society’s convention that veiled language must be used when female body is alluded to. She rejects the phallogocentric system that centralises man and marginalises women. Patriarchal society censures woman’s language when it depicts woman’s sexuality truly. In this context, Sarojini Sahoo comments:

If a painter paints a nude of a woman, we can appreciate it as a masterpiece. We can enjoy the erotic sculpture showing women’s nude bodies on the temple wall. We can digest all these from the pen and brush of a male artist, but if Kamala Das writes, we feel disturbed thinking that society is now in danger. When Sunil Ganguly writes about his affairs with other ladies, it is cited as a literary boldness, but when Kamala Das expresses her passion, it is considered as ‘perverted thought. (Agarwal, 2009:2)

The double standard of morality that society prescribes for men and women is also extended to the use of language.

Contemporary women celebrate female body, especially its uniqueness, in their writing. Though menstruation is a sign of fertility, it is often regarded as impure. But Deborah Harding sees menstruation as a powerful life process:

small bud of my child,
my half-thumb, is it you?
Every half hour I’ve been checking
for blood, slipping my hand under the sheet,
quick touch at the velvet opening,
the place where the head would crown. (Otten, 1995:8-9)

For Harding menstruation is not a burden, but a mysterious experience. It is a possibility within her body and she recognizes it as her body’s potential. Anne Sexton breaks the taboo of writing the female body when she celebrates her uterus in the poem “In Celebration of My Uterus.” Sexton speaks, as if her uterus has an identity of its own:

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you.

I dare to live. (1981:182)

Sexton uses positive metaphors to describe the uterus and invites the readers to explore the potentials of female body.

Ecriture feminine, the concept formulated by Helene Cixous, opens up a new way of writing for women. It is a mode of thinking and writing different from the patriarchal mode. According to Ellen Messer Davidow, it is “an attempt to dismantle the messages of the dominant phallogocentric discourses and to ‘embody’ female identity in a language that originates in womb like darkness, flows from its creator like her body fluids, and diffuses rhythmically like her multipliant sexual pleasure” (Kauffman,1989:69). In the Lacanian Symbolic, the infant gives up the pre-verbal relation with the mother, and the ecriture feminine is a mode of writing that is possible without this separation. It has a capacity to reflect and create human
experiences free from the control of patriarchy. It reasserts the value of the feminine.

But it remains only at the conceptual level. Though creative writers like Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison have tried it, Cixous observes that “there has not yet been any writing that inscribes femininity” (Warhol, 1997:347). According to Cixous, it is difficult to define the concept. Elaine Showalter realizes that it does not make sense as a literary practice. She observes in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness:”

The concept of *ecriture feminine*, the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text, is a significant theoretical formulation in French feminist criticism, although it describes a utopian possibility rather than a literary practice. (1981:185)

Women writers are bound to translate this theory into practice. Feminists like Nancy K. Miller evaluates it as “…fundamentally a hope, if not a blueprint, for the future” (1981:37). It provides women writers a raw material to work with. Elaine Marks observes that *ecriture feminine* is the result of an intense desire “to destroy the male hegemony” over language, but she doubts whether it is possible “to break out of the prison of language” (1981:896). Women writers find that they are the captives of a discourse they despise.

Feminists like Monique Wittig suggest a lesbian Subject position for women. According to Wittig, women fail to enter the Subject position as long as heterosexual imagination prevails. Heterosexual economy is based on the categories “man” and “woman” and the subordination of woman. In order to become a total Subject she should disrupt it. Heterosexuality assigns women an identity only in
relation to men. It grants women a linguistic position that assigns them a deviant status. Wittig exhorts women to refuse to be heterosexual. In her view this “refusal to become (or remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not” (1992:13). Wittig posits that as lesbians women can write from the Subject position. Language can be transformed only by abolishing the categories “man” and “woman.” Lesbian cannot be confined within the hegemonic binary man/woman because a lesbian is in no way linked with heterosexual economy (Abelove, 1993:108). She means that equality of sexes in life as well as in representation is possible only outside the hegemonic site of heterosexuality.

All discourses, whether of medicine or psychiatry, take the position that heterosexuality is an unquestioned paradigm when human relations are analysed. Sigmund Freud views sexual instinct as a need for both reproduction and pleasure, but Oedipus and Electra complexes, point to the development of a heterosexual identity as the normal and natural form of human sexuality. In this regard, Richard von Krafft-Ebing observes in *Psychopathia Sexualis*:

> During the time of maturation of physical processes in the reproductive glands, desire arise in the consciousness of the individual, which have for their purpose the perpetuation of the species (sexual instinct) [...] with opportunity for the natural satisfaction of the sexual instinct, every expression of it that does not correspond with the purpose of nature, i.e. propagation-must be
regarded as perverse. (qtd. in Phillips, 2007 http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/psychosexual.htm)

According to this view, the mature adult has a natural instinct to mate with a member of the opposite sex for the reproduction of the species. Anything that does not obviously lead to reproduction is not natural.

Monique Wittig views psychoanalytical contract as a forced one, it is not a contract of consent (1992:145). Lacan’s concept of the unconscious consciously serves the interests of man. The concepts of the Symbolic order, Desire and Jouissance are all categories founded on heterosexuality. These concepts become laws and are universalized. It is difficult to imagine a culture where heterosexuality does not control all human relationships and the production of concepts. Wittig regards heterosexuality as “the obligatory social relationship between ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ You-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be” (1992:46). Heterosexuality has become the norm and the mainstream sexuality.

Wittig observes that discourses have played a very significant role in institutionlising heterosexuality. Experiences and testimonies of lesbians challenge the Freudian concept that sexual desire is always directed to the opposite sex. Kamala Das expresses her lesbian desire in her autobiography My Story and her short story “The Sandal Trees.” Lesbianism has always existed; but it has always been repressed because in accepting it one has to reject the Symbolic order and phallic signification. But discourses of heterosexuality force lesbians to speak in their terms. In this regard, Wittig observes:
The discourses which particularly oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men, are those which take for granted that what founds society, any society is heterosexuality…These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms. Everything which puts them into question is at once regarded as elementary…These discourses deny us every possibility of creating our own categories. (1992:146)

They have no other choice but to repeat what the straight mind says. Naturally, they find it difficult to communicate experiences that are exclusively lesbian in the patriarchal culture where heterosexuality and lesbianism are treated in terms of normality and deviance. According to Wittig, the lesbian poet has to wage a tough battle; she has to struggle to create a space of her own.

In patriarchal culture, heterosexuality is normative. It is the unmarked sexual identity. As woman is the marked gender category defined by her gender, non heterosexuals are the marked sexual category defined by their sexuality. Patriarchy uses all its resources to project heterosexuality as the normative sexual identity. Society functions through interactions. The gender appropriate language in which we interact forces heterosexuality on women by making it appear normal and natural. The way woman speaks indicates her powerlessness in the male dominated society. The super polite forms, evading of strong expletives and the use of trivial vocabulary all mark her femininity linguistically and index her heterosexual identity. Thus, language is the powerful tool with which men and women construct their identities; one’s style
of speech is an index of one’s sexual identity. According to Deborah Cameron, speakers can fake identities since linguistic resources are shared: “…by appropriating the established, shared meanings of particular ways of speaking, speakers …are able to construct identities which are not ‘authentic’” (2003:62).

In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the woman who “sparingly and partially” participates in sexual intercourse fakes orgasm:

> When she senses some spasm about to grip him, she will make rapid movements with her hips, press her finger nails into his back, suck in her breath, and pretend she is having an orgasm. (1972:69)

The woman who fakes orgasm and successfully communicates it to the partner is constructing a sexuality based on the prevalent discourse that “giving” a woman an orgasm is a proof of a heterosexual man’s sexual competence.

The male perspective on sex relegates women’s sexual experience to a secondary status. Ruthven observes that the refusal to see female sexuality as a non-reproductive autonomous pleasure is reflected in lexicography and literature: “It is significant that Henley and Farmer have no entry for ‘clitoris’ in their dictionary of Slang and its analogues …” (1984:47). The term “sex” is indicative of an act that is defined by male orgasm. Sexual activity that women find fulfilling is termed “foreplay.” Sex or sexual activity therefore becomes more natural for men than for women: “foreplay” distorts women’s experiences. Ruthven states that in a language where sufficient suitable words are not available to record female experience, it is natural to suppose that
women are silenced. They find it difficult to articulate key elements of their lives and important aspects of their thoughts. Maleness of language imposes the male worldview. Dale Spender also suggests that the maleness of language constrains thought, imposing a male worldview on all of us, and making alternative visions of reality impossible, or very difficult to articulate.

When people are categorized on the basis of their sexual desires and practices, and are linguistically labeled, patriarchal ideas of sexuality dominate our thoughts. As male terms are universalized, women with heterosexual orientation are referred to as “normal women.” This contributes to the invisibility of lesbians. In a culture that can conceive sexuality only in heterosexual terms, those who remain outside the norms are labeled in such a way that they have only a subordinate status in the society. Men have historically shaped ideas about what is respectable for women in love, sex and family. They reject lesbianism and argue that it is not a valid expression of sexuality since men are excluded. Early sexologists referred to gay men or lesbians as “sexual deviants,” "sexual inverts;” this classification was stigmatizing. Cameron observes that such discourses construct one’s idea of normativity and deviance: “The language we have access to in a particular time and place for representing sex and sexuality exerts a significant influence on what we take to be possible, what we take to be ‘normal’ and what we take to be desirable” (2003:12). The universality and normality of heterosexuality is taken for granted in patriarchal societies.
Feminists believe that by changing the label a more dignified status can be accorded to the deviant minority who practice alternative forms of sexuality. Cameron observes that the term “gay” is an alternative to homosexual, less common but not at all condemnable:

Although the two terms, ‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’, have the same referential meaning – they identify the same group of people – their meanings in actual usage are not identical. The selection of one or the other can signify the difference between conceptualizing homosexuality as deviance or sickness, and conceptualizing it in other and more positive ways: as an alternative personal and/or political choice, for instance, or simply as one ‘natural’ variant of human sexuality, less common than heterosexuality but not by that token deserving condemnation. (2003: 26)

Cameron points to a heterosexual bias in language. Other forms of sexuality are stereotyped and stigmatized by the androcentric language and patriarchal culture.

Although the terms heterosexual and bisexual refer to identity as well as sexual behaviour, the term "homosexuality" has connoted sexual activity rather than a general way of relating and living. Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concern instituted by American Psychological Association has suggested ways of avoiding heterosexual bias in language. Referring to lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons in situations other than sexual relationships is another way of liberating these terms from the sexual connotations. As "homosexuality" has been associated with deviance, mental illness, and criminal behaviour, the use of terms "lesbianism," "heterosexuality," "homosexuality" and "bisexuality” is likely to perpetuate
negative stereotypes. So it is preferred that such negative terms are replaced by "lesbian sexual orientation," "heterosexual sexual orientation," "gay male sexual orientation," and "bisexual sexual orientation." Authors are advised to avoid inaccurate stereotypes of lesbians and gays.

Since heterosexuality has been considered the norm, lesbians, gays and bisexuals are silenced or ignored. “Homosexual” is a designation ambiguous in reference; usually, it refers to only men, and lesbians become invisible. The tendency to use “heterosexual” to refer to general public is an act of universalizing male terms. So, for clarity of expression, they should be referred to as “heterosexual men and women.” In order to increase their visibility it is suggested that when referring to activities like parenting, mistakenly associated with heterosexual people, examples of lesbians or gays should also be given. It is also suggested to use the term sexual activity instead of sexual intercourse; the former is equally relevant to people of all sexual orientation.

Feminists argue that sexuality plays an important role in the patriarchal power politics. The male idea of normal, female sexuality denies sexual pleasure to women. They believe that heterosexuality asserts man’s dominance over women. The set norms of heterosexual pattern are detrimental to the identity of women. Radical feminists, in particular, regard heterosexuality as an oppressive institution. Charlotte Bunch observes that “the very essence, definition and nature of heterosexuality is men first” (Persall, 1986:131). Patriarchy defines normal female sexuality focusing on female vaginal orgasm. According to Ann Koedt, there is an oblique politics in the theory of vaginal orgasm. Men have created and popularized
the myth of vaginal orgasm because he needs vagina for his sexual arousal. Heteronormativity benefits men but overlooks women’s needs. In “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” Koedt observes that vaginal orgasm is a patriarchally constructed myth mediated through discourses to reinforce male power over women:

Women have been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men; our own biology has not been properly analysed. Instead, we are fed the myth of the liberated woman and her vaginal orgasm—an orgasm that in fact does not exist. (1973: 112)

In heterosexual paradigm women’s desires are subordinated to men’s pleasure. So heterosexuality is a site of male power and female subjection. Feminists regard it as a socially constructed institution which structures and maintains male domination.

Feminists exhort women to redefine their sexuality and seek new ways of sexual enjoyment. Women should break out of the binary modes of heterosexist thinking. Adrienne Rich holds that heterosexuality is a violent political institution that makes women’s dependence on men inevitable. It grants men physical, economic and emotional power over women. According to Rich, heterosexuality is a compulsory choice that women can take whereas lesbianism is a forbidden one and it is the patriarchal culture that makes it so. Compulsory heterosexuality denies individuals the freedom to choose his/her sexual preferences. Heterosexuality has a role in maintaining gender hierarchy in which women are subordinated to men. Lesbians, who refuse to submit to male dominance, thus become a threat to patriarchy that functions on gender hierarchy. In heterosexual relationships there
develops a kind of emotional attachment that prompts women to fit her into the mould that society has shaped for her. In this context, Martha Shelley observes:

[men] don’t like women who aren’t dependent on them – who aren’t sitting at home waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for “him” to come home, women who don’t feel totally crushed by the thought that some man doesn’t love the many more, women who aren’t terrified at the idea that a man might leave them. (Crow, 2000: 305)

The woman who enjoys the sexual and emotional pleasure from her heterosexual relationship wishes and tries to be the girl of his dreams.

Adrienne Rich conceives Lesbianism as an extension of Feminism. Rich exhorts women to direct their energies towards other women and thus experience the erotic in female terms. Historically, lesbian experiences have been unexposed. Lesbianism has been a stigmatized clinical term and lesbians are viewed as deviants. Rich speaks about a “lesbian continuum” (Gelpi, 1975:215) For Rich, lesbianism is not merely sexual acts but a whole range of “woman identified experience.” Her approach grants women the freedom for sexual choice by granting more visibility to lesbianism. Women can move in or out of the lesbian continuum irrespective of their sexual orientation. Rich is indignant that lesbians have been included in history without any distinctiveness. Lesbianism is treated as a version of homosexuality and this approach falsifies female experience. In this regard, Rich comments:

Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through ‘inclusion’ as female version of male homosexuality. To
equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to erase female reality once again. (Gelpi, 1975:215)

Lesbianism is not just an alternate and counter hegemonic form of sexuality: it is a mode of representing the true female-centred experiences. According to Rich, female heterosexuality is a lie that conceals women’s passion for women, their longing for a female community. This lie entraps women’s identity and sexuality into a culturally prescribed format. This lie has been mediated through discourses that assert that women are inevitably drawn to men and the image of heterosexually constituted family as the basic unit of society.

Phallogocentrism can mediate only cultural practices that restrict one’s sexuality. It is impossible to be totally free of these rules while using the language for creative or critical discourses by women. Even when women write, they can write only the language of men. In this context, Shoshana Felman comments:

…if “the woman” is precisely the Other of any conceivable Western theoretical locus of speech, how can the woman as such be speaking in this book? …Is she speaking the language of men, or the silence of women? Is she speaking as a woman, or in place of the (silent) woman, for the woman, in the name of the woman? …Is “speaking as a woman” a fact determined by some biological condition, or by a strategic, theoretical position, by anatomy or by culture? What if “speaking as a woman” were not a simple “natural” fact, could not be taken for granted? (Warhol, 1997:7).
Feldman’s comment reminds one of Luce Irizarry’s observations that discourses, male or female, are they inscribed with the rules of patriarchy.

The female writer is always a female Prometheus. In the absence of a female-centred language, she is forced to use the wrong tool, the male-centred language. Kamala Das challenges the hegemonic patriarchal discourses in the male-centred language that she despises. This creates ambivalence in her poetry. She seems to be confused when she uses words. For her words are birds and she wonders “Where have they gone to roost/ Wings tired/Hiding from the dusk” (1991:137). Women writers feel uneasy when forced to use androcentric language. Das associates “the word” with sin: “The word then is sin/Nothing better, nothing worse” (1996:61). For Das word resonates with the home where the God of sin resides. She is afraid that man, God and Word together conspire against women:

    Tomorrow they may bind me with chains stronger than
    Those of my cowardice, rape me with bayonets and
    Hang me for my doubts. (1991:96)

Women’s difficulty in using male language is expressed here. She refers to the evolution of male constructed discourses.

Women poets are unhappy with the phallogocentric system that offers no scope for a true representation of female identity. What women need is the freedom to experience their sexuality unrestrained by cultural and linguistic practices and to define it spontaneously. By introducing a female perspective, they hope to challenge the phallogocentric concepts. Feminist theorists put forth the concepts of female identity, female sexuality and female centred language as possibilities. Helene
Cixous’s c écriture feminine, for instance, rests only at a conceptual level. It is more a theoretical discourse than a creative one. Monique Wittig’s lesbian Subject position is actually a linguist utopia inhabited by women. The female imaginary world constituted by a pair of lovers in Luce Irigaray’s “When our Lips Speak Together” is a fantasy. What women writers need is an alternative language which is as powerful as the male-centred language but different from it. They should try to evolve a language suitable to render exclusively female experiences of sexuality, reproduction and body. They need a language to penetrate and undermine the masculine system which contains them. In this regard, Michelle Rosaldo remarks:

The very symbolic and social conceptions that appear to set women apart and to circumscribe their activities may be used by the women as a basis for female solidarity and worth. (1974:39)

The male-centred exclusionary discourses provide women with a platform for collective resistance against phallogocentrism.

In order to subvert the phallogocentric perspective, women poets of all cultures have been exploring myths and tales. Alicia Ostriker observes that myths are “foundations of collective male fantasy” (1986:317). They attune women to a sexuality programmed in a male libidinal economy. This coheres with the phallic order in such a subtle way that women fail to realize that it is indifferent to their sexual needs or desires. As Luce Irigaray observes in “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother,” it is important for women to know that “there is a relationship with jouissance other than that which functions in accordance with the phallic model” (Whitford, 1991:45). Women writers, especially women poets, of all cultures have
been rewriting myths in their efforts to re-discover the female sexual identity and singularity of women’s desire. As structuralists like Levi-Strauss and Barthes contend, there is no functional difference between language and metalanguage. In this context, metalanguage like myths offers a raw material for a female-centred language which is oppositional to the male-centred discourses. The female-centred language can truly express the female sexuality and retrieve the female identity lost in the exclusionary phallogocentric system of signification.