CHAPTER IV

Defamiliarizing the Self: Re-vision as Art

In Women’s myth poems … the self in its innermost reaches is plural. The “I” is a “We,” the myth contains and conveys common knowledge.

Alicia Ostriker

Defamiliarization is the artistic technique of presenting common things in an unfamiliar or strange way in order to refresh perception of the familiar. In “Art as Technique,” Viktor Shklovsky observes: “As perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic” (Rice, 2002: 49). Habitual perception retreats into the area of the unconsciously automatic. Even though an object is not seen in its entirety, habitual perception makes it possible to recognize it by its characteristics. Such automatic recognition deprives the objects of sensation which can be restored through the art of re-vision. Re-visionist mythmaking opens new vistas of perspectives and interpretations that defamiliarize the self.

Feminist tradition of re-visionist mythmaking can be traced back to the beginning of women’s writing. Invasion of myths, the sanctuaries of male logos, is not typical of any culture or era. As Alicia Ostriker observes, feminists on both sides of the Atlantic have been experimenting with this counter-hegemonic act. Mythic re-vision by feminist poets is a trans-Atlantic practice. The aesthetic of feminist re-visionist mythmaking can be discussed at two levels: as a poetic technique and as a medium of expression of the female self. The selected poets
Anne Sexton, Kamala Das, Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy and Lucille Clifton, who represent different cultures, employ re-visionist mythmaking as an objective artistry in their subjective poems. They use this technique to render their subjectivity objectively and to find a new way of being in space that is familiar to them. They draw materials from their lives, but defamiliarize the intimately personal experiences in their poetry. They transform their personal histories into mythical archetypes, culturally appropriated.

Women poets have set a tradition of exploring the self through their poems. So the content of women’s poetry is subjective, autobiographical and confessional. In women’s poetry the poet and her characters irrespective of age, race or class, share the same experience of male oppression. The collective oppression they have endured makes their poetry emotionally surcharged. So women poets are accused of “lamenting the lot of the woman; caterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times, and so on” (Roethke, qtd. in Eagleton, 1986:175). Such negative responses emanate from the emotional intensity natural to the female subjectivity expressed in women’s poetry. Defining feminist poetics, Jan Montefiore comments:

…it is crucial that we identify a tradition of specifically female poetry…to understand female experiences (including sexual oppression) and women’s awareness and criticism of those experiences, as the intellectual and emotional context of the poetry we value. (1987:2)
A caution against the oppressive male ideology and its haunting effect on women reverberates through women’s poems.

Conventional epistemological perspective, which stresses the significance of objectivity, excludes subjective writings from the public sphere of "high culture.” Both ancient literature and literary criticism underlines the impersonal style. Homer’s objectivity is a classic illustration. It is, as Jacob Burckhardt observes, the “complete surrender of the creative powers to the object without any intrusions of the poet's own thoughts, feelings, or personal relations” (1963:169). Eliot pursued impersonality with a sacred mission. In “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” Eliot observes: “Classicism is a goal towards which all good literature strives, so far as it is good” (Kermode,1975:176). Eliot’s call to “return to the ideals of classicism” is a challenge to the romantic cult of subjectivity in general and the emotionally surcharged women’s poetry in particular. In this regard, Eileen Gregory remarks that Eliot’s classicism is sterile and insensitive in character:

… a denial of all untoward, imaginative, emotional, spiritual stimulation that would give the lie to the tragic truth…[The] landscape of the new classicism is …hard, cold, dry, hierarchic and regulated, impersonal and emotionally constrained brilliant and shadow less day light. (1997:18-20)

Eliot seems to have fixed cold impersonality as the hallmark of good classical literature.
Subjectivity associated with women’s writing is incompatible with Eliot’s brand of classicism. Eliot insists on a process of depersonalization as a corrective to the Romantic cult of subjectivity. He insists on a “distancing of emotions” as the prerequisite to objectivity. On discussing the "relation of the poem to its author," T.S. Eliot argues that “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (Kermode, 1975:43). Northrop Frye also speaks about the need to reduce the immediacy of emotion. He insists that there must be an “aesthetic distance” between the writer and his/her character. Otherwise, there will be an identification between the two. The aesthetic distance can be maintained through the displacement of emotions which in turn lends objectivity and impersonality to the narrated text. This is a kind of de-familiarization that works exclusively at the level of represented emotions.

Women’s poetry that celebrates the female self is neither purely personal nor really devoid of artistry. Confessional poems actually lie like truth. Anne Sexton also observes: “Poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical truth” (George, 1987:90). The poet only makes a pretense of honesty by relying on facts, on “real” situations and relationships, for a poem’s emotional authenticity. It is a pretension that the writer speaks to the reader unmediated. The reader assumes that he sees the real poet whereas all that he actually has in his sight is a substitute, or a persona. The reader misidentifies himself with the protagonist who merges with the poet. This rules out the possibility of emotional displacement in women’s poetry and their poetry ceases to be objective and impersonal. As objectivity is
crucial to the popularity of a text, women writers are confronted with the task of reducing the immediacy of emotional experiences in their poetry.

Alicia Ostriker observes that when feminist writers render their subjective experiences within the mythical frame they gain an authority denied to them in their personal writings. Myths form a part of well-knit culture; so they resonate with authenticity and objectivity that subjective writing can never hope to attain. Myths are psychologically convincing since myths are part of racial unconscious. Mythical stories are believed to be true by the cultural group in which they are popularized. In this regard, Alicia Ostriker observes: “In Women’s myth poems …the self in its innermost reaches is plural. The “I” is a “We,” the myth contains and conveys common knowledge” (1986:235). When the poet works in the mythical frame her voice transcends the personal and becomes mythic. An archetype or fairytale character or any persona with whom the poet identifies, acts as the medium that separates the poet and the protagonist. The poet remains hidden behind the persona when it speaks. The emotions and feelings of the creator get transmuted and become universal. Since myths exist objectively, poems that retell myths also acquire objectivity:

Myth belongs to "high" culture. These poems generically assume the high literary status that myth confers and that women writers have often been denied because they write "personally" or "confessionally." (1986:215)

Ostriker refers to the double power of myths. Myths have significance both in the personal and the public sphere. At the personal level myths inspire dreams and
desires that exceed the rational consciousness. At the same time, they exist objectively in the public domain occupying a place in the religious and literary discourses. Women poets, faced with the necessity of mystifying the literary process, use re-visionist mythmaking as a literary technique to defamiliarize their self. Another equally successful practice of mystification is the construction of speakers/narrators.

The term “subjectivity” refers to the state of being and functioning as a “subject.” Individual experiences are at the centre of subjective writings which are largely confessional and autobiographical. Anne Sexton has perfected the confessional mode, the objective form crafted to contain the subjective content of exclusively female experiences. According to Linda Gray Sexton, Sexton’s artistic inclination grew from the “need to make form from [the] chaos” of her biographical and emotional realities (1979:43). Sexton sought the subject for her poems from the “narrow diary of her mind” and “the commonplaces of the asylum.” She insisted on rooting her role as a poet in her experiences as a woman. In this regard, Alicia Ostriker observes:

She helps us full helpings of her breast, her uterus, her menstruation, her abortion, her “tiny jail” of a vagina, her love life, her mother’s and daughter’s breasts, every one’s operations, the act of eating….

(Colburn, 1988:263)

Sexton has landscaped her poetry with her female sexed body and punctuated her poetry with female sexuality from the female kaleidoscopic view.
Confessional mode is a predominant male tradition. The cause of confession is an act of transgression. In the case of the male confessional, though the controlled, rational and ordered male psyche collapses, his testimony of suffering is equated with strength. But in the case of the female confessionals like Sexton, though it offers liberation from the stereotypical Angel image, the male anxiety of woman’s fury and madness is reinforced. Male confessional poets often acquire universal relevance whereas woman’s confession is always undervalued as a testimony of her personal weakness. In this regard, Deryn Rees-Jones comments:

In speaking what she believes to be a personal truth she is making a spectacle of herself, throwing an already precarious subjectivity into a heightened state of prominence and vulnerability. (1999b: 283)

Sexton’s poems that reveal the hidden aspects of life have elicited gendered responses from the critics. James Dickey criticizes Anne Sexton for dwelling on “the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience” (1968:53). Praising her poem “In Celebration of my Uterus,” Muriel Rukeyser comments: “...woman has come to the fact as symbol, the centre after many years of silence and taboo”(qtd. in Kumin, xxi). The delineation of female sexuality so far kept under erasure has enchanted the women readers who could easily identify with the speaker whereas men could not cope with these blunt confessions concerning the emotional and bodily functions of women. A woman speaking of her own body in her own voice is embarrassing to conventional readers. Robert Lowell also conveys this sentiment:
Many of her most embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if some one had put them in quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author. (McClatchy, 1978:72)

Though Lowell wrote in the confessional mode, he could not stand such “raw” stuff when it came from “her kind.” Sexton is a poet devalued for the apparent lack of objectivity— for offering her body limb by limb unmediated.

Sexton, who seems to be writing too impulsively from first hand experience in her early poetry cures the raw disasters of her life with art in her anthology Transformations. Here she combines the personal with the popular mythology. Transformations, is a subjective, personalized, poetic re-vision of Grimms’ Tales. She selects seventeen tales from Grimms’ Tales with which she seems to have felt a subconscious connection. The fairytale characters whom Sexton selects for rewriting symbolize her submerged feelings and conflicts. The traumatic experiences of life that she publicly confessed through her previous poems like failure of love, anger, oedipal conflicts, madness and fears of sexual awakening are the thematic concerns of these poems. Rose Lucas evidences a connection between Transformations and the previous works of Sexton: “[These poems] …in fact reveal the same preoccupations with the ‘adult’ material of sexuality, family dynamics, religious strivings and so forth, which appear in her more ‘directly’ personal poetry” (1993:74). But the contexts and the experiences have been defamiliarized. She achieves a “shift from the personal to the transpersonal” by employing a poetic persona in each tale she re-tells
(Lauter,1984:25). Thus her voice, though confessional, is metamorphosed into a grandiose impersonality.

In “The Gold Key,” the opening poem, of her anthology, Sexton consciously creates a middle-aged witch who has a story to tell. She serves as a persona that explicitly separates the speaker from “Dame” Sexton. “Witch,” is Sexton’s favourite image of herself and she uses it as a symbol throughout her poetry to represent female alienation from society. The voice of the witch rings true as it personally knows very well whereof it speaks. She speaks with freedom, both emotional and mental, as she is amply distanced from the tales she narrates. Witch is Sexton herself: “The speaker in this case/ is a middle aged witch, me” (1981:223). At the same time she speaks for female collectivity and renders the muted voice of women audible. The boy that opens the box is “… each of us/I mean you/I mean me” (1981:223). This mask Sexton assumes helps her to explore herself by imagining “the Other.” This distancing of the poet from the speaker facilitates displacement of emotions rarely achieved in her confessional poems. The folktales that maintain the continuity of tradition become the target of the unconventional narrator. In the very portrayal of the witch itself Sexton breaks convention. The narrator-witch in Sexton’s Transformations is imbued with the power of knowledge and writing which has traditionally been man’s monopoly: “…tangled on my two great arms/My face in a book/And my mouth wide, ready to tell you a story or two” (1981:223). This unconventional representation of the storyteller reflects Sexton’s intention to challenge the male authority in literature. The witch is a cover for Sexton to break the silence that women have inherited with
regard to their sexuality. In this regard, Alicia Ostriker observes: “When American poetry was dominated by ideals of sexual purity and bourgeois gentility, women used heroines like Sappho and Eve as a cover for writing erotic verse…”(1986:214). The image of witch provides Sexton, a disguise to discuss female sexuality from female perspective and that too with objectivity. As an object of the perception of the witch – narrator, Sexton’s self becomes unfamiliar.

In *Transformations*, Sexton’s voice is a blend of the mythic, the archetypal and the transpersonal. Theoretically speaking, *Transformations* cannot be considered a confessional writing. But Sexton herself acknowledges it as autobiographical: “It would further be a lie to say that they weren’t about me, because they are just as much about me as my other poetry” (1979: 43). The poet’s concerns and intimately personal experiences are assimilated into the tales. Her poems like “Briar Rose” and “Rapunzel” are in fact docufictions of her own tortured self. The mythical framework helps the poet to defamiliarize her painful personal experiences and this defamiliarization of the private experiences of the poet brings in objectivity which is essential for impersonality.

In “Briar Rose,” Sexton addresses her self-identity as a psychiatric patient and incest survivor. The witch-narrator, Sexton’s persona, perceives Briar Rose/Sexton as an emotionally imbalanced victim of sexual abuse. The third person point of view in the prologue of the poem underlines Sexton as Briar Rose that is perceived from a distance by which Sexton becomes an object rather than a subject. This distancing provides the context to voice her emotional disturbances with objectivity. The prologue is very much like a therapy session. “Briar Rose” opens
with the image of a “girl who keeps slipping off/ arms limp as old carrots/ into the hypnotist's trance” (1981:290). It is a probe into the childhood experience of Briar Rose distilled in her personal unconscious, an attempt to find out what disturbs her emotional life:

She's on a voyage
She is stuck in the time machine,
Suddenly two years old sucking her thumb. (1981:290)

In Sexton’s prologue to the poem, Briar Rose is a doll like child: “Come here to papa/ Sit on my knees. /I have kisses for the back of your neck” (1981:290). There is nothing suspicious or sinister in these lines. In the lines that follow, the adoring daddy puts on a seductive tone:

A penny for your thoughts princess.
I will hunt them like an emerald.
Come be my snooky
And I will give you a root. (1981:290)

A vague suspicion of sexuality in the father-daughter relationship lurks in the air. Briar Rose misidentifies the prince who awakens her from sleep as her Daddy: “He kissed Briar Rose/ and she woke up crying:/Daddy! Daddy!”(1981:291). Since her daddy is the only man Briar Rose has known, there is nothing abnormal or strange, if she identifies the male figure who kisses her back to life with her daddy. But the whole situation abruptly changes in the lines that follow. The cozy familial air of intimacy is disrupted and the situation darkens. Sexton gradually prepares the readers for a shocking revelation. Her elliptical sentences are epigrammatic: “There
was a theft/That much I am told” (1981:294). Sexton gives clues. As the poem is read along, a scary thought, a creeping sensation, catches hold of the reader and the shocking reality in all its fury falls upon the readers:

It’s not the prince at all,

but my father

Drunkenly bent over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,

my father thick upon me

like some sleeping jellyfish. (1981:294)

In her biography, there is reference to a fantasy Sexton narrated in a trance about her father coming to her bedroom and fondling her sexually. Sexton does not let this biographical detail do the work on its own. Instead she uses it as a raw material in the poem “Briar Rose” and works her way backwards to her subjective experience: “Each night I am nailed into place/and forget who I am” (1981:294). Briar Rose guides one to Sexton’s self. But by appropriating Briar Rose, Sexton defamiliarizes her own self and it goes unidentified.

Sexton successfully universalizes her disturbing experience by projecting it on to her mouthpiece who pushes it away from her own vulnerable moment. Briar Rose’s narration of nightmarish experience strikes a note of authenticity and objectivity which Sexton’s subjective narration can never impart. Readers are more vulnerable to Briar Rose’s account than they are to Sexton’s. Sexton’s traumatic experience, when displaced on to Briar Rose, is invested with a new sensation. Sexton’s story becomes every woman’s. The princess or Sexton or any woman in a
patriarchal society is an object of desire or instrument of pleasure. Re-visionist mythmaking provides Sexton the context to effectively displace the personal content as she opens up her heart and shares with her readers how she was sexually abused. The archetypal persona speaks and its amplified voice mutes the voice of Sexton’s self. In Sexton’s hand confession becomes an exceptional art. She skillfully fuses confessional poetry with professional craft.

Rapunzel and the witch are again intimately known fairytale characters Sexton places in a strange context to explore her “unnatural” relation with Nana, her great-aunt who was like a surrogate mother to her. She defamiliarizes her self and Nana’s too, by appropriating the identities of Rapunzel and the witch. Sexton, who was driven by a ravenous need for caresses, enjoyed Nana’s “cuddles” and “wonderful back rubs.” Diane Middlebrook observes:

Nana’s loneliness welcomed Anne’s neediness. While they lay together under Nana’s blue-bordered quilt, Nana would stroke Ann’s back and tell stories…. (1991:15)

“Rapunzel” opens with a monologue of the narrator witch. It is a reflection of the intense bond Sexton had had with Nana which they cherished until “she became absorbed in attracting and teasing boys” (Middlebrook, 1991:15):

Many a girl
had an old aunt
who locked her in the study
to keep the boys away.

They would play rummy
or lie on the couch
and touch and touch.
or lie on the couch/and touch and touch.(1981:247)

Sexton, under the assumed mask of the witch – narrator, imaginatively recreates her emotional bonding with Nana and transmutes her particular concerns into general ones by embedding a part of herself in the archetypal Rapunzel. There is a complete extinction of the poet’s personality which makes it impossible to identify the poet with the protagonist. In a society that romanticizes the heterosexual relationship, a tale of female bonding is unconventional. By recreating Rapunzel as homosexuality oriented, Sexton denaturalizes heterosexuality. Sexton’s Rapunzel hardly resembles the known fairytale character. This defamiliarization of the archetypal symbol with whom she identifies automatically defamiliarizes Sexton’s own homosexual orientation.

It is possible to draw parallels between many of the revised tales and Sexton’s life. Her biographer Diane Wood Middlebrook notes that “the poems were a way to place her struggles in legend rather than personal history” (1991:37). The role of the Miller’s wife in the poem “The Little Peasant” seems to suit Sexton as well when we recall her unstable marriage and extramarital affairs. Sexton either had or she imagined she had love relations with many men. In the prologue of the poem the witch-narrator observes that adultery is a common sin:

The men and women
Cry to each other,
Touch me,
My pancake,
And make me young.
And thus
like many of us,
the parson
and the miller’s wife
lie down in sin.(1981:237)

The witch-narrator pushes Sexton back from her vulnerable self when this audacious observation is made. The fairytale figure and the remote context defamiliarize Sexton, the consummate flirt. Whatever personal or factual is so effectively diffused and distilled into the created character that Sexton’s personality undergoes total extinction. The two personae she appropriates, the witch-narrator and the Miller’s wife, distance the creator from her creations.

Anne Sexton had an emotionally disturbing relationship with her mother which she confesses in many of her poems. It was a torture for Sexton that her mother held her responsible for causing her cancer:

Only my mother grew ill

…………………………..

On the first of September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn’t answer.(1981:38)
Sexton blamed herself unreservedly for the death of her mother, but she could neither experience nor express it: “all my need took/ you down like a meal”(1981:315). She admits she did not know it when she was a child: “I did not know that my life, in the end, would run over my mother’s like a truck”(1981:121). This emotion and guilt that permeate many of her confessional poems are effectively disguised by the appropriation of Greek and Biblical frames of reference in poems like “The Legend of the One-eyed Man.” In the poem she creates a cluster image, the combination of two sinners Oedipus and Judas Iscariot, and further explores the suppressed and overlooked crime against women. The One-Eyed Man focuses on the overlooked part of Judas’s crime. He charges Judas with the forbidden crime of sexual violation of his mother:

Judas had a mother

Just as I had a mother.

Oh! Honour and relish the facts!

Do not think of the intense sensation

I have as I tell you this

But think only. (1981:114)

The One-eyed man identifies himself with Oedipus and tells the story of his crime through the tale of Judas. Just like any other mother, Judas’s mother also had the dream that her son would become a great man. Sexton goes a step further and analyses this dream. The hopes of the mother might have turned into rage. She is furious that patriarchy has suppressed her possibilities by confining her to motherhood and domesticity. Her indignation against her son is transferred to all
sons and all fathers. This dream embodies both hopes and fears and decides the fate of the son who raped her. The betrayal of the “father” was foretold, but not the other more heinous crime.

The oedipal situation in the poem is Sexton’s own. Sexton, as one who metaphorically slew her mother, identifies herself with Oedipus, who in turn identifies with Judas: “Like Oedipus I am losing my sight./Like Judas I have done my wrong”(1981:112). Diana Hume George also identifies Sexton with Oedipus, “the embattled seer” in her biography: “it is my contention that Oedipus/Anne does “slay” her mother and “marry” her father, just as Oedipus slew his father and married his mother”(1987:17). Oedipus did not wish to hurt his parents and so too Sexton. Oedipus committed the grave sin in his haste to protect his actual parents. It is the split between the actual, rejecting parents, and the adoptive, loving parents, that lead to Oedipus’s tragedy. This split in the oedipal myth is not typical of Oedipus but is common to all. Sexton loved and rejected her parents at the same time and believed that her parents also were subject to the same split. In the childhood psyche the image of the loving and rejecting parents unite and so, as a child she could not make out that “she slew her mother, and she dearly loved the mother that she slew.” Later she realizes the psychic truth that Oedipus’s story is her own and of all women; all daughters slay their mothers whom they love. “The Legend of the One-eyed Man” draws on Sexton’s own experiences as a daughter and mother. Diana Hume George also observes: “The ‘confessional’ feeling experienced by the speaker …lends us a momentary frisson”(1987:14). But the voice that she appropriates is mythic and collective which drowns the “personal.”
By identifying with the One-eyed man who combines in him the two primordial images, Oedipus and Judas, Sexton identifies her own nature. She portrays her self but in a quite unfamiliar setting.

Sexton is highly subjective and assertively emotional in her confessional poems. The emotional anguish that Sexton had to endure all through her life is manifest in her poetry. The mythical frame helps her to depersonalize her emotions and transform them into wonderful works of art. She finds space in the prologues of the poems in *Transformations* to give voice to her emotional crippling. But the mask that she puts on brings in objectivity to her personal experiences. She incorporates certain off-hand commentaries and digressions that echo the demoniac experiences she had in her life. But the identity of the fairytale characters that she appropriates helps her to digest her emotions and use them as raw materials for the finest poems she has written. Re-visionist mythmaking is a tool for her to defamiliarize the archetypes which in turn defamiliarize her self.

Kamala Das, writing in the Indian context, is in every sense a confessional poet who makes an attempt to defamiliarize her self within a mythical frame. There is a strong note of subjectivity in the poems of Das. She shares with her readers, fed with mystified tales about women’s bodies, the truth of female body and experiences. Das exposes the hidden vistas of a woman’s psyche through a candid portrayal of her life experience. In the history of modern Indian writing she sets the trend of telling truth, honestly and truthfully, without “telling it slant” in the traditional way. Kamala Das’s poetry is in fact a saga of her tortured self. Her personality is the raw material for her artifact. In this regard, Das confesses:
A poet’s raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment. (1976:157)

Das escapes into personality instead of escaping from it as Eliot advocates. Her poems are “an unending stream of misery and sexual humiliation…” she had to go through in her life (Nigam, 1990:114). Her poetry is an objective correlative of her subjectivity.

Kamala Das was born and brought up in a traditional family where women were silenced. When compared to the west, female aspirations and experiences were much more trivialized in the orthodox Kerala culture she belonged to. Kamala Das watched with indignation her mother creating a façade of domestic bliss by timidly resigning to the denial of rights. She thought her parents were mismatched: “My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and horribly mismated” (1976:5). But when she finds herself another victim of a loveless marriage she refuses to be silent. In protest to her husband who is cruel and brutal, Das launches into a “hectic love life with small capital –just a pair of beautiful breasts and a faint musk-rat smell in my perspiration…”(qtd. in Dwivedi, 1983:2). Das unashamedly confesses her extra marital escapades, real or imaginary. The persona, who firmly declares “I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon” (1973:48) or the woman who openly confesses, “After that love became a swivel –door/When one went out another came in (1967:6) or the freak who “flaunt[s], at times, a grand, flamboyant lust” (1991:42) is Das’s defamiliarized self who once said: "I
always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little"

Kamala Das is a feminist with a difference. Though she is a liberated self she does not forgo her feminine traits like her western counterparts. What she seeks to achieve is a total female self in its essence. In spite of her complaint that “Cowering beneath your monstrous ego, I ate/the magic loaf and became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason…. " She longs for man’s companionship (1973:1). She is feminine while her poems project her as a feminist. In this regard, Subhash Chandra observes:

Her aim is to attain a wholeness in her personality, to achieve what Woolf, and before her, Coleridge called an androgynous mind.

There exists a complete integrated harmony between the male and female elements to her mind. (Dhawan,1993:142)

He means that even though she rallies in her poems against male lust and woman’s exploitation of female body in the institution of marriage, her quest for self fulfilment includes man.

Das confesses in My Story that she loved to tread unorthodox paths in search of true love. But her quest for love ends up in frustration. She turns to a band of cynics:

clinging to their chests where

New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her

Face, into their smells and their young lusts to forget… (2004:49)
But whoever she approaches sends her away, telling “I do not love, I cannot love, it is not/In my nature to love”(1996: 54). They are willing to condescend out of sympathy: “I can be kind to you” (1996:54). Das has the courage to own her sexual cravings even when she is trapped within the cultural conventions that compel her to downplay such “base” emotions. But she realizes that the love she craves for cannot be realized in the hierarchically ordered cosmos where body is subordinated to mind. Creaturely instincts are stigmatized in the civilized society in which the concept of the sublime is overemphasized. She is well aware that a proper blending of the physical and metaphysical aspects of love alone can give meaning to life. In this regard, she writes in “Winter”:

…Even my soul,

I thought—must send its roots somewhere,

and, I loved his body without shame.(1991:92)

Das longed for wholeness, female in its essence. She craves for a sexual exchange on a much deeper level than mere physical intercourse but has to be satisfied with mere carnal desire devoid of warmth of love and affection. Sex without self infuriates the persona in “The Freaks”:

…can this man with

Nimble fingertips unleash nothing more

Alive than the skin’s lazy hungers? (1991:42)

Das becomes aware of the increasing gap between her yearning and its consummation. She is frustrated as she fails to attain mental and emotional warmth and companionship in her marital life. Her persona is depressed because her man is
indifferent to the niceties of feminine desires and aspirations. She desperately asks in “The Freaks”:

Who can

Help us who have lived so long

And have failed in love? (1991:42)

Her quest for an ideal lover takes her to the Radha-Krishna legend in Indian mythology where sexuality is conceptualized as carnal, erotic and spiritual all at once. In *Gita Govindam*, Radha-Krishna love story is depicted as the corporeal worship of that which cannot be possessed. Das identifies the agonies and ecstasies of her self in the prolonged sexual excitement and longing that permeates the divine love story. She craves for the embrace of Krishna that maddened Radha with desire. She wants to secure herself within her man:

Your body is my prison, Krishna,

I cannot see beyond it.

Your darkness blinds me,

Your love words shut out the wise world’s din. (1991:54)

Das is taken over by Krishna consciousness. According to the Hindu view of life *kama* is an important aspect of life. It precedes *moksha*, the sublimation or transcendence. *Kama* or the physical desire is integral to the attainment of salvation. Only through a proper coordination of the primal instincts and the existential heights can one achieve the sense of completeness.

Women have dreams and desires that cannot be circumscribed by the phallic economy. Kamala Das writes for woman “who is probably too timid to write” about
her agonies and ecstasies. The feminine consciousness that prevailed the works of early Indo-Anglican women poets like Toru Datt and Sarojini Naidu gives way to feminist sensibility as Kamala Das starts questioning the existing paradigms. According to Germaine Greer, woman who seeks liberation from male oppression should begin with her self: “She could begin not by changing the world, but by reassessing herself” (1970: 4). Women should discover and re-define themselves. Feminine sensibility is too strong to be clipped by the patriarchal restrictions and she needs an outlet to the suppressed tensions and agonies. Writing comes to her as a welcome relief. She observes:

If I had not learnt to write how would
I have written away my loneliness or grief?
Garnering them within, my heart would have
grown heavy as a vault, one that only death
might open, a release then -
I would not be able to feel or sense….(1996:108).

Das recollects that she desperately needed her imaginative flights which liberated her pent up emotions. She could write away her loneliness and grief and it was a release she could experience.

Kamala Das is true to her self. As a feminist writer she responds to “ the shadows which they [women] alone can see and the anguish they alone can feel” (Jain,1994:36). She is honest to her incongruities and failings. She stands apart from the common women who “tell different lies at different times, depending on what the men of the time needed to hear” (Rich, 1979:188). She admits the demands of
her body and refuses to be silent when “…his/ Mouth …and his limbs like pale and/Carnivorous plants reaching/Out for me [her]” (2004:14). She never bothers to fake orgasm when he “…embalmed my [her] poor lust with your bitter sweet juices” (1991:100). Occasionally her poetry becomes obsessively confessional and as Eunize De Souza observes, “gets out of control…there is scarcely a trace of grit or resilience to shape and control the emotion” (Sahane, 1980:46). De Souza’s comment suggests that even women critics object to the parading of too much of emotions and detailing of personal experiences.

Das fails to satisfy Eliot’s insistence of impersonality in many of her poems. She rarely makes an attempt to distance her self from her pages. She explicitly identifies herself with her persona. In Krishna poems Das identifies herself with Radha and her ideal lover with Krishna. Radha-Krishna myth provides her with a frame to defamiliarize her self and a context to explicitly express her sexuality. She reinterprets the Radha-Krishna relationship in the light of her own experience. The terror of living with a man for whom she was a “body that his muscular power puts at his mercy” (de Beauvoir, 1960:374) and her yearning for a reciprocal relationship are paralleled with the unexpressed woes of Radha caught between the rapturous love for Krishna and sterile resignation to her husband:

That night in her husband’s arms,
Radha felt so dead that he asked
what is wrong, do you mind my kisses,
love, and ,she said, no, not at all
but thought, what is it to the corpse
if the maggots nip? (1991:46)

Das shatters the complacency of the andro-centric culture that equates womanliness with self-effacing marital love. Man is given sexual freedom whereas woman’s sexuality is restricted to marriage. In this regard, de Beauvoir comments:

The sexual act, if not sanctified by the code, by a sacrament, is for her a fault, a fall, a defeat, a weakness;…if she ‘yields’, if she falls, she is scorned. (1960: 374)

De Beauvoir means that society’s hegemonic attitude with regard to sexuality incurs a double standard of morality.

It is a daring step on the part of a woman born and brought up in a culture where ethics and religion enjoy strong hold over the individual to portray a culturally banned sexual experience as fulfilling and a socially sanctioned one as shattering. Das’s Radha is an adulterous woman by definition. Das seems to be legitimizing women transcending the borders in quest of love. As Alicia Ostriker observes, in such re-visions “…we look at or into but not up at, sacred things; we unlearn submission” (1986:236). Though Radha is as autobiographical as her other personae and speakers, the mythical frame obliterates her emotions and enables an escape from her personality. The amorous relationship between Radha and Krishna endowed with spirituality is so close to Indian psyche that the woman who suffers disappears from the pages. Her experience gets transformed as every woman’s. In her poem "An Introduction," the narrator says: "I am every/ Woman who seeks love" (1991:12). Women readers identify their unexpressed woes and cravings in
the personal cries of the poet. Her silent desires and fantasies are conveyed to her readers quite effectively and objectively under the mask of Radha pining for Krishna. She achieves an aesthetic reconstruction of her tormented self by articulating her personal disregard for the traditional Hindu woman’s modesty and the pathivrata concept within a mythical frame. Das admits that Radha and Krishna figures in her poems obliterate her real self:

I think I decided to wear a disguise. That was why I shifted to poems that seemed metaphysical. Because many people used to advise me that I should write about the love between Radha and Krishna and escape criticism from people rather than write about my own affairs, if there were any. (Raveendran, 1993: 148-149).

A culture that can think of sexuality only in terms of man “possessing” a woman and a virgin being “subdued” will never entertain the candid confessions of Das.

Kamala Das’s personality enters her poetry as its vibrant content. But revisionist mythmaking provides Das a context to remain in spaces that are otherwise familiar to her and her readers. Das treats Radha-Krishna relationship in human terms, thus “reducing the verbal glow that we are trained to associate with mythic material” (Ostriker, 1986: 236). Das defamiliarizes the Radha-Krishna myth by perceiving it from the perspective of a society in which female sexuality is restricted to marriage. Radha’s love for Krishna is subject to social censure. Her love, dalliance with Krishna, risks humiliation and alienation. Yet she cannot resist her passion. Radha is Das or any woman in disguise. Das is in the same predicament. She too disregards her family honour and husband to satisfy her urges.
Das openly writes about the incompatibility of her married life in many of her poems. By manipulating the much admired love legend into a tale of adultery, Das defamiliarizes her own experiences and relations. Her highly subjective poetry becomes a beautiful work of art when she identifies herself with Radha, and equates her ideal lover with Krishna. T.S Eliot, who advocates “an escape from the personality,” also suggests:

The creation of a work of art … consists in the process of transfusion of the personality, or, in a deeper sense, the life, of the author into the character[s]. (1920:12)

Das defamiliarizes her self by defamiliarizing the characters through which and the contexts in which she explores her self. The mythical frame in which Das explores her personal experiences leads her readers away from her “self.”

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, one of Canada's major contemporary poets, novelists and critics, has successfully used re-visionist mythmaking as an art in her fictions and poems. Atwood’s interest in myths developed while she was a girl and was accelerated by her acquaintance with Northrop Frye, Joseph Campell and Robert Graves. She perceives that myths record the collective experience of the previous generation and they motivate the repetition of behaviours. Atwood’s biographer Rose Mary Sullivan observes that Atwood always finds women at the receiving end in man-woman relationships: she is “sardonically amused by the way both men and women in relationships were acting out unconscious myths” (1998:196). Atwood uses poetry as a medium to explore how men and women act out the archetypal images of aggressive male subject/passive female object in their lives.
Her preoccupation with myths helps Atwood to be objective and authentic in her subjective poems.

Although Atwood was relieved of cultural pressures in her early years, she found herself bombarded by a set of cultural conceptions about literary authority while at Harvard and later in her personal life. Atwood married Jim Polk, a fellow writer, in 1967. But it was a short lived affair. The couple drifted apart after a few years and separated. Patriarchal construction of gender identity based on the archetypes often structures the break down of love relationships, the most powerful sites of desire investment. In this regard, her biographer Sullivan observes: “To loving, we import the mythologies that have accumulated from our culture…Each gender has its iconic images: the woman as patient Penelope, as Daphne, as primitive cave goddess, and the man as questing adventurer, as conquering knight, as Bluebeard, as Dracula” (1998: 249). Iconic images associated with gender allow no space for free will and keep women constantly chained to the receiving end. The hierarchical gender values compel women to act in accordance with the traditional female role, the deciding of which is beyond the control of women. Mythically ordained state of mind facilitates the power structured relationships of domination and subordination whereby woman is controlled by man. The oppressive patriarchal gender relations create a psychological tension in women that gradually leads to a disinvestment of object libido.

In spite of her determination to “squash underfoot like a cockroach…the idea of art as self expression,” the love-aggression complex that Atwood portrays in *Power Politics* can be interpreted as an intimately personal experience delineated
through the two created characters “you,” the male Other, and “I,” the archetypal female (Howells, 2006:15). In the light of this broken up relationship, Atwood scrutinizes the intimate relationships between men and women, bringing out the underlying power politics. She presents man-woman relationship as a colonizer/colonized relationship that demands complete surrender from the colonized: “I want questions and you want/only answers” (1996:11). Hostility and distrust mount with the passage of time. Love degrades into a devastating experience:

You fit into me
like a hook into an eye
a fish hook
an open eye. (1996:1)

The compulsion to act out the myths reduces the romanticized fairytale concept of love to a devastating mode of existence; the garment fastener becomes a deadly weapon. This subversion of the patriarchal conception of romantic love, which Atwood realizes from her personal experience, is a reality framed in myth. The poet is spaced out when her pent up emotions, agonies, anger and frustrations are divulged through Eurydice, who is given the privileged position of the narrator in the poem “Orpheus(1).” Her personal and very private complaints and the angst that she might have endured in her broken relationship with Jim Polk turn out to be Eurydice’s and then develop into every woman’s. The horror of following an "outline / of… head and shoulders," "a dark oval" with an indistinct face under compulsion by an “old bridle” is not an isolated experience, but is shared by women
dictated by patriarchal gender norms (1988:107). Orpheus/man might call it love, but for Eurydice/Atwood/woman it is nothing more than a cultural bridle that drives her to tag on to Orpheus:

Though something stretched between us
Like a whisper, like a rope:
My former name,
Drawn tight
You had your old leash
With you, love you might call it,
and your flesh voice.(1988:107)

This mythical frame lends objectivity to her subjective experiences. Eurydice’s complaints against Orpheus strike a familiar chord in every female heart while the readers prefer to understand it as Eurydice’s critique of Orpheus. In “Orpheus(1),” Eurydice criticizes Orpheus for his self-centredness: “Before your eyes you held steady/ the image of what you wanted/ me to become…”(1988:107). The mythic hero perceives woman as an object of desire and this leads to the failure of his mission. Orpheus had never regarded Eurydice as an individual. Eurydice’s allegation that in spite of his prowess, Orpheus miserably failed to recognize that she was “obedient, but / numb, like an arm/ gone to sleep.” This is the smothered contention of women of all ages. Atwood universalizes her traumatic experiences through her protagonist. Eurydice speaks for all women and addresses all men who refuse to see woman as an individual and denies her free will. Atwood extends her
personal mythologies to a wider world and her subjective experiences get transmuted into the struggle between the sexes. Thus, through a change of perspective Atwood subtly introduces her concerns regarding gender relations and exposes the subtleties of oppression that she herself has experienced with an objectivity that a confessional mode can never render. It is her own subjective world that Atwood explores, but she defamiliarizes her identity by reimaging Eurydice with whom she identifies. This helps her to defamiliarize her self/identity. The discrepancy between the known Eurydice, and the perceived Eurydice is extended to those between the known Atwood and the real Atwood, through the mythic context.

In “Circe/Mud” poems, a retelling of the Circe episode in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Atwood mediates her subjective emotions through the agency of Circe. Circe speaks for all women who in their attempt to transform realize that they are mud women. She violently reacts to the fact that woman’s fate is to be as malleable as clay to male desire:

is this what you would like me to be, this mud woman? Is
this what i would like to be? it would be so simple.(1974:61)

She angrily recollects how Odysseus appeared one day in his ‘stupid boat’ and continues with a strong suggestion of violent abuse:

Holding my arms down
holding my head down by the hair
mouth gouging my face
and neck, fingers groping into my flesh.(1974:55)
Unlike the persona in *Power Politics*, who succumbs to her fate with the realization, “Have to face it/ I’m finally an addict,” Circe refuses to be a mud woman.

I’m not the sea, I’m not pure blue,

I don’t have to take

anything you throw into me.(1974:63)

The authorial “I” is very much present, but invisible “refined out of existence.” It exploits the creative possibilities of turning impersonality into poetics. The archetypal “I” performs, elevating the status of what has been traditionally alleged to be “self-absorbed, private, escapist, non-universal” (Ostriker, 1986:6). Myth has defamiliarized intimately private traumatic experiences.

Circe symbolizes the woman who refuses to live in man’s stories. Circe accuses Odysseus for assaulting “the ones they accused of/ being silent because they would not speak in the received/ language” (1974:49). Her inner self, that refuses to comply with tradition, merges with Circe’s refusal to use “the received language,” the language of myths. Circe is all set to create a new language, a space where man and woman co-exist. Circe’s suggestion that they leave behind the current story and write themselves a new one is indicative of Atwood’s desire to resurrect the word love. Atwood, who mythologizes her inner rebellious self, is amply distanced from her poetry; the archetypal persona fills in the poetic space, making Atwood’s voice more convincing and impersonal.

Susanna Moodie is another mask that Atwood puts on to maintain the aesthetic distance required for objectivity. Atwood reimages Susanna Moodie, the nineteenth-century British immigrant to the backwoods of Canada, in *The Journals*
of Susanna Moodie. Myths and folklores as oral expressions of a communal life rooted in nature have been a constant fascination for Atwood, who is spiritually oriented towards nature. The poetic narrative, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, is a poetic/artistic exploration of the anguish and estrangement one experiences when thrown into a hostile environment. Moodie's *Roughing It in The Bush* provides a narrative context from which Atwood negotiates the complex nature of Canadian culture to which she belongs. Atwood fills in “the hints, the gap between what was said and what hovered just unsaid between the lines,” with her subjective interpretations (Atwood, 1986: viii). Atwood speculates and invents what is unsaid by Moodie. Atwood’s fascination with the relatively unknown history of Canada and her perspective of her own land are distilled into the *journals*, but the impersonal point of view that she adopts erases even the slightest traces of Atwood’s individuality or biography. Atwood uses Moodie to explore, examine and explain Canada that fascinates and bewilders at the same time. Moodie’s assertion echoes Atwood’s voice: “It would take more than that to banish/Me: this is my kingdom still” (1970: 60). Atwood’s attempt to historicize her subjective concerns defamiliarizes her identity.

Atwood makes her pronouncements on Canadian wilderness objectively using Susanna Moodie, the mythic pioneer woman. According to Atwood, Moodie’s personality reflects Canada’s “paranoid schizophrenia” (1970:62). Canadian wilderness both confuses and attracts her. Moodie’s dual response to Canadian landscape is typical of all generations. Atwood observes in the “Afterword” to *The Journals Of Susanna Moodie*: “We are all immigrants to this
place...even if we are born here” (1970:62). The experience of being lost in the territory of Canada is common to both Moodie and Atwood. Moodie embodies the anxieties of a twentieth century woman. Moodie, having inhabited the Canadian wilderness of which Atwood has intimate knowledge, provides scope for both distance and empathy that lend objectivity to her subjective concerns. The distance gives her the freedom to imagine, to invent Moodie's feelings about life in Canada of her era. Susanna Moodie writes of her everyday experiences whereas Atwood describes Moodie’s times. Atwood begins from Moodie’s narrative, but her investigation takes her to contemporary times and her Canadian identity. In “Journal Three” that continues till 1969, a dead Susanna Moodie comments on the twentieth century Canada. She makes her final appearance in a bus heading along Toronto’s streets which is familiar to Atwood. The technique of narration makes the objects unfamiliar. Atwood reinterprets the twentieth century Canada through Susanna Moodie’s nineteenth century perspective. This provides her a context to defamiliarize the Canadian wilderness and her Canadian identity and invest them with a new life. She uses Moodie’s journal as a framework to perceive her intimately known Canadian context and her dual response to Canadian wilderness from a distance. Atwood traces her Canadian identity by analyzing and rearticulating Moodie’s experience. She assumes the mask of Moodie and therefore the Journal is “A Self Portrait of Atwood” (Stephen, 1972:37). But as Moodie, she is far removed from her immediate context; this distancing removes the automatism of perception.
For Atwood, her Canadian identity is inseparably bound with her female identity. The question of power and subjugation is common to both. Within Canada "national identity and gender were both predicated on second class status" (Sullivan, 1998: 128). The Canadian cultural identity that she explores in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* parallels and informs the apparently more personal and feminine expressions of identity. From Atwood’s perspective, Canada can be best represented as a female figure because Canada has internalised the subordinated position of the female with regard to its relation with the dominant America (Atwood, 1982: 389). *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* can be interpreted as an exploration of the poet’s self, both as a Canadian and as a woman. As a Canadian, she struggles to preserve her cultural identity in the face of onslaughts from the oppressive influence of America and as a woman she is subjected to violence physical, psychological and sexual. Atwood metaphorically identifies “wilderness,” the wild Canadian environment, with the deep recess of the self. Atwood exploits the setting to universalize her personal drive for self-knowledge. She shares with Susanna Moodie her Canadian female identity and a desire to know the truth of the “wilderness” that she is. Moodie begins her life in Canada as “a word in a foreign language” and tries to be a part of its wilderness (1970:11). The desire of Moodie, the iconic, archetypal figure in Canadian culture, to become a part of the wilderness symbolizes Atwood’s thirst for self-knowledge. It is also Atwood’s invitation for women to replace the incidental knowledge with the significant:

(You find only

the shape you already are)
but what
if you have forgotten that
or discover you
have never known). (1970: 25)

Moodie’s transformation from a conventional British immigrant to an impervious pioneering Canadian is not complete. She has not fully learnt all that is to be learnt about wilderness within or outside her. But in her attempt to transform she realizes that she lacks self-knowledge: “Without the wolf’s eyes to see/ the truth” she has been living with a self assigned to her by others. She explains her predicament: “I…got used to being/a minor invalid expected to make/inept remarks,/futile and spastic gestures” (1970:14). Moodie becomes the symbol of a metamorphosed self. She has a double vision that helps her to shift to a different level of perception:

Two voices
took turns using my eyes
One saw through my
Bleared and gradually
Bleaching eyes, red leaves,
The rituals of seasons and rivers
The other found a dead log
Jubilant with maggots
Half-buried among the sweet peas.(1970: 42)
Instead of exploring male definitions of female self, woman should try to realize what she really is. Atwood’s personal interest in female self-definition resonates with double power when voiced through Moodie’s persona from history.

T.S Eliot has turned impersonality into poetics. Atwood maintains the impersonality even when she is highly subjective. This she accomplishes by objectivising her experiences through characters constituted in history or myth. Atwood renders the anguish and estrangement of the doubly colonized Canadian women with detachment and restraint under the guise of personae whom she recreates to suit the changing cultural perspectives. She universalizes her concern in being tied to the conventional definitions of the self and her desire to break away by appropriating the identities of mythical icons. She recreates from traditional myths and historical legends, women who attempt to transform or bring about transformation in other persons. The classic female monster Circe, notorious for her power to transform human beings into beasts, is tired of being linked to this male fantasy. In “Siren Song,” Atwood portrays Siren as a female locked in the body of a mythological creature infamous for her deadly seductive power. Atwood’s Siren is fed up “squatting on this island/looking picturesque and mythical” (1976:195). She also longs for a transformation. She wishes her seductive song to be transformed into a “cry for help.” Susanna Moodie, is tired of being called a minor invalid who cannot shed her conventional British woman’s posture. She longs to change from being a “composer of uplifting verses” to a woman at ease with the wilderness. Atwood’s voice lies surreptitiously beneath her persona who refuses to replay the role and life plot dictated for her by the male societal story tellers. The archetypal
status of her personae helps her to make a general symbol of her personal experiences. In this regard, Branko Gurjip observes: “Myth both recounts and facilitates the process of metamorphosis, turning whatever is local in the imagination into what is universal” (Howells, 2006:132). The transforming power of myths defamiliarizes the poet’s self identity: in the process Atwood comes to represent Canada, Canadian female or woman in general.

Atwood has successfully used re-visionist mythmaking as an objective artistry in her poetry. For Atwood, art is not a means to express neurosis but a way to combat it. Atwood never believes that artists should suffer in order to be creative: “[E]very one has neuroses….but the artist has a way of working them out [her art]” (Cooke, 1998:328). She does not promote the idea of the suffering artist intimidating the creative work. Re-visionist mythmaking provides her the context to maintain the distance required for the element of artistry in poetry. She unites tales of the Self with the tales of the Other and narrates them impersonally with a mythological mask. There is ample distance between the creator and the persona and this enables the poet to be irreverent in her criticism of the patriarchal paradigm. By keeping her persona distinctive, Atwood universalises the private dramas of her life and makes it as compelling to her readers as they were to her. The aesthetic artifact that she constructs out of her personal experiences within the mythical frame is a testimony to the mystifying power of myths.

Lucille Clifton, the most celebrated of Black female poets, is another strong female voice of confessional poetry. She constructs an autobiographical identity for herself in her poems. Clifton has her family roots in West African Kingdom of
Dahomey. Very proud of her ancestry, Clifton acknowledges her great grandmother Caroline Donald, the first woman legally hanged in Virginia for murdering the white father of her only son, as the inspiration behind her poetic career. Clifton gives a full account of her family’s story in her 1976 memoir Generations. Clifton observes: "...the proper subject matter for poetry is life" (http://www.AfroPoets.Net/lucilleclifton.html). She celebrates African-American ancestry, heritage and culture in her poems. Alicia Ostriker also observes: “Black anger and black pride stand at the core of her work” (1993:45). Clifton writes herself and by extension African-American women in general, to find a narrative space for her poetry.

Anne Bradstreet remarked at the beginning of the seventeenth century: "I am obnoxious to each carping tongue / That says my hand a needle better fits." Since then women poets have been voicing their angst in their poetry. Clifton also uses poetry as a medium to articulate her alienation as a doubly colonised woman. As an African-American woman, Clifton has the insider’s experience of the oppressive potential of racism and patriarchy and this makes her poems highly subjective. Clifton’s intensely personal protest against the injustices inflicted by the colonizers, both patriarchal and racial, becomes more collectivist when she writes from a mythopoeic perspective. Re-visionist mythmaking provides her a context to transmute her personal experiences of sexism and racism and perceive the collective oppressions of African-American women in a new light.

Biblical scripture, often utilized to serve patriarchal interests, has been a consistent target of Clifton. Biblical texts have been misinterpreted to justify
oppression, both gender and racial. In the Biblical story of Genesis, Adam is given authority to “rule over [Eve]” (Genesis, 3:16). The divine mandate to “fill the earth and subdue it and [rule over] every living creature” seems to encourage colonisation. Noah’s curse that his grandson Canaan will be “the lowest of slaves…to his brothers” appears to justify racism as the Canaanites were believed to have settled in Africa. Lucifer is the notorious Other in the Christian tradition. American culture with its puritan roots abhors Lucifer, the arch enemy of God. Clifton finds in Lucifer a kindred soul sharing her pangs of alienation. Etymologically the name “Lucille” means “light,” but she remains a black poet. Lucifer, as his name indicates, is the bearer of light, but he is stigmatized as the prince of darkness. By recreating Lucifer, Clifton writes about herself and her sisters, Othered in the racist land of America. She speaks from the margins in the voice of Lucifer. It is an attempt to defamiliarize her self and to remove the blemished image culture and gender have imposed on the Black women.

Clifton is at once aware of the racist and sexist discrimination in society. She knows very well “how dangerous it is/to wear dark skin” (2000:118). She is equally aware of “how dangerous it is/to be born with breasts”(2000:118). But she celebrates both her blackness and femaleness on account of which she is Othered: “maybe it is the afrikan in me …something hopeful rises in me/rises and runs me out into the road”(2000:119).From the margins of culture, she speaks more objectively in the guise of Lucifer. By reclaiming Lucifer, Clifton reclaims Black women from being demonized. Lucifer, who calls himself the “light bringer/created out of fire,” is the poet herself who has illuminated the dark world which she
inhabits through her writing. Re-vision of the Othered Lucifer, the dark devil, provides her the context to impersonalize her voice (1991:80). Clifton imbues Lucifer with human qualities: “It’s too easy to see Lucifer as all bad. Suppose he were merely being human” (Holladay, 2004:56). He is a flawed being, yet loved by many. In "lucifer speaks in his own voice," the evil incarnate asserts: “illuminate I could/and so illuminate I did” (1991:23). Lucifer’s voice prompts the readers to reflect on the conventional thinking of Lucifer as the embodiment of evil. Clifton, using Lucifer as her mouthpiece, invites the colonizer to objectively reflect on the belittled status accorded to Black women. Clifton’s familiar ways of writing the Black woman is made unfamiliar through her re-vision of Lucifer.

The mythopoeic technique brings in restraint and objectivity to the rendering of pent up emotions. Clifton’s marginalized status does not permit her to express her anger and protest though she longs to articulate them. Clifton challenges the society’s pervasive attitudes that cast Black women as non-entities or adversaries from the racial and social margins of American society. Her challenge becomes all the more convincing when rendered through the archetypal persona. It is a resistance that acquires a collective dimension. Clifton’s experiences provide the material for her poetry. She transmutes them skillfully and objectively in her poetry. Her personality never reduces the grandeur that myth confers on her poetry. By giving voice to the voiceless, Clifton renders the muted voice of her community audible. Her personality undergoes extinction when she puts on the
mask of Lucifer. The perspective of the recreated Lucifer distances Clifton from her poetry. Lucifer defamiliarizes her self/identity as Black woman.

Myths and stereotypes associated with African-American women have played a pivotal role in disempowering them. Cultural assumptions based on these images are responsible for “African-American women’s limited access to societal resources and institutions” (Jewel, 1993:12). The Euro-centric concepts of womanhood have always been impediments to Black female identity. Clifton finds it imperative that women should realise their worth in order to break out of the patriarchal domain. In the poem “What the Mirror said,” she reminds woman that she has “got geography of [her] own” that no man can fully comprehend (1987:169). He may colonise her body by way of his superior strength but can never subdue her mind. The patriarchal notions of female identity ingrained in the female psyche hinder women from realizing their inordinate strength. Clifton demolishes the negative images associated with women by recreating Eve, the archetypal mother, in line with her feminist vision. Clifton uses re-vision as both art and medium in the two poems “adam thinking” and “eve thinking.” Instead of looking into herself, the poet imagines the Other. She describes how Adam and Eve feel, by making them speak for themselves. The historical oppression of Black women or Black people through slavery is a subjective experience which she objectively renders through Eve’s soliloquy: “something has tried to kill me/ and has failed” (2000:79). This is an anti-autobiographical opening and hence more effective without any outpourings typical
of confessional poetry. Clifton as Eve motivates Black women to reclaim their identity by sharing her experiences with them:

i made it up

.......... my one hand holding tight

my other hand; come celebrate.(2000:79)

It is Clifton who “made it up,” but re-visionist mythmaking provides her the context to examine her experience from a distance, defamiliarizing her self.

Clifton, recreating the twentieth century African-American female experience uses Leda as her mouthpiece to voice the suppressed agony of women abused and neglected by men irrespective of race. Leda easily captures the essence of a woman’s extreme humiliation of being sexually abused by her protector, her father in Clifton’s case. Leda’s rape by the Swan sets the frame for capturing her mutilated self. It is her indignation at the sexual abuse she and her sisters were subjected to that Clifton expresses through Leda, her mouthpiece. In “Leda 1,” the first of her Leda series of poems, Zeus, who rapes Leda, is a substitute for Clifton’s incestuous father about whom she writes: "all week you have stood in my dreams / like a ghost, asking for more time"

(Clifton, 1987:178). In “Leda 3”, her anger is directed towards all patriarchs:

always pyrotechnics;

stars spinning into phalluses

of light, serpents promising

sweetness, their forked tongues
thick and erect, patriarchs of bird
exposing themselves in the air. (2000:98)

The sources of Clifton’s poems are the personal traumas of her life rather than her imagination. By consciously creating a persona with whom she trades her place, Clifton makes an aesthetic experience out of her tragic and ominous encounters in life. The universal appeal of myths generalizes her personal experience as she works in the re-visionist tradition. Clifton transforms the subjective context by defamiliarizing her self, but retains the nature of patriarchal abuse of women which she herself has experienced.

Re-visionist mythmaking provides Carol Ann Duffy, Britain’s twentieth Poet Laureate and one of the best known and most admired English poets, a very effective context to preserve the aesthetic distance that Eliot strictly insisted in poetry. T.S Eliot has had a great influence on Duffy and she acknowledges this continuing influence in her comment: “If I had to pick one who devastated me and made me shiver and want that it would be Eliot, and still it would be Eliot” (Micheles, 2003:33). Re-vision demands either creation or recreation of characters who help the poet to keep away from “self-expression” that Eliot despises. In her anthology *The World’s Wife*, Duffy resurrects wives who have had no voice in the history of their legendary husbands. Aesop, Darwin, Icarus, all have gone into history whereas Mrs Aesop, Mrs Darwin, Mrs Icarus are left out. These muted women from history and myths reclaim their voice and identity in Duffy’s poems. Duffy successfully transfers her private self into the public realm by choosing the mythological/historical personae as her mouth pieces. Duffy’s personae are all
given contemporary voice, in spite of their mythical surnames. Her voice, as it streams out from Mrs Midas or Mrs Sysyphus, her mouthpieces, blends with the voice of all women hushed for centuries. She explores her self and redefines it under the mask of these historical personae who never have had an opportunity to delineate their self in history. She gives them name and voice to speak on her behalf and elucidate her stance. This mask gives her the freedom or distance to be irreverent, take chances with language or appropriate the facts to create the most engaging story. This distancing enables Duffy to address the issues of gender and sexuality that she confronts as a woman in the patriarchal structure with the detachment of an observer. Her self and emotions are defamiliarized when transferred to poetry. Dramatic monologue is Duffy’s favourite genre and she experiments with the genre to “give facts from within,” without appearing to do so (Langbaum, 1985:78). Duffy exchanges place with her speakers, maintaining an air of mystery even when rendering her intimate female concerns.

Autobiographical elements often form the raw material for Duffy’s poetry. When Duffy launched her anthology, The World’s Wife, she remarked: “Each poem had to be personally honest, and have some kind of autobiographical element in it, whether it had happened to me or whether it was an emotional or intellectual truth” (Rees-Jones, 1999a:17). The opening poem, “Little Red Cap,” for instance, is about a young girl becoming a poet. The anthology concludes with “Demeter” which is about a woman becoming a mother. When read against the backdrop of Duffy’s biography, this seems to have some resemblance to her life. But
when placed within the spatially and temporally distanced contexts the incidents of Duffy’s life appear unfamiliar and strange.

In the poem “Little Red Cap,” Duffy re-images Little Red Cap as a budding female poet. Little Red Cap, as a young woman on the poetic pursuit, has a close resemblance to Duffy. Duffy observes in a personal interview that the poem is based on her first love: “Little Red Cap is a version of me... the wolf in my poem being an older male poet that Little Red Cap, a teenage female, poet learns from” (Wood, http://www.sheerpoetry.co.uk/advance/ interviews/carol-ann-duffy-the-world-s-wife). Literal details of her hometown are poetically described in the opening lines:

the houses petered out
into playing fields, the factory allotments
kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men,
the silent railway line, the hermit’s caravan. (1999:3)

The maturing of Duffy’s poetic genius is the focus of the poem. In the poem “Little Red Cap,” Duffy appropriates the fairytale by presenting an altered view. It is her interest in poetry that takes Little Red Cap “to the edge of the woods.” There she confronts the wolf who “Stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud/ in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw,/ red wine staining his bearded jaw...” (1999:3). The wolf takes her “deep into the woods, away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place/lit by the eyes of owls”(1999: 3). There he teaches her “Lesson one that/ night” (1999: 3 ). It was “a love poem” and Little Red Cap “clung till dawn to his thrashing fur, for/what little girl doesn’t dearly love a wolf?” (1999:3).
Duffy exploits the defamiliarizing capacity of myths and fairytales for an imaginative recreation of her poetic initiation and the affair she had had with the poet Adrian Henri which she openly acknowledges: “He gave me confidence, he was great. It was all poetry and sex, very heady, and he was never faithful”(Winterson, http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/content/index.asp?Page ID=350). The poem also develops the idea that women poets are dominated by the male tradition. The wolf represents the male-centred discourses which Alicia Ostriker describes as “written overwhelmingly by men” (1986:15). Duffy has in mind what Gilbert and Gubar describe as "anxiety of authorship.” Male writers attempt to “enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster), drastically conflict with her sense of self--that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity” (1979:48). Duffy, a victim of these patriarchal definitions, universalizes her experiences by projecting her self on to Little Red Cap, embedded in the collective unconscious. In this regard, Deryn Rees-Jones observes that Duffy’s restructured dramatic monologues “present a way of bringing the poet’s self into the world, while simultaneously denying responsibility” (1999a:17). Duffy tells her own story effectively concealing her emotions behind the mask of a fairytale character. Her poetry is rooted in her own experiences, but she is hardly exposed as they get defamiliarized in the fairytale context.

Duffy craftily conceals her personal voice, as she verbalizes her experiences and emotions through Eurydice’s monologue in the poem “Eurydice.” Duffy uses Eurydice as a mask to articulate her experience as a woman and a writer with
detachment. Language as a constrictive force has crippled Eurydice. So she is happy in the underworld where she cannot be constrained by language for there “words had to come to an end/And end they did there, lastwords/, famous or not” (1999:58). She articulates the struggle of women poets to break out of the images generated by patriarchal texts. Women writers find the male literary tradition frustrating, for it authoritatively distorts reality. The male poet’s image of woman negates everything that she really is. So women writers fail to get a model to start with. In this regard, Adrienne Rich observes:

She is looking eagerly for guides, maps, possibilities; and over and over again in the word’s ‘masculine persuasive force’ of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about. (Gelpi, 1975:173)

Eurydice symbolizes the new woman who has realized that she has been “preserved in the glass coffin of patriarchal aesthetics” both as a woman and as a writer. She longs to “dance out of the looking glass of the male text into a tradition that enabled her to create her own authority” (Gubar, 1979:71). Eurydice/Duffy seeks liberation from male-centred categorization as woman and as writer. Duffy envisions a female literary tradition uncontaminated by male influence. Under the mask of Eurydice, Duffy universalizes her experience:

Furthermore,

we've all, let's be honest,

been bored half to death by a man

who fucks like he's writing a book. (1999:58)
It is an invitation for an authentic representation of female sensibility. Duffy’s intimately personal experience becomes every woman’s. Eurydice’s voice blends with the voices of all women poets trying to escape the constrictive hierarchies of tradition through autonomous self-definition. Duffy’s personal experiences with regard to the maturing of a female poet are diffused and distilled into her poem as an impersonal point of view. It is Eurydice’s point of view that defamiliarizes her self.

Duffy’s maternal love takes an impersonal form in her re-vision of the myth of the Greek goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone with which she concludes *The World’s Wife*. Demeter comes with a gift to enlighten the world darkened with an irrecoverably lost feeling when the resurrected wives of the historical personae articulate the irony of marital affection:

> She came from a long, long way,
> but I saw her at last, walking,
> my daughter, my girl, across the fields,
> in bare feet, bringing all spring’s flowers
> to her mother’s house.(1999:76).

Persephone distances Duffy from this celebration of re-union. This is also a context to explore the possibility of an emotionally redemptive connection between two women which Duffy looks for, as a lesbian. But she is so distanced from the world of Persephone and Demeter that Duffy and her exclusively intimate details take on a totally unfamiliar look. The poem “Queen Herod,” a retelling of the Biblical story of Herod, provides Duffy another productive context to defamiliarize the maternal
ferocity with which she brings up Ella: “"No man I swore, will make her shed one tear"(1999:7). Queen Herod does not want any boy make her baby girl suffer; so she asserts her will to protect her daughter from all prospective threats. This is an impersonal rendering of her attachment to her only daughter Ella. Her maternal ferocity merges with the concerns of all women that go unexpressed in the patriarchal milieu that naturalises passivity and timidity in women:

We Queens, we mothers,
Mothers of Queens.
We wade through blood
For our sleeping girls. (1999:7)

The distancing of the poet’s self from the poem brings in objectivity which, according to Eliot, is the test of any work of art.

The notion of impersonality is crucial to modernist aesthetics and Sexton, Atwood, Das, Duffy and Clifton very effectively maintain this by effacing themselves through narrative masks and personae in their re-visionist poems. All these poets employ the technique of re-visionist mythmaking to represent their female experience and knowledge without being too personal or confessional. The mythic frame elevates the status of their writing and the masks of the archetypes they put on provide a disguise for their personal experiences. Myths embody various aspects of identity which they perceive in a new light and re-imagine their experiences in such a way that the known is transformed beyond recognition. They appropriate the mythic medium to represent their self/identity defamiliarized in the poetic process.
Myth is a construct, at once linguistic and cultural. Irrespective of culture, women writers, especially feminist poets, appropriate myths as a medium of self expression. Re-visioned myths can be skillfully explored to objectify subjective feelings, distance emotions and to acquire an aesthetic/critical distance between the writer and her speaker/narrator/persona. This kind of appropriation is an act of defamiliarization. It redeems the myths from automatized perceptions. Thus re-written or retold myths can be used as a form of disguise to transform or mythologize the autobiographical elements and to defamiliarize the poet’s self/identity.