CHAPTER III

Re-visionist Mythmaking

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival.

Adrienne Rich.

Myths are the most powerful tools used by patriarchy to subordinate women in the use of language. Myths attribute to women a gender identity built on the binary logic and a sexual identity submerged within the phallic system. In the poem “The Stranger,” Adrienne Rich challenges the competence of the mythmakers in defining woman: “I am the living mind you fail to describe/In your dead language” (Gelpi, 1975: 52). In Euripides’s Medea, the all-female chorus laments that “the muses of ancient singers” have been telling “the tale of my unfaithfulness” from their perspective (1946:410). These unfair tales provoke women poets and they seize the lyre to sing “an answer to the other sex” (1946:410). Women poets revise myths to present their perspective so far ignored. Myth is a complex form of language and women poets steal the language in which they are humiliated and refashion it to tell their story. Re-vision of the myths is a reappropriation of male space for female ends.
Myth is patriarchy’s language that subjugates woman. It is the Law of the Father that operates within the realm of myths. The masculine language connects itself with the masculine value system. It reflects the culture and ideology of patriarchy. Male view of culture and women’s role in it are imposed as if the male perception is the only truth. This ideology is internalized by all irrespective of gender. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes uses the term myth as indicative of any made up, illusory thing, the false representations and invalid beliefs prevalent in the society which we accept as “natural.” According to Barthes, the role of the mythologist is to prove that what appears to be natural is in fact artificial constructs which support existing power structures and construct a world for us and decide our place in it. Barthes suggests that myths not only reflect and explain perceived reality but also convey powerful messages about how this reality should be and how people should behave. Anthropologists like Paul Radin emphasize the functional dimension of myths:

A myth is always explanatory. The explanatory theme often is so completely dominant that everything else becomes subordinated to it.…. (http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/-mmagouli/defmyth.htm.)

In this context, myth, like poetry, is a functional structure.

Myths are constructed in such a way that they legitimize certain perspectives of culture, history and society. Fairytales and myths produce, conserve and transmit a female identity that is construed as natural. In this context, Kate Millett observes: “patriarchy has a still more tenacious or powerful hold through its successful habit of passing itself off as nature” (1970:58). The patriarchal ideology of myth is hardly
visible due to its defamiliarizing capacity. Only a female perspective can unravel the phallocentric nature of myths and challenge their androcentric structure. In this regard, Judith Fetterley observes:

The first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcising the male mind that has been implanted in us. (Warhol, 1975:570)

Fetterly underlines the need to apply the feminist critique to evaluate the myths and to expose the materials inimical to female identity in them.

Reading myths and fairytales from a female perspective reveals how much women are victimized by these cultural texts which are defining parameters of language. Most of the characters, events and ideas related to the Bible have been transmuted into symbols and metaphors that naturalise the subordination of women in society. Patriarchal religion constructs an identity for women without appearing to do so. Positive and negative role-models are presented for women in the Bible. The Christian ideal, Virgin Mary, the embodiment of submission, is held up for reverence as a role model, whereas Mary Magdalene, with an irrepresible nature, is projected as a weeping sinner. Women can silently accept their sufferings and can be ideal figures like Virgin Mary or be unfeminine and enterprising like Miriam, the prophet and leader and face eternal retribution. Eve is “the symbol of woman’s innate sinfulness, her power to degrade and corrupt, a symbol of divine punishment laid on womankind” (Haughton, 1985:iv). Eve’s rebellious act in the Garden of Eden is one of the primary myths that western civilization makes use of to subjugate
women. Kate Millett describes the story of the fall as “the central myth of the Judeo-Christian imagination and therefore of our immediate cultural heritage” (1970:52). The myth of Eve is well exploited by patriarchy to project woman as a secondary creation. In this context, Anne Baring and Jules Cashford observe: “Whatever is divine in Eve comes to her secondhand through the substance of Adam” because “the male is prior in time,… superior in consciousness,… and created in the image of God” (1993:519). Myths, like language, are conceptualized in androcentric terms; they are endemically phallocentric.

In western civilization, patriarchal sexual attitude towards women is founded on the image of Mary and Eve. The type of female purity originates in the Biblical figure of the Virgin Mother Mary. Eve, who disobeyed God’s command, becomes the archetypal woman, the holder of dangerous sexuality and alluring form that can bring trouble to humanity. In order to attain sanctity, women have to identify with Virgin Mary. But Mary Condren observes that it becomes impossible due to the most revered virginity of Mother Mary:

…we are told that Mary herself "was conceived without sin" and when she gave birth to Jesus remained a virgin. To reach full sanctity then, women have to renounce their sexuality, symbol of their role as temptresses and the means by which they drag men from their lofty heights. (1989: 5)

Condren’s study on women and religion in Celtic Ireland leads her to conclude that sex and spirituality have become polar opposites in Christian teaching.
The female archetypes in Greek myths, denied of voice, visibility and dignity, instill in women a set of values that confirm and justify their subordination. They counsel women on how they should be in order to survive in the patriarchal society. Victimised and ineffectual Alcestis, Iphigenia, and Philomela naturalise women’s victimization and their silent submission to oppression. Male control of female sexuality is justified through the images of sexually aggressive Clytemnestra. Women we come across in myths are either angels or monsters. Venus of Hellenic myth and Cinderella from the fairy land symbolize the angelic attributes of women. Medusa, with her deadly stare and mysterious hair, and Medea, the powerful sorceress, are the different faces of monstrous women. The powerful Circe is a brutally eccentric sorceress, whose spells turn men into animals. Pandora, the trouble maker, and Helen, the beautiful deceiver, are the other moulds available to patriarchy from Greek mythology to categorize women. Women can have only two kinds of existence: the paragon of all virtues or the demon of all vices. This is a biased representation far removed from reality. Sherry Ortner observes that in myths woman becomes the embodiment of the “extremes of Otherness” which the culture of the male “confronts with worship or fear, love or loathing.” This is a “symbolic ambiguity” that arises from the fact that denied of cultural autonomy woman “can appear … to stand both under and over the sphere of culture’s hegemony” (Rosaldo, 1974:86). Mythmakers categorize women in terms of their subservience to the patriarchal cultural values. In order to make women available to their desires, men portray them as Madonna, mother or idealized lover. Male fear of the menacing, destructive, violent woman finds
expression in the images of witch, harlot or femme fatale. Euphemistic myths and tales camouflage reality and create a cultural mindscape that shuts out all the possibilities of self-assertion and growth for women.

Myths have a psychological existence. From the Jungian perspective, myths are the “culturally elaborated representations of the contents of the deepest recess of the human psyche: the world of the archetypes” (Walker, 1995:4). According to Carl Jung, the archetypes in myths are already stored in our collective unconscious. So myths transcend the personal and establish links with the wider culture. Since archetypes transcend space and time, there is a striking similarity between the values, hopes, fears, dreams and thoughts of people of different cultures. Freud's psychological use of the myth of Oedipus confirms that myths tell the story of everyman. Freud argues that Oedipus, the man whose fate was to kill his father and marry his mother, actually tells the story of the childhood experience of every boy. Jung’s theories that relate archetypes to the unconscious suggest that these archetypes continue to haunt us. They generate and shape our thinking. The archetypal mother helps us to recognize a certain relationship, that of "mothering." We project this abstract archetype into the world and on to a particular person, usually our own mothers. It is also likely that we often personify this archetype. This character symbolizes the archetype. Alicia Ostriker echoes the Jungian perspective when she comments: “myth is quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation - everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed, or abominable” (1986:212).
She means that myths are part of the unconscious and they constitute personal materials as well.

Northrop Frye shifts the definition of archetypes from the psychological to the literary. Whereas Jung views archetypes as primordial images that we have inherited, Frye sees archetypes as recurring patterns in literature: “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole” (1957:365). Most of the myths that are part of our culture have been transmitted through literature. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, posits that myths permeate our lives and that all literature is displaced myth. He assigns myths an irreducible and inescapable place in literature. Mythical mode is the “most abstract and conventionalized” form (1957:134). It deals with characters who have the greatest possible powers and who act “near or at the conceivable limits of desire” (Frye, 1957:136). Frye identifies four types of “mythos” or narrative patterns: summer, autumn, winter and spring each indicative of Romance, Tragedy, Irony/Satire, Comedy respectively. This framework organizes the entire system of literary works. Works in the “realistic mode” stand at one end of the spectrum and works in the “mythical mode” occupy the opposite end (1957: 138). Frye’s theory suggests that the roots of all literature and life are displaced myths. Myths “take root in a specific society and provide for that society a network of shared allusion and experience” (1976: 19). Individual and apparently archetypal images in myths constitute the fundamentals structure of our psyche and culture. Frye’s theorizing of myths suggests how powerfully myths can organize our thinking about literature and culture.
The images of women in classics are drawn from myths and legends and hence they are stereotyped. According to Gilbert and Gubar, woman can exist only as "male-defined masks and costumes" in the male literary canon (1979:19). Throughout Odyssey, one comes across a series of wicked women. Women are used as a symbol of temptation. Cassandra tempted Ajax which resulted in her rape. The female deity Athena took revenge by detaining Odysseus and his crew in the sea. Nymph Calypso also resorted to her feminine charms to seduce Odysseus. He escaped Calypso but confronted Circe, another female trickster. Next he came across Sirens, whose sweet song maddened him with desire. Women in Odyssey are temptresses. But they are dependent on the actions of men and gods, proving that ultimately they will have to submit to men. The Sirens are a perfect example of the powerless female using her charm to control men. Even when their alluring song drives men wild, they are immovable and are fixed to the rocks. In Mahabharata, Draupadi was marginalized. She had no say in the power politics of the nation. She was denied the right to select a match for her. Though it was Arjuna who won her hand, she was forced to be the wife of all five brothers. Unlike man, who can make things happen, woman is at the receiving end; things happen to her. It is difficult for a woman to have an individual identity in a culture where men dominate. The hegemonic use of language has pushed woman to obscurity and has subjected her to a forced silence.

The stereotypical representations of women in literature, conveyed through myths and converted into role-models, limit the possibilities of women. Images of motherhood in classical literature are influenced by the cultural and religious
symbols of motherhood. They in turn provide the base for mythologies that create icons and idealized stereotypes pervasive in communities. The maternal and nurturing Demeter, finding satisfaction in caretaking and providing for others, is the model of good mother in Greek mythology. In the study on patriarchal good mother/bad mother dichotomy, Shary Thurer points out that the image of Mother Mary is the good mother image that women should strive to emulate. According to Thurer, the good mother must be like Mary “always loving, selfless, tranquil; the one who finds passionate fulfillment in every detail of child rearing” (1995: xiii). Woman, as a lover and as a mother is supposed to “give herself;” female passion is chained to acquiescence. These valourised archetypal mother images provide patterns of behaviour that go beyond geography, traditions or age. Patriarchy formulates the image of the self-sacrificial mother/woman based on the archetypal mothers/ wives and thus confines women to marriage and domesticity. In her poem “Housewife,” Sexton illustrates the fact that women identify themselves with mother figures and thus develop a blurred identity:

Some women marry houses.

It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman is her mother.

That's the main thing. (1981:77)

Sexton’s idea resonates with the views of feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Shulamith Firestone who reject the patriarchal strategy of confining women to their biological functions. Firestone regards child bearing and child rearing as “fundamental inequality” produced by nature: “half the human race must bear and rear the children of all of them” (2003:184). Motherhood is a biological function which many women consider their destiny.

From the feminist perspective the myth of maternity is an inauthentic representation of an exclusively female experience. Motherhood, as constructed by patriarchy, is not a liberating experience for women. Patriarchy misuses it to subordinate women and to enforce patriarchal laws as universal. Man glorifies the institution of motherhood but denies the same glory to womanhood. Propagators of the patriarchal myth of motherhood often overlook the fact that mothers are primarily women. Patriarchal concept of motherhood alienates woman from her body. Electra condemns the desiring mother, Clytemnestra. She wonders if “mother she should be called” sleeping with Aegisthus, “in our father's bed.” A traditional approach to the myths of Electra and Oedipus keeps mothers under erasure. Jocasta’s feelings, when she passes through the trial, remain unveiled in the myth of Oedipus. Order is re-established without giving Jocasta opportunity to voice her pent up feelings. Clytemnestra’s true intention is misrepresented as sexual betrayal and thirst for power.
Myths and folktales are passionate and sensuous in content. Self-effacing romantic love is so much glorified in classical love legends that woman is enamoured. The romantic love of myths and folktales envelops the readers in such a way that it is difficult to have an objective look into them. The myth of romantic love induces women to submit themselves willingly to male domination. Shulamith Firestone sees it as “the pivot of woman’s oppression” (2003:113). In fairytales woman is defined in terms of love, and this vocation of love keeps her passive in the role of romantic wife. Fairytales like “Cinderella,” with the “happily ever after” ending, popularize the concept that the ultimate happiness of a woman comes with the intervention of a male protector. The story even suggests that a woman is unsafe without a male to protect her. Women internalize the patriarchal philosophy that marriage is the ultimate goal in life. A woman’s life depends on how good she is in winning over a handsome husband. A study of love and marriage in Grimms’ tales suggests three possibilities. A prince comes along, hears of a beautiful princess, finds her, falls in love with her and wins her as it happens in “Briar Rose” and “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.” It may happen that a young man enters a contest to win the hand of the beautiful princess, as we read in “The White Snake.” In stories like “Cinderella” the beautiful, suffering heroine wins the beauty contest and subsequently the Prince Charming. She lets herself be picked by him for being the most “feminine.” The tale ends happily with marriage. Kate Millett also observes that romantic love and marriage obscure the realities of female life in a patriarchy. She considers romantic love “a means of emotional manipulation” of the female by the male in a patriarchy
Marriage and family are institutions that help men to perpetuate the subordination of women. A wife who relinquishes her selfhood and identity for the sake of her husband is ever appreciated in patriarchy. The battered woman who bears ill fortune is projected as the role-model. These male concepts submerge the identity of women and they internalize the belief that they have certain sexual functions and can have only aspirations appropriate to these functions.

Phallocentric language contradicts the essence of woman by idealizing her beauty which patriarchy sets as the fundamental requisite of femininity. Fairytales have always been the most effective medium for patriarchal indoctrinations. Femininity is socially constructed and male-centred language makes it look natural and transparent. The beauty myth sets the standards for how a woman should look like. Pursuit of beauty makes a woman narcissistic and neglect the possibilities open to her. Once taken over by the beauty myths she starts dressing not for herself but for the male gaze. She no longer looks for her authentic self but “shave her legs until they gleam/like petrified mammoth tusks” (Rich, Gelpi, 1975:9). Marge Pierce’s poem “The Barbie Doll” describes the life and death of a girl trapped in the beauty myth. The girl child, “presented with dolls that did pee pee” and “lipsticks the colour of cherry candy,” feels degraded when the classmate “in the magic of puberty” comments: “You have a great big nose and fat legs” (1973:100). She feels bad that her appearance is unsatisfactory and “she went to and fro apologizing/Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.” Society prescribes “exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.” Finally the girl collapses trying to please the male gaze: “Her good nature worn out/like a fan belt/So she cut off her nose and her legs/and
offered them up” (Percey, 1973: 100). She commits suicide by cutting off her nose and legs, the most scrutinized parts of her body. “The Barbie Doll” is the true image of a girl haunted by the beauty myth.

Fairytales, originally meant to be children’s tales, teach us behavioural codes that we follow even beyond childhood and into matured roles. They have a lasting impression on the readers’ mind. In this regard, Andrea Dworkin observes: “We have taken the fairytales of childhood with us into maturity” (1974:80). They are deeply ingrained in us. They focus on what women ought to be and not what they are. Dworkin again remarks: “Despite ourselves, sometimes knowing, unwilling, unable to do, otherwise, we act out the roles we were taught” (1974:85). In The Dialectics of Sex, Shulamith Firestone expresses indignation about the male constructed image of what women ought to look like: “women everywhere rush to squeeze into the glass slipper, forcing and mutilating their bodies with diets and beauty programs” (2003:136). Ordinary women are like Cinderella’s stepsisters; they cut their feet to suit the shoes made by the conventions of patriarchy. Patriarchal tales misrepresent the ideal as the actual. Patriarchal myths divinize male worldview and establish gender polarization and the attendant behavioural prescriptions as natural. Gender stereotypes in myths mould our realities, fix our values’ potential. In this context, Jack Zipes observes that Grimm Brothers imposed their ideal of “benevolent patriarchal rule” on the stories they collected (1983:56):

...The male hero learns to be active, competitive, handsome, industrious...His jurisdiction is the open world...The female hero
learns to be passive, Obedient, self sacrificing, hard working, patient…Her jurisdiction is the home or castle. (1983:57)

Zipes explains how the socialization process takes place. The representation of women in myths and tales naturalises the gender identity prescribed by patriarchy.

Myths have acquired strong persuasive power through centuries. They design experience, determine beliefs and “transmit a heritage of shared allusion and verbal experience in time,… create cultural history" (Frye, 1982:34). Since myths have an easily digestible story form and have been transmitted through cultural institutions, their ideology takes root in the minds of subsequent generations. Repetition gives authenticity to myths and the embedded concepts become undeniable. The readers are easily carried over by the ideology they promote. Myths tactfully place women in a patriarchal frame. By glorifying motherhood patriarchy indirectly circumscribes women to matrimony and thereby to self-effacement, unconditional love and devoted service. By romanticizing the beautiful, suffering “Cinderella” who wins the beauty contest and subsequently the Prince, patriarchy confines women to the domestic realm. By highlighting the vulnerability of foremothers, male mythmakers try to control female sexuality. Patriarchy consolidates the myth of woman based on the archetypal images and thus restricts possibilities.

Women writers equivocally acknowledge the inherent danger of traditional myths. Simone de Beauvoir argues that men stereotype woman and use it as an excuse to dominate her. Man has always made woman the "Other" in society by putting a false aura of "mystery" around her. De Beauvoir finds myth the most powerful weapon in the hands of patriarchy. She observes that myths legitimize the
abusive treatment of women: “Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling class than the myth of woman: it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse” (1960:285). De Beauvoir strongly feels that the male colonizers have always enjoyed the strong ground of myths. They manipulate the myths to keep women in subordination and to retain their dominant position in the hierarchy. Women internalize the androcentric concepts embedded in the myths and look up to the strong, adventurous males for support.

Kate Millett shares de Beauvoir’s view, but she focuses on the politically expedient character of the patriarchal convictions about women as reflected in religious and literary myths:

The image of women as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the “Otherness” of women. Yet this notion itself presupposes that patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject and referent to which the female is the “Other” or alien. (1970: 46)

Millett sees the male representation of women in religion and literature in terms of sexual power politics. Woman is “the Other” and her “Otherness” is frightening to man. Millett recognizes that man’s depiction of ideal woman as passive, silent and self-effacing is an indirect way of keeping her subordinated forever.

French school of feminism stresses the positive aspects of “Otherness” which is the lot of woman in all institutions and signifying practices of patriarchal culture. They suggest that the marginalized women must turn the notion of
Otherness upside down and explore the possibility of a non-hierarchical difference to articulate the female identity in feminine terms. Helene Cixous stresses the immediate necessity of subverting the phallogocentric language in myths. Myths are archeological sites of patriarchal culture structured on the traditional binary oppositions. Binary systems validate logocentrism very convincingly. According to Cixous, the logocentric fact behind the underlying paradigms of male/female opposition in culture and literature is a “death dealing binary thought” (Warhol, 1975: 210). In the binary opposition, death is at work; that is, one has to die for the other to survive. The message conveyed through the androcentric myths provides a single perspective: women’s view is suppressed by keeping women under erasure. The marginalized woman remains in the shadow and she is denied a voice. As long as the binaries male/female is hierarchically maintained and treated as universal truths, female identity can be imagined, defined, and articulated only in relation to the male. A positive representation of female identity is impossible within this system of organization that takes male as the reference point. So it becomes imperative for feminist writers to reject the ever powerful notion of this universal truth and prove that its universality is a fallacy; it is universal only from the male perspective.

French feminists rely on Derrida’s theories to liberate women from the binary oppositions in which they are trapped. Derrida posits that every hierarchy carries within itself the material for its own subversion. Even without a force applied from outside, any text can deconstruct itself. According to Derrida, the inferior, excluded negative pole is necessary for the function of binaries on the one
hand and to facilitate subversion on the other. Without woman, the binary man/woman cannot exist. One cannot imagine a linguistic system without writing because “there is no linguistic sign before writing” (1976:14). But a deconstruction of the binary through the linguistic deconstruction of the text can disrupt the domination of the one over the other. The deconstructionist reverses the values attached to each component in the binary pairs. In the binary pair of male/female, the decentring can be effected by conceptualising the female as the subject and the male as the object occupying the centre and the margins respectively. Once the binary opposition of male/female is reversed to construct a new methodological basis for literary analysis, the signifying supremacy passes on to the “female," the once-secondary term in the hierarchy. The static closure of the binary opposition is then avoided to reject this term's dominance over the now-secondary term the “male." The supremacy of the privileged term, female, cannot remain in its privileged position to create new values and meanings.

Helene Cixous thinks that feminist critical methods need revision to subvert the androcentric strategies of marginalization and subordination of women. Writing from outside the dominant discourses only affirms the Otherness. So the patriarchal hold on traditional discourses needs to be attacked from within. A re-reading of critical theories and methods of the literary canons is possible only if those theories and methods are challenged from within. Motivated by Derrida’s structuralist perception to emphasize difference not in terms of binary oppositions but in multiplicities and pluralities, Cixous attempts to set up for feminism a discourse that
speaks in a multiplicity of sexual/gender voices. Toril Moi in the article, “Feminist, Female, Feminine,” precisely but expressively sums up Cixous’s project:

…the effort to undo the logo centric ideology to proclaim woman as the source of life, power and energy and to hail the advent of a new, feminine language which ceaselessly subverts these patriarchal binary schemes where logo-centrism colludes with phallo-centrism in an effort to oppress and silence women. (Belsey, 1985:110)

She stresses the immediate necessity of a female-centred language which can be created by subverting the phallogocentric structures of ordinary languages.

Alicia Ostriker suggests re-visionist mythmaking as an effective strategy to evolve an alternative linguistic medium to make “corrections” to constructed “images of what women have collectively suffered” (1986:216). Women writers can try for a self-definition by deconstructing myths that imprison women within the binary opposition with a stable subordinated status. Traditional narratives and symbols that perpetuate male hegemony are deconstructed and the same materials are rewritten to promote a vision of equality and equitable production of cultures. Re-vision opens possibilities for multiple perspectives or views. Revisionist mythmaking makes an alternative reading possible by bringing woman to the centre or by shifting the perspective from the male to the female. Re-visionists give voice to the silenced female by re-imaging characters or by re-interpreting the tale.

In “Thieves of Language,” Ostriker explains how and when re-vision comes to effect. A writer can use the myths either conventionally or in an altered form. In the conventional use of myth, the meaning given to it by the author converges with
the already accepted meaning. When the writer appropriates the myth for other purposes, he/she is said to have revised the myth. The writer assigns new meanings, changes perspectives or re-images characters to suit his/her need. Re-visioning, in Ostriker’s view, is like filling an old vessel with new wine. The individual author, who engages in re-visionist mythmaking, achieves the purpose, but the cultural perception is changed in the process:

…old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead…. they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; [and] in some cases they are instructions for survival. (1986:215)

In Ostriker’s view mythmaking is a means of self-projection and self-exploration.

Feminist re-vision has become an effective context to look back for a re-survey in literature, a re-view of discrimination and subordination on the basis of gender, sex and sexuality, which retard the development of women over the ages. The feminist theorists revise the knowledge with the intention of undoing hierarchical injustice that benefits the male at the expense of the female. In this regard, Adrienne Rich observes:

Re-vision –the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more
Re- vision, for Rich, is “taking a second look” from a different perspective. Texts in the male canon are re-read with a view to exposing the patriarchal or other unjust hierarchical practices and assumptions contained in them. Rich considers the re- visioning of the male-centred perspectives a question of survival rather than a consummate art. It is an essential act in a woman’s “drive to self-knowledge.”

Adrienne Rich observes that retelling is inevitable since the male ideology of female subordination and the patriarchal mode of socializing reflected in the male-centred texts are detrimental to the identity of women. The images of women in them are humiliating to the female gender. Many women find it a death-in-life experience. Feminist re-reading also intends to unveil the political deception endemic in their phallocentric organization. According to Rich, the re-visionist’s concern should be: “the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth” (Gelpi, 1975:53). In order to disentangle from the oppressor’s legacy, women must go to these sites of destruction where female essence is destroyed and female identity is moulded in male terms. In this regard, Barthes observes: “Myth is a speech defined by its intention, much more than by its literal sense” (1972: 134). Barthes’s priority of intention to literary application of myths can be politically explored by women writers while using myth as an art/medium.

In the poem “Diving into the Wreck,” Rich subverts the archetypal male hero and his gallant quests through the depiction of the female diver who undertakes the perilous journey into the depths to see the wreck of a tradition based on the
misrepresentation of women. All through her dive she has to wear a mask made up of patriarchal prescriptions. All her equipments restrict rather than facilitate her movements. Her flippers are “absurd.” The mask is “grave and awkward.” Rich here alludes to patriarchal restriction that cripples women who dare to venture out of the domestic realm. As long as she lives in manmade tales, she can speak only in male-defined terms, which alienate her from her body. The female hero descends further into the depths and feels liberated as “there is no one / to tell me when the ocean /will begin” (Gelpi, 1975:53). The power of male control is no more felt: “the sea is not a question of power/I have to learn alone/to turn my body without force/in the deep element” (Gelpi, 1975:54). By blurring the boundaries between these territories of binary oppositions, Rich subverts the foundations of oppositional systems of ideology. When the woman diver begins to shed the imbibed patriarchal notions of reality her movements become easy. Then she crosses the boundary and reaches where “I am she: I am he” (Gelpi, 1975:54). In the depth of the ocean there seems to be a unity between the mermaids and the mermen. Here there are no hierarchical oppositions. She sees here the possibility of change that all women desire. Rich looks into the past of patriarchal control and creates her own reality of an androgynous being that is capable of strength and love. Thus, she creates a new myth which sets the stage for the ultimate truth in which there is no dichotomy of the male and the female. Man and woman together can re-write history that also includes the names of women in their proper places and in appropriate perspectives. Re-writing of myths becomes a representative action of a community of women
writers when the diver realizes that she is not alone. She is only one among the whole community of women:

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear. (Gelpi, 1975:54)

Rich observes that myths exclude women, but they can be rewritten to include them. Rich rejects the universality of the binaries and argues that the female self is a subject in the continuous process of becoming. She distances woman from the idea of the changeless and static self. This idea opens up imaginative ways for alternative systems of reality and action.

Women writers revise myths and fairytales to cultivate gender consciousness in women. Recognising patriarchal strategies of trapping women into subordination is the first step towards women’s liberation. In “Cinderella,” Anne Sexton presents the patriarchal image of a good woman and then re-orients the readers towards this traditional image through her sardonic comments. Cinderella, the most feminine in patriarchal community and her prince-husband end up like “Regular Bobbsey twins” in Sexton’s poem.Sexton re-images Cinderella with the intention of undoing the patriarchal indoctrination about how a good woman should behave. Cinderella’s
inability to act self-assertively adds to her charm which patriarchy prescribes. But this passivity spoils the aspirations and vigour of young girls who identify themselves with Cinderella. She seems to suggest that the applauded femininity has an unseen, unthought of facet that is detrimental to women.

Sexton makes the readers view the tales to which they have become accustomed to in a new light. A shifting of focus from Cinderella to the stepsisters and their self-mutilation communicates an entirely different message to girls trained to look up to Cinderella as role-model. Cinderella's stepsisters, in their attempts to "grab a prince," force their feet into the shoe by cutting off their toes and heels. The toe fits into the shoes; but the “blood tells” and their deception is exposed. The sisters try to force themselves into someone else's "ideal" mould, as women try to suppress their true identity and confine themselves to the mould which patriarchy has cast for them. They do not know that they harm themselves when they attempt to force an unrealistic "shoe" to fit to their toes. Here re-vision is a kind of consciousness-raising programme. Sexton’s “Cinderella” imparts a liberating knowledge that would aid women to get over the agony of exclusion and forced passivity.

Margaret Atwood thinks that cultural changes can be made possible by exposing the misrepresentation of gender roles in myths. She observes that the prevalent myths can operate as “foundation stones for new versions” based on the reality of female experiences (2005:36). She means that women can build a room of their own on the patriarchal base. They can use it as a starting point to tell their versions of reality. She shares Adrienne Rich’s view that re-vision is a strategy for
survival. For Atwood, survival and re-vision are equally important in the cultural and national contexts:

> Even the things we look at demand our participation, and our commitment. What can result is a ‘jail break, an escape from our old habits of looking at things and a ‘recreation,’ a new way of seeing, experiencing and imaging – or imagining-which we ourselves have helped to shape. (1972:246)

Atwood’s poetry explores the strategies of survival at the individual and collective levels and re-visionist mythmaking provides her the right context.

In the poem “Half-Hanged Mary,” Atwood deconstructs the mythic persona Mary Webster documented as her ancestor. She is believed to have been accused of witchcraft in the 1680’s and hanged from a tree. In Atwood’s version of Webster’s story, Mary endures but prevails: “She was left all night. But it is known that when she was cut down she was still alive, since she lived for another fifteen years” (1995:58). Mary survives to narrate her haunting experience. In the first section of the poem, Mary explains why she was doomed to be hanged:

> …for living alone

> For having blue eyes

> …………..

> And a surefire cure for warts. (1995:58)

She is punished for transgressing the patriarchal law that confines women to dependency and inactivity. Atwood resurrects Mary Webster, her powerful ancestor, to articulate the patriarchal oppression of women who transgress
conceptions of gender. It is her experience of oppression that provides her the language to voice it. Atwood parallels Mary’s fate with that of Jesus Christ. The parallel helps her not only to centralize women’s experience but also to elevate it to a metaphysical level. She creates the image of a crafty survivor from “his story” of a witch destined to be persecuted for being unfeminine. She also manages to establish an intergenerational connection between women. Though myth is detrimental to female identity, Atwood finds it helpful in creating a more compatible literary landscape: victimization holds promise of survival.

Women’s re-vision of myths is based on intuitive knowledge. Sonia Johnson remarks that only a woman can successfully communicate a woman’s experience: “Any female who has lived a day on the earth is already an expert on what it means to be a female. No man on earth,… has the answer for any woman, let alone for all women” (1983: 382). In The World’s Wife, Carol Ann Duffy’s speakers reveal “hidden truths” about themselves as well as about the narratives they subvert (Baldick, 2000:72). In “Queen Herod,” for example, Duffy informs her readers that it is Queen Herod who ordered the murder of the innocents:

I send for the Chief of staff
A mountain man

..................
Take men and horses,
Knives, swords and cutlasses.
Ride East from here
And kill each mother’s son
Do it. Spare not one. (1999:7)

Queen Herod’s demand to execute every male child is instigated not by her avarice but by maternal love. The Biblical story of King Herod and The Journey of Magi provides Duffy the context to celebrate the ferocity of maternal love.

Women writers re-read/rewrite myths for manifold reasons. Muriel Rukeyser uses the myth of Oedipus to defy gender assumptions. Her poem “Myth” is a critique of the patriarchal assumption that man represents “genderless” identity. This is a deeply ingrained cultural presupposition that reduces woman and her feminine experiences to a non-entity. In “Myth,” Rukeyser proves how the dichotomy created between men and women, separating the aspects of each, has ironically crushed Oedipus. The mythic hero, who justifies his omission of woman on the ground that it is a universal law, is doomed. Sphinx’s answer to Oedipus’s query “Why didn't I recognize my mother?” is what muted women have always longed to voice:

> When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning,  
> two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered,  
> Man. You didn't say anything about woman."

"When you say Man," said Oedipus, "you include women too. Everyone knows that." She said, "That's what you think”. (1978:480)

Rukeyser examines the patriarchal society in the play *Oedipus* of Sophocles and shows how Oedipus, who considered “man” an all-encompassing word for all of humanity, falls a victim of the society built on this ideology of male dominance.
She exploits the Oedipal myth to challenge patriarchy’s treatment of the “feminine”
life as trivial and irrelevant to the fundamental issues of humanity.

Re-visionist mythmaking provides women writers a context to rectify men’s
misrepresentation of women in art and literature. Alicia Ostriker remarks in *Stealing
the Language*: “the motivating force behind women writers’ revisionist myths is the
subversion of the dominant ideology's hidden male bias” (1986:214). The feminist poet Gerrey Alta intends to convey the message that
mythically constructed gender identity is a male fantasy. She explores to scan the
unfathomed mind of Eurydice in the poem of the same title:

all the male poets write of Orpheus
as if they look back & expect
to find me walking patiently
behind them, they claim i fell into hell.
damn them, i say.
i stand in my own pain
&' sing my own song. (1980: 6)

Alta underlines that no poet has ever ventured to look into the destiny of Eurydice
who was forced to recede to hell due to the male impatience and arrogance. The
American poet May Sarton echoes the same sentiment in “The Muse as Medusa.”
Sarton’s speaker ventures to look at the snake haired Gorgon who, she is made to
believe, would turn to stone all who look at her. Instead of being turned to stone,
she recognizes herself in the demon:

I saw you once, Medusa; we were alone.
I looked you straight in the cold eye, cold.
I was not punished, was not turned to stone —
How to believe the legends I am told? . . .
I turn your face around! It is my face.
That frozen rage is what I must explore —

Oh secret, self-enclosed, and ravaged place!

This is the gift I thank Medusa for. (2003: 107)

Sarton means that the demonic self in the unconventional woman is a male constructed strategy to devoice the woman who assertively articulates her identity. The speaker identifies herself with Medusa and realizes that “the petrifying look” that the legends speak of is only the “frozen rage”: the unexpressed wrath against the mythmakers. A desire to explore this “frozen rage” that seizes her is suggestive of women’s indignation at the fossilized misrepresentation through myths and tales. Sarton here highlights the necessity of re-reading the fossilized tales from a feminist point of view.

Myths have always been a source of collective male fantasy. Alicia Ostriker defines myth as a storehouse of gender specific meanings. In her view, myths are “the sanctuaries of existing language, the treasuries where our meanings for male and female are themselves preserved” (1986:211). These are often connected with the patriarchal value system which treats woman only as an appendage. The mythical Eurydice is a meek object of her husband’s desire. When Orpheus, the gifted musician, enthralls the underworld with his heavenly music and is acclaimed
for his heroic quest, Eurydice is portrayed as the passive object of his pursuit. She has no creative voice of her own. She has no choice but to silently wait for her husband’s decision. Her dreams are immaterial to all. Eurydice represents the forced silencing that women endure in patriarchy. In the poem “Eurydice,” Hilda Doolittle gives voice to Eurydice, the passive object of Orpheus’s pursuit. The faithful lover who turns back is taken to task by Eurydice. She addresses him from the underworld: “So you have swept me back, /I who could have walked with the live souls/above the earth” (1988:36) Eurydice emerges empowered towards the end of the poem. She has lost the earth due to the “arrogance” and “ruthlessness” of Orpheus. But she boldly asserts that “such loss is no loss”:

    hell is no worse than your earth
    
    my hell is no worse than yours
    
    against the blackness
    and the stark grey
    I have more light. (1988:39)

Such rewriting coupled with a feminist reading serves to alter our perspective and compel the readers to reconsider the way men and women live in society. By giving voice to the voiceless Eurydice, Doolittle disrupts patriarchal meaning of the “female.”

    Re-visionist poets revalue the dialectical foundations of Western philosophy on which language is structured. By combining the religious and the sensual,
Lucille Clifton demolishes the hierarchically ordered binary logic which subordinates the corporal to the spiritual. Clifton refers to “Kali,” the Hindu Goddess, as “a woman God and terrible with her skulls and breasts.” Kali is woman and God at the same time. She is a goddess who knows about womanhood: “she is persistent with her/ black terrible self, she/ knows places in my bones/ i never sing about but/ she knows i know them well” (1987:135). Goddess Kali knows the inner secrets of women, the truths they know but “never sing about”

Re-visionist mythmaking, which is meant to purgate gender bias, takes place at three levels. It can be re-vision, re-imaging or re-interpretation. In re-vision, feminist revisionists subvert the original author’s intention by changing the perspective. They re-view the myths rooted in male perspective through the feminist lens and rewrite the tale foregrounding female elements. They revise the original representation of woman in-order to expose the masculine desires or modes of thinking that underpin the representation. In “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” Anne Sexton exposes patriarchy’s latent politics behind the portrayal of an inexperienced, passive, ignorant, and stupid girl as beautiful and a woman “eaten of course by age,” an experienced and intelligent stepmother, as ugly. Her sharp satire is directed on the narrowness of the male-constructed world of women. Patriarchy suppresses and undervalues female sexuality. Sexton begins a hit and run game by launching the target at the very outset of the poem: “No matter what life you lead/ The virgin is a lovely number” (1981:224). Beautiful Snow White, patriarchy’s suggested role-model for young girls, is reduced to a “dumb bunny.” By transforming the traditional stories feminists provide the youth an opportunity to
re-view the inherited tales from a different perspective. They help them to change their lives as per changed values in a culture susceptible to change.

Re-visioning may require the re-imaging of one or more male-defined characters in the myths. Re-imaging may in turn lead to the creation of a new character. Re-mything is an effective way to demolish the hostile images of women moulded in religious tradition and ingrained in the consciousness of people. Early Jewish culture depicts Lilith as a symbol of promiscuity and disobedience. According to Jewish folklore, Lilith was the first wife of Adam created from the dust like him. Lilith considered herself equal to Adam and refused to submit herself to his dominance. Speaking the Ineffable Name, she flew away in rage to the demonic world. When she was cast out, she was made a demon figure. God punished Lilith by making one hundred of her demon children perish daily. If she could not destroy a human infant, because of the angelic amulet, she would spitefully turn against her own. According to Gilbert and Gubar, Lilith’s story conveys the message that in a patriarchal culture the revolt against male domination is demonic: “…the figure of Lilith represents the price women have been told they must pay for attempting to define themselves” (1979:35). Gilbert and Gubar equate the sufferings Lilith faces with the problems of female authorship and female authority.

Re-visioning of canonical myths makes it possible to create covetable and exemplary images of women. Alicia Ostriker, in her scripture study, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions*, reimages the Biblical female figure of Lilith. In mythical representations, Lilith is a powerful inhuman
force. She appears in folktales as a demon that captures Jewish babies and strangles infants in the night and eats them. She seduces dreaming men, and leads young girls and husbands astray. In feminist revisions, Lilith is presented as earthly, enigmatic and powerful. Ostriker depicts Lilith as an African-American in her “Lilith Poems.” She is a woman of power, but she is misunderstood. Ostriker’s Lilith does not persecute the woman addressed in the poem. She keeps away from hurting children. The protagonist in “Lilith poems” is a mother who experiences loss. She is an ally to Eve. She forges a connection with the protagonist through maternity:

…and you a mother
Watching your children hurt one another
I know How you feel, I bear a hundred
Babies every day, and they die by nightfall
…But every midnight I kiss
Their dead faces. (1994:96)

Lilith in Ostriker’s poem is at once threatening and attractive. Re-imaged Lilith rejects the good girl/bad girl dichotomy in which "good" symbolizes servility to patriarchy, and "bad" represents challenge. By reimagining mythic figures like Eve, Lilith and Medusa women poets challenge patriarchal constructions of female identity. They redefine women’s place within the patriarchal culture.

Re-vision, as a feminist strategy of subverting patriarchal values, can also be a reinterpretation of the androcentric myths from the feminist angle. Even though mythical content is hostile to women, many women writers exploit it in their favour. They find it a fertile ground for reinterpretation. Anne Sexton reinterprets
Grimms’ tale “Rapunzel” in *Transformations*. Sexton shifts the focus from the world of romance to the lesbian world. She uses the tale of Rapunzel as a context to write about the different facets of women's relationships with other women. She suggests possibilities of a world in which women move together uninterrupted by the dictatorial male voice. She opens the poem “Rapunzel” with the cryptic statement: “A woman/who loves a woman/is forever young” (1981:247). In “Rapunzel,” the witch is a surrogate mother to the young girl, deprived of maternal affection. Their relationship verges on homosexuality. Mother Gothel demands:

- lie on the couch
- and touch and touch.
- Old breast against young breast...
- Let your dress fall down your shoulder,
- come touch a copy of you. (1981:247)

It is a desperate attempt on the part of the “mentor “to remain youthful.” This sexually surcharged mother-daughter relationship is terminated with the coming of the prince. Sexton juxtaposes the sexual with the religious. They: “lay together upon yellowy threads, / swimming through them, / like minnows through kelp/ and they [sing] out benedictions like the Pope.” She is not that “dumb bunny” she used to be when she was with the witch. She ”pierces his heart” and she restores the eyesight of the prince. Having abandoned the lesbian relationship, she makes the heterosexual choice. When the poem concludes Sexton turns the focus back to the old woman:

As for Mother Gothel,
Her heart shrank to the size of a pin,
never again to say: Hold me, my
young dear, hold me. and only as she
dreamt of the yellow hair
did moonlight sift into her mouth. (1981:249)

These lines suggest the possibility of a rethinking on the part of Rapunzel. There is an “essential” female or feminine experience, which has persisted through the ages even in the face of patriarchal oppression. In this regard, Simone de Beauvoir observes: “The woman may discover… that she will not derive pleasure from heterosexual relations, that only another woman can fully provide it” (1960:436). In a patriarchy, where heterosexual relationship is the order, woman is defined and differentiated by her sexuality. But she is never permitted to enjoy her sexuality. In the female homosexual relationship a woman finds her self-definition through her sexuality, which she enjoys and shares with the other woman.

The poem “Rapunzel.” can also be interpreted as a study of the complicated mother-daughter relationship. Mother Gothel, the surrogate mother, has a crippling influence on Rapunzel. She locks up Rapunzel with the intention of hiding her from others. It may be an attempt to retard the sexual blooming of the child as the elder woman wishes to retain her youth in the company of the young girl. The adolescent trauma and adult frustrations in women’s world are beautifully portrayed in this poem. Rapunzel, like a stupid doll, obeys Mother Gothel’s instructions and accepts her advances. Gradually, the initial delight in the amorous relation wanes and she develops a kind of ambivalent attitude to the mother. Rapunzel remains a “captive”
in the tower, but struggles to outgrow her childhood dependency. Sexton aborts this incestuous relationship and provides Rapunzel the opportunity to bloom into independence. Unlike the other heroines in *Transformations*, who are prevented from changing, Rapunzel undergoes transformation. She emerges a dignified and powerful woman who is nobody’s dumb bunny. Rapunzel proves that “mother-me-do/can be outgrown.” Sexton portrays the oppressive forces that retard the growth of women and concludes the poem optimistically with the image of a matured and independent woman who breaks out of the destructive maternal love that cripples her. In the poem “Rapunzel,” Sexton throws light on the different ways in which women move with women. She focuses on the positive aspect of female-female relationship without ignoring the negative side of it.

Pratibha Ray combines all the three aspects of revision in *Yajnaseni*. Re-visualization, re-interpretation and re-imaging occur simultaneously in this revision of the *Mahabharata*. From the feminist perspective, *Mahabharata* depicts woman as a non-entity, totally subservient to man. The epic provides Pratibha Ray the context to challenge the patriarchal point of view which moulds our realities, fixes our values and limits our vision of individual possibilities. In *Yajnaseni*, Ray uses the mythical framework of Mahabharata to give voice to all silenced women. She treats a subjective theme in the political framework of the *Mahabharata* to objectify her subjective feelings. *Yajnaseni* is the story of the *Mahabharata* narrated from the perspective of Draupadi, one of the most important but overlooked characters. Draupadi is a strong character who demands her rights in a male-dominated society and fights against injustice in every possible way. She is
the embodiment of woman’s pride, sharp intellect and strong will. Ray makes Draupadi speak out her feelings about the various choices that were made for her by her father, her brother, her mother-in-law, and her husbands, even by Lord Krishna, to whom she was devoted. When she hears that she should be the wife of all the five Pandavas, she wishes to see all of them dead and turn into ashes (1995: 6-8). A woman who prays for the death of her husbands is a shocking picture in the Indian context which is accustomed to the image of Savitri who ventured to confront even the God of Death to save her husband, Satyavan. Draupadi speaks for all silenced women who long but fail to speak out. Ray alters the traditional view by re-imaging Draupadi in Yajnaseni and by reinterpreting the story from a female angle.

It is imperative for women to undermine the traditional concepts that suppress their identity and sexuality through a fresh perception: “What we see, we see / and seeing is changing” (Rich, Gelpi, 1975: 170). Fresh perceptions on the myth of love and romance lead to the awareness that they end up in marriage where “woman's erotic life is suppressed…and she becomes nothing but her husband's ‘Other’ half” (de Beauvoir, 1960: 455). Woman has been the heroine/victim of the myth of romantic love, but re-visionists write of love, marriage and motherhood as they have experienced them. Marriage, in reality, is much different from patriarchal myths project it to be. The poet, Mamta Kalia states: “So many things/could have happened to me…/But nothing ever happened to me/except two children/and two miscarriages” (1970:50). The speaker confesses that her married life has turned out to be exhausted and dull. The disillusioned wife in “I am a Great Fool” regrets: “I am a great fool/To think that marriage is bliss”
(Kalia,1970:55). She contradicts the fairytale vision of the prince and princess who “lived happily ever after.” In Sylvia Plath’s "The Applicant,” wife is just “A living doll” reduced to an inanimate “it”:

   It can sew, it can cook.
   It can talk, talk, and talk.
   It works; there is nothing wrong with it.
   You have a hole, it's a poultice.
   You have an eye, it's an image.
   My boy, it's your last resort.
   Will you marry it, marry it, marry it. (1963:14-16)

Plath, like de Beauvoir, strongly believes that family and marriage retard individual growth and distort identity.

   Motherhood is an exclusively feminine experience which only a woman can authentically depict. By institutionalizing motherhood patriarchy shuts out the possibilities of an alternative view generated from women’s actual experience of mothering. In this regard, the psychoanalyst Christiane Olivier suggests: “We must revive Jocasta and understand the mother according to her own needs and desires” (1989:40). Only through re-vision can women break the hold of the patriarchal concept of motherhood that alienates woman from her body. Feminist re-visionists breathe life in to the silenced mothers and let them be at once mothers and women. Martha Graham the choreographer, recreates Jocasta as an erotic mother in her ballet Night Journey. The patriarchal myth of desexualized motherhood erupts when Jocasta relives her destiny at the moment of her death.
Lucia Trent views motherhood as a source of political and economic oppression. Her anger is directed against both the men who manage the institution of motherhood as well as the women who unconsciously submit themselves to the patriarchal ideology. Lucia Trent’s poem “Breed, Women Breed” approaches the subject of maternity from the perspective of the working-class. She mockingly exhorts women to breed children for male ends:

Breed, little mothers,

With tired backs and tired hands, Breed for the owners of mills and the owners of mines, Breed a race of danger-haunted men, A race of toiling, sweating, miserable men, Breed, breed, breed!

(Nelson, 2000:376-77)

The “little mothers” in the poem are a group of unidentified women whose fate is decided by the male capitalists. They are just “tired backs and tired hands” and "sunken eyes and . . .sagging cheeks.” She refers to the worn out undifferentiated women who are forced to render their procreative capacity of wombs and thus become agents in perpetuating male hegemony.

Revisionist writings need not be always defiant in spirit. Poets like Eavan Boland think that women poets should look into the myths and re-experience and re-examine the roles men have assigned to them. Boland sees Demeter and Ceres as archetypes that relate her to her roles as daughter and mother. She enters the myth in search of answer to her questions about the place of aging women in literature and mythology. Re-visionism may be used to suggest the possibility of forming a
sisterhood among women. Myth of Demeter, known for her fierce defense of her
daughter Kore, is reinterpreted to glorify female-female relationship with a new
sense of community. Women can form a bond among themselves and together they
can challenge patriarchal oppression. Kate Ellis uses this myth in “Matrilineal
Descent.” Irigaray uses the myth of Demeter/Persephone to reaffirm the feminist
theory that women have been traditionally controlled by men. It is Zeus,
Persephone’s father, who abdicates her to satisfy his brother’s desire. Mother has no
say in her daughter’s marriage. Persephone is reduced to an exchangeable
commodity. Both mother and daughter are at the mercy of the overriding males.
Irigaray uses the myth to remind women of the necessity to strengthen the bond
among them since they are likely to become tokens of exchange between men.
Adrienne Rich remarks that women poets should transform language and naturalize
it as a medium to represent abiding relationships. She explains: “A poet cannot
refuse language, choose another medium. But the poet can refuse the language
given him or her, bend and torque it into an instrument for connection instead of
dominance and apartheid” (Gelpi, 1975: 62).

Rich means that a poet should transform the language into a medium of
cohesive relations rather than an instrument of hegemony and segregation. Lesbian
poets deconstruct the traditional myth-language systems in which “Woman is not a
poet: she is either muse or… nothing” (Graves, 1948: 446). They imagine woman
in a way that she has not been so far imagined. In Lesbian poems woman is both
subject and object of consciousness. She is the agent of desire and its aim as seen in
Adrienne Rich’s “Twenty One Love Poems”: 
You've kissed my hair
to wake me. I dreamed you were a poem,
I say, a poem I wanted to show someone ...
and I laugh and fall dreaming again
of the desire to show you to everyone I love,
to move openly together
in the pull of gravity, which is not simple,
which carries the feathered grass a long way down
the up breathing air. (Gelpi, 1975:77)

Lesbian poets delineate female creativity vested in lesbian sexuality. It is a revision of female muse/ male poet paradigm. In the lesbian poetry, generally the lesbian is the metaphor for female creativity. In the female muse/ male poet paradigm the female is the Other and is alienated. Lesbian poets redefine the poetic conventions by incorporating a lesbian identity into them. In lesbian poetry muse remains female, not the Other. She is the familiar face in the poet’s community. The androcentric tradition in which the poet in the woman is alien or monstrous is subverted. The lesbian poets familiarise the muse thereby making the poet in the woman an aspect of her womanhood.

Lesbian poetry is inspired by the urgent desire to seize the language and forge an instrument with it to articulate experiences of female sexuality. Adrienne Rich conceives poetry as “a criticism of language”...which helps women “hear and see our words in a new dimension” (1980:248). Rich uses poetry as the best medium to give voice to the traditionally muted woman. In
their poems, lesbian poets like Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde and Judy Grahn move “psychically and through metaphor to a place beyond the well-traveled routes of patriarchy and all its institutions, especially it’s linguistic and rhetorical ones” (Carruthers, 1983:36). They at once deconstruct the “myth” of heterosexuality and the related gender dichotomy, and (re)construct a new myth of women together and separate from men. In this regard, Billie Maciunas observes: “The playful and knowing lesbian subject traverses gender and other boundaries for political purposes and for pleasure, privileging context and confounding entrenched identity categories” (http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/grahn/lesbianpoesy.htm). They cross the boundaries of gender and thereby challenge the ingrained identity categories. Rich boldly rejects the patriarchal generic assumptions of female dependence on male strength mediated through myths and tales:

Your small hands precisely equal to my own—
only the thumb is larger, longer—in these hands
I could trust the world. (Gelpi, 1975:77)

Rich refuses to agree that woman is forced to reiterate while living within the boundaries of heterosexual culture. She subverts oppressive structures of patriarchy and male hegemony and deconstructs sexual colonialism by suggesting that woman can discover her self in another woman. This kind of identification is most possible in same-sex love.

Re-visionist mythmaking has been very effectively used by African-American writers to dismantle the many damaging notions about the Blacks and
their cultural heritage. In African-American male writings we find mostly negative portraits of women characterized by sexual promiscuity and poor mothering. Sexism is mixed with racism in the portrayal of Black woman. The stereotyped portrait of the tough, jolly, warm Black Mammy is very popular. The Mammy stereotype in Black literature is the social construction of identity that justifies the abusive treatment of Black women. Mammy represents all Black women and propagates the myth that they are impervious to pain like Mammy, the embodiment of stoic endurance. The harsh realities like sexual exploitation of Black women and their ill treatment are shrouded in the mawkish fantasy like Mammy. African-American lesbian literature makes use of re-visionist mythmaking to create an empowering African-based womanist tradition. The Black feminist sisterhood is effectively used as a resistance to male tyranny, cruelty and oppression. Writers like Lucille Clifton rewrite the patriarchal myths that depict women as subordinate to men. She replaces the Judeo-Christian male God and other patriarchal myths that depict women as the second sex with positive images of female identity.

Re-visionist mythmaking is not exclusively a female strategy. Male writers also have exploited this technique. Salman Rushdie appropriates a fairytale pretext and makes it an anti-paternalistic narrative in *Shame*. He goes beyond cultural constructions of gender. He achieves the ability to look at "the petrifying figure of Medusa and perceive the vitality of the ancient snake goddess beneath the veneer of loathing she has been condemned to wear" (Sellers, 2001:22). Usually, re-visionist mythmaking is a strategy used by male writers to revise the mythical tales
of gods or goddesses in order to challenge materialism or rationalism of their
culture. They nostalgically look back to a glorious past. Many twentieth century
writers have used myth as a literary device in their works. The myth of Electra is
given a new meaning in Eugene O’ Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*. He adapts
the Greek tragic myth Oresteia to suit the nineteenth-century New England. O’ Neill
tries to find a modern analogue to the Greek sense of fate. James Joyce reinterprets
Homer’s *Odyssey* in *Ulysses*. Both the writers employ an ancient myth in different
contexts; contemporarize the myth and attempts to examine thereby attempt to
examine the predicament of modern man. In *The Great Indian Novel*,
Shashi Tharoor rewrites *the Mahabharata*. It is a highly subjective version of
history. An individual who is both an insider and a participant presents his view of
history. Tharoor draws a parallel between India’s freedom struggle and the epic
battle. It is an attempt to rediscover the contemporary Indian reality in the light of
India’s mythical past.

For the re-visionist feminists, re-vision is not a return to the celebrated past.
For them re-vision is a means of exploring the self. Motivated by women’s needs
and desires, they revise the oppressive patriarchal images and replace them with the
actual images which they alone can depict. The stories we have been hearing from
the cradle are retold, foregrounding the feminist elements. Rewriting of myths and
folktales is not a monolithic process. Jack Zipes thinks that the rewriting of
fairytales can be done in two ways either “transfigure...the classical fairytale so that
the story line remains the same but a different set of values is introduced” or
"transfigure...through a fusion of traditional configurations with contemporary
references” (1983:40). In Sexton’s *Transformations*, a re-telling of *Grimms’ Tales*, she narrates the traditional fairytales in a satirical way, introducing new viewpoints and values. Sexton rewrites the tales with some changes in portrayal of characters. The characters are portrayed in a realistic way. They are transplanted from the mythological context to the modern consumerist society where the author lived. Both the primary and secondary characters remain the same in name. What she does is a re-vision of the fairytales and a re-imaging of the characters in an entirely new perspective in tune with her feminist ideology. Occasionally, she resorts to the subversion of traditional values and cultural myths. Sexton succeeds in presenting the characters in the feminist perspective without tampering with the original in a commendable way. The story itself is not altered, but the manner of telling is altered. She makes observations and comparisons in such a way as to perplex the readers and make them wonder how the teller is going to wind up the story. The feminine qualities of the protagonists are exaggerated to degrade them to absurd levels.

Angela Carter, on the other hand, entertains a different view on the re-vision of tales. Carter, in her book of short stories entitled *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, completely alters the story by foregrounding the feminist elements. She casts men as sexual prowlers in “Little Red Riding Hood.” Jeff VanderMeer Comments that she rings an alarm to her fellow women readers in her retellings: “…Carter has included a coda: Beware of men, beware of becoming subservient to men” (http://www.thermodernworld.com/ scriptorium/carter.html). This is the cryptic message she communicates. She lends a modern realistic setting to the story
and radically alters the story line. Carter rewrites the stories to expunge the sexist imagery and patriarchal message. She brings in a complex set of gender relationships in a self-reflexive manner.

Today, more and more tales are being recreated with active heroines. In these tales, young girls are given a wide field of action just as the male fairy and folktales heroes are. Men and women are elevated from the level of stereotypical pawns to humane, individuals with emotions and responses. In Barbara Walker’s feminist re-vision of fairytales, there is a reversal of gender binaries. The focus is shifted from the male to the female characters in the re-told tales. The binary opposites male-female is made topsy-turvy through her re-visionist attempts.

It is difficult to replace a mythically ingrained ideology with an opposing concept except through newly created myths or revised tales. In this context, Barthes remarks: “The best weapon against myth is perhaps to mystify in its turn” (1972:222). Re-visionist mythmaking is the most effective strategy employed by women writers to talk back to the dominating male precursors in their own vocabulary. “The silent woman” without access to “authoritative expression” has found re-visionist mythmaking a very effective tool to penetrate the male discourse (Landy, 1977:16). Re-visions help them to create a female space inside the otherwise male dominated world of myths and tales. Though myths have always been inimical to female identity, women writers find in them an effective tool in fighting women’s subordination. In this regard, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock comment:
The use of myth with all its attendant dangers can nonetheless serve as a strategy for women in combating the order encoded in mythic excuses such as Eve and Pandora for the continued subjugation of women. (1987:57)

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Patriarchal values encoded in myths can be reversed to make one acknowledge other truths and perspectives.

Apart from evolving a female centred language and providing contexts to challenge and correct stereotyped images of women. Feminist writers use re-visionist mythmaking as an objective artistry in their writings. They take to revision as an art and a framework for rendering subjective experiences. Feminist writers usually write in the confessional mode in which "private humiliations, sufferings and psychological problems" are dominant, and in which "the literal Self [is placed] more and more at the center of the poem" (Rosenthal, 1967:26). The overvaluation of Eliot’s theory of depersonalization, which insists on a complete separation between "the man who suffers and the mind that creates," undervalues feminist writings in which the female speaker is the author herself in disguise (1975:41). Feminist subjective writings in which the textual experience merges with the real experience fail to satisfy Eliot’s dictum and run the risk of being rejected by posterity. So women writers mystify the literary process to make up for the lack of emotional displacement, which is essential for objectivity in their subjective writings. Mystification, achieved through re-visionist mythmaking, re-interpretation of myths or re-imaging of mythical characters, brings out objectivity which is essential for impersonality.
When oppressed by patriarchy and conventions women writers choose to speak through mythical figures. Myths and tales constitute the right medium to tell an important, but inadmissible truth. Under the guise of mythic fantasy they tell truths that the dominant males may find offensive, if conveyed directly through any realist modes. The poet separates herself from the speaker by putting on the mask of a fairytale character, or an archetype that exists objectively. Sylvia Plath describes her authoritarian father who dominates her life as “Herr God, Herr Lucifer.” Feminist re-visionists objectively express their repressed emotions, sorrow or anger through a persona without creating the impression that they are too vulnerable. Hilda Doolittle’s Eurydice, who charges Orpheus with “arrogance” and “ruthlessness,” is none other than Doolittle herself whose marriage at the time of recreating Eurydice was on the verge of disintegration. Kamala Das effectively uses the mythical frame in her “Krishna poems” to explore her feminine urges. Such mythical frames save the woman writer from censure when she speaks of her self and projects her as a subject of sexuality. Marina Warner sums up the main objective of fairytales in unique expressions: “to encipher concerns, beliefs and desires in brilliant, seductive images that are themselves a form of camouflage, making it possible to utter harsh truths to say what you dare” (1995:xxi). A myth or a tale, in this context, functions like a euphemism, but for a different end.

Feminist critics differ in their responses to re-visionist mythmaking as an effective strategy to undo male hegemony. Susan Sellers finds that myths have potentially high transformative power. Sellers also suggests that alternative possibilities and endings are possible in myths: “Myth’s form and collaborative
gestation offers empowering paradigms for our collective and individual presentations, analysis and transformations” (2001: viii). Myths have an open structure capable of alternative readings. They reveal situations and problems that women have not encountered in real life. They motivate the imagination of the readers and help the female writers to conduct innovative experiments and come out with solutions for the problems that they may encounter. By analyzing and transforming the myths, the marginalized woman brings to light the hidden aspects of the myth and shape the world in tune with them. In Myth and Fair Tale in Contemporary Fiction, Sellers shows the “power of myths in giving expression to our common experience and about the role of narrative in enabling us to undergo, shape and survive those experiences” (2001:vii). She underlines the expressive power of myths and the relationship between female experience and narrative strategy.

Sellers does not find myth a totally uncomfortable field for women. She appreciates myth’s ability to resist change. Myth has a potential to survive attacks and this, she hopes, will inspire the reader to confront issues, instead of avoiding them, and perceive things in a new way. Still many myths have to be re-worked or their female characters have to be rehabilitated. According to Sellers, feminist rewriting of myth is a constructive deconstruction:

…an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction – of bringing into being enabling alternatives. (2001:30)
She envisages “rewritings as new embroideries, adding fresh images and colours to radically alter the picture” (2001:25). Sellers is confident that new, different stories can be woven around the known ones. A re-visionist subverts values or incorporates fresh images or changes perspectives as per her needs. Re-vision of myths is an act of creation. Women writers who use re-visionist myths create characters who defy conventions and juxtapose them with the tradition-bound characters to suggest alternative possibility.

Critics like Luce Irigaray and Diane Purkiss are conscious of the limitations of the re-vision of myths. Though she interprets the Demeter/Persephone myth to explore patriarchal restrictions on women enjoying the erotism of their bond, Irigaray is of opinion that women writers only “mimic” the discourse which is exclusively created by men. Any attempt to differ with it will merely reproduce its repressive hierarchy (1985:68). Irigaray’s contention is that myth is strictly patriarchal in nature and women, who are outside the frame of its construction, can never rewrite it effectively. Diane Purkiss is well aware of the problematic nature of myths. She believes that any attempt to give voice to the marginalized or subaltern will indirectly endorse the original myth (Larrington, 1992: 444). Irigaray and Purkiss echo the argument of the postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak who asserts that subalterns can never speak on their own. They can begin to speak with the voice borrowed from their colonizers or oppressors (Ashcroft, 1995:26). Patriarchy is a form of interior colonialism. So women can articulate their views with the help of the androcentric language. These feminist critics argue that rewriting can only upset the internal pattern of myth. But, the misogynist patriarchal
discourse remains unaffected. They fear that any attempt to give voice to the marginalized results in endorsing the hostile male perspective. But there are many excellent re-visions of myths and folktales, which make it impossible to have a conventional reading of the old tales. Tanith Lee’s “The Beast” reveals the inner, bestial nature of a handsome, prince-like lover suggesting to the readers the danger of being swept off by the Prince Charming. In another tale, “Walking the Prince,” the stereotype roles of male activity and female passivity are reversed to overthrow the socially constructed gender norms. These retold tales reflect new visions and suggest alternative thinking.

In spite of such hostile responses from many prominent figures in the female literary canon, re-visionist mythmaking has been successfully applied to “decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority” (Gilbert, 1980:19). Literature has always been the most effective medium to propagate the socially constructed gender. Feminists have selected the same to demolish the existing oppressive male paradigms. They transmit a different ideology by adding a female vision to the conventional perception. An analysis of women’s poetry validates the argument that women poets across cultures have been actively responding to Claudine Herrmann’s perception of women poets as “thieves of language” or “female Prometheuses.” They steal the power of word from patriarchy and show its use to other women just as Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to the mortals. Woman needs the
power of words as Adrienne Rich observes: “The words are purposes/The words are maps” (Gelpi, 1975: 54). Words can serve to map new perceptions. Women poets have been stealing the male oriented language and refashioning it to redefine culture by redefining themselves. They use it as a strategy to subvert the traditional male concepts. In this regard, Tilde Sankovitch observes:

…the mythopoeic process is … a process of recovery and reformation, as the ‘old’ myths are spirited away from their dead, oppressive contexts, and rejuvenated by reinterpretation, rereading, rewriting, all performed in newly found female contexts. (1988:146)

Patriarchy has constructed female subjectivity through language in a manner disastrous to female identity. Women should adopt the same strategy to undo the harm done by male constructed fantasies. So they have to begin the purgation and resistance through language itself. The feminists argue that resistance must be reflected in language. They attempt to evolve a female centred language to transform the androcentric language by subverting its structure from within. They have to domesticate dominant patriarchal discourses in order to make them acknowledge other truths and perspectives. Re-visionist mythmaking is the most appropriate effort in this direction.