Research article

"I am that woman Gayatri-Lover of Brahma": Resistance and Resurrection of the Mythical Divine Feminine in Usha Kishore's *Night Sky Between the Stars*

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Abstract

This article intends to explore the convergence of feminism and mythology within Indian culture, with a particular emphasis on Usha Kishore's poetry collection, *Night Sky Between the Stars* (2015). Employing a feminist literary lens, the paper examines Kishore's engagement with significant mythological figures—goddesses such as Durga and Kali, alongside mortal women like Sita and Draupadi—to challenge patriarchal conventions. These characters represent various dimensions of womanhood, including strength and resilience, frequently contesting established gender roles. Through her reinterpretation of these myths, Kishore transforms feminist discourse and creates a new identity that elevates the voices of female mythological figures. This analysis highlights how her work contributes to an alternative narrative of Indian womanhood, promoting female agency and redefining the cultural portrayals of women in mythology.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Mythology, Gendered Identity, Resistance, Resurrection

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Introduction

The marginalisation of women is a pervasive issue that spans cultures, societies, and historical periods. Women have traditionally been assigned to subservient roles in various cultures, including Indian society, and their identities and contributions are frequently obscured by prevailing gender norms. This marginalisation is also deeply embedded in the myths and narratives that shape collective consciousness. Myths, as foundational stories that express the values, beliefs, and norms of culture, have long played a crucial role in constructing and perpetuating gender roles. They reflect and reinforce patriarchal ideologies, positioning women in subordinate roles and defining their identities in relation to male figures. Writers can engage with myth in three primary ways. One approach involves retelling the myth while adhering closely to its original narrative. This method essentially offers a new rendition of existing stories, but it is often seen as the least compelling way to engage with myth, as it contributes little innovation and fails to delve deeply into its themes or implications. Another approach allows writers to relive the myth, focusing on specific moments or characters. This method can uncover aspects of the myth that may not have been fully developed, providing fresh insights into the narrative. The third approach involves questioning the established terms of the myth. Writers can highlight what the myth suppresses or omits, giving a voice to those who have been silenced and bringing attention to the overlooked. This strategy has gained particular attention among female writers who critically examine the portrayal of women in classical myths. Often depicted as objects of desire rather than active subjects, these women are frequently discussed without having the opportunity to express themselves. In a time when feminist activism is experiencing a global resurgence, exploring mythology remains crucial for understanding the cultural dynamics that both facilitate and challenge gender justice.

In Indian mythology, there are goddesses like Kali and Durga who represent feminine power, or Shakti. It is particularly intriguing that Indian goddesses are equal to and, in some cases, superior to their male counterparts, even though this does not reflect the true social structure of India. "Though motherhood is highly valued in India, women in the social sphere are not equal to men" (Preston, 1980, p. 97). The female characters are depicted as ideal examples of endurance and tolerance. Women, on the other hand, are at the bottom of society's social ladder. Their presence is minimised and dismissed. Modern writers have redefined, revamped, and reinvented female protagonists by giving them a new voice, making them strong, defiant, and self-sufficient. Myth provides a space for women to express their suppressed cries, lifeless dreams, and suppressed feelings. Their stories serve as a metaphor for all women, who are 'unexpected' and 'uninvited' into this world.

Usha Kishore, an Indian-born British poet, has carved a unique space in contemporary Indian literature through her exploration of identity, culture, and gender. Notable poetry volumes that she has written and published include *On Manannan's Isle* (2014), *Night Sky Between the Stars* (2015), *Translating the Divine Woman* (2015), *Home Thoughts* (2017), and *Immigrant* (2018). Central to her body of work is a profound engagement with the divine feminine, which she reinterprets and reimagines through the lens of both Indian mythology and her own lived experiences. Like Kamala Das, Kishore has witnessed and felt the power of blind patriarchy and has tried to capture the burning problems of women. Her writings, she believes, are a form of defiance against gender discrimination. Kishore's engagement with the divine feminine is also a response to the historical marginalisation of women in both religious and cultural discourses. Her poetry resurrects these forgotten or silenced voices, giving them a platform to speak their truths and assert their identities.

Kishore has always been fascinated by mythology. As she says in her interview with Sunil Sharma: "Growing up with oral narratives and Kathakali performances, myths were ingrained in me, courtesy of two grandfathers and a grandmother. I use them generously in my poems. In a way, this is translating my Indian culture to a global audience" (Talking Muses and Myths with Usha Kishore, 2018). Using Sanskrit words and Hindu mythological figures, as well as other creations of myths from other cultures, she adds a new dimension and richness to the act of writing and reading. Myths represent a symbolic truth where gods and goddesses serve as metaphors for that truth, reflecting beliefs and practices within a specific social structure. Kishore finds it useful to explore the experience of myth and its patterns, describing it as a universal framework for women's lives. It is worth noting that through her poetry she raises issues of female subjugation and exclusion while also attempting to shatter and batter patriarchal ideology. This paper explores how mythical allusions that depict conflicts, challenges, and reflections have been used to depict Indian womanhood in the poetry of Usha Kishore and how her poetry functions as a site of resistance and resurrection for the mythical divine feminine.

The Ideology of Patriarchy and Indian Myth

Patriarchy, a social system that privileges male authority and dominance, has been a fundamental aspect of human societies for centuries. At its core, it is rooted in the belief that men are inherently superior to women, a notion that has been perpetuated through cultural narratives, religious doctrines, and legal frameworks. According to Kamla Bhasin (1993), "Patriarchy is a system of power that is based on the belief that men are superior to women and that women are inferior to men" (p. 19). Feminist theorists have extensively critiqued this system, illuminating its pervasive impact on women's lives and advocating for a reimagining of gender relations. Feminist theorist bell hooks (2004) articulates the insidious nature of patriarchy when she states, "Patriarchy has no gender" (p. 1). This assertion underscores the idea that patriarchy is not solely a male phenomenon but a societal construct that can be internalised by individuals of all genders. The implications of this internalisation are profound, as it often leads to the perpetuation of gender-based violence, discrimination, and the silencing of women's voices. The historical roots of patriarchy can be traced back to ancient civilisations, where societal structures were predominantly male-dominated. In many cultures, women were relegated to domestic roles, and their contributions were undervalued and overlooked. This marginalisation is reflected in the language and narratives that permeate our societies. For instance, feminist scholar Simone de Beauvoir (2011) famously stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 267). This notion emphasises that gender is not a natural state but a socially constructed identity shaped by cultural expectations and norms. The process of becoming a woman, according to de Beauvoir, involves navigating the constraints imposed by a patriarchal society that seeks to define and limit female identity. This unjust practice is so prevalent and influential that it is often erroneously regarded as a normal aspect of life by society. However, it is a socially constructed reality that can be challenged, dismantled, and deconstructed. Adrienne Rich, a leading figure in radical feminism, defines patriarchy in the following manner in her article "The Kingdom of Fathers" (1977):

> The power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political structure in which men determine what role women should and shouldn't play through ritual, tradition, law, language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, or by force or

direct pressure, and in which women are subordinated to men everywhere… It has been challenging to understand the fathers' influence because it permeates everything, including the vocabulary we use to try to explain it. It is both universal and expressed with regional variances that mask its universality. It is both diffuse and particular, symbolic and literal. (p. 56)

Throughout history, as patriarchal ideology has persisted, men have believed they have the authority to keep women in a subordinate role, and many women have come to accept this position. As a result, both men and women perpetuate patriarchy, which, according to Beauvoir, is the primary reason why patriarchy has persisted as an ideology to this day. Women are expected to be more connected to nature through symbolism, ritual, and myth, which prevents them from achieving equality with men. In a binary system of representation in which the man is the norm and thus the 'self', she must become the 'other', to use Simon de Beauvoir's terminology. It is claimed in *The Second Sex* (1949) that women are bound to traditional roles such as wives and mothers. She observes:

For him [man] she [woman] is the sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated concerning man and not he concerning her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other. (p. 16)

M.P. Srivastava (1975) also continues, "As a daughter, a woman lived under the wardship of her father, as a wife under the tutelage of her husband, and as a widow under the care of her son" (p. 91). Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) laid the groundwork for advocating equal rights for women and men, arguing that the betterment of society hinges on the recognition of women's rights. She famously asserted that "the neglect of women is a great evil," (p. 35) emphasising that women's education and empowerment are essential for societal progress.

Myths are explanations of how things are and came to be, as well as a method of adjusting and controlling the environment through ritual and prescribed behavior. "Myth is at varying levels of consciousness and degrees of articulateness, a way of describing the foundations of social behavior" (Righter, 1975, p. 10). According to Mark Schorer (1960), "myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend" (p. 356). The origin of Indian mythology is a rich tapestry woven from ancient texts, oral traditions, and cultural practices that span millennia. It is deeply rooted in the Vedic scriptures, particularly the four Vedas—Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda— composed in Sanskrit around 1500 BCE to 500 BCE. These texts not only serve as religious scriptures but also contain hymns, rituals, and philosophical discourses that reflect the beliefs and values of early Indian society. As Indian civilisation evolved, so did its mythology, which began to incorporate a diverse range of narratives and characters. The epic tales of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* emerged as significant literary works that further enriched Indian mythology. These epics not only narrate the adventures of gods and heroes but also explore complex themes such as dharma (duty), morality, and the human condition.

In many mythological traditions, female characters are often depicted in ways that emphasise their roles as mothers, wives, or objects of desire rather than as independent agents with their own identities and destinies. These portrayals reduce women to symbols of fertility, purity, or temptation, reinforcing stereotypes that confine them to specific, often restrictive, social roles.

For instance, in many myths, goddesses are revered for their beauty, chastity, or maternal qualities, yet they are also subject to the control and authority of male gods. These narratives contribute to a cultural framework where women's worth is measured by their relationship with men and their ability to fulfil traditional roles. The *Manusmriti*, also known as the *Laws of Manu*, is an ancient Indian text that has played a significant role in shaping societal norms and values, particularly regarding the status and role of women in Hindu society. Composed around 200 BCE to 200 CE, it is one of the earliest and most influential texts of Hindu law, outlining various aspects of dharma and social order. Its prescriptions regarding women's roles have been both revered and criticised throughout history, reflecting the complex interplay between mythology, culture, and gender. The *Manusmriti* presents a patriarchal worldview, asserting that women should be subordinate to men and primarily defined by their relationships to male figures—fathers, husbands, and sons. It states that "a woman must never be independent" (p. 148) and emphasises the importance of a woman's duty to serve her husband and family. Such assertions have contributed to the perception of women as passive and dependent, reinforcing traditional gender roles that limit their autonomy and agency (Bhasin, 1993, p. 23). It is commonly believed that the epics were also conveyed and interpreted by the Brahmins, a group of men who had a stake in preserving their status and controlling the female population. Women were not allowed to read or hear the scriptures, according to the laws that governed all social levels in the community. Because the women were left with no chance to object to anything spoken, this gave the men a great level of freedom. The men had complete control over how the mythological characters were shaped due to their monopoly.

However, myths are not static, and their meanings are not fixed. Despite the prevalent misogyny and patriarchal norms present in Indian mythological narratives, there are numerous examples of powerful, self-reliant women who defy traditional gender expectations. These female characters serve as inspirations for contemporary feminists, challenging the notion that Indian mythology is solely a tale of men and deities. The myths also depict women who actively fought for their rights and equality, refusing to be confined by societal constraints. These empowered female figures show that Indian mythology embraces a wide array of stories that transcend the often-highlighted male-centric narratives. Even though patriarchal prejudices have marginalised or obscured their stories, their inclusion in these age-old tales underscores the long-standing legacy of strong, independent women who have always existed within Indian culture. For modern feminists, these mythological heroines provide a source of empowerment and a reminder of the rich history of women's resistance to oppressive gender norms in India. Feminist scholars and writers have critically engaged with mythological stories, uncovering the ways in which they reflect patriarchal values while also seeking to reclaim and reimagine the roles of women within them. This re-examination of myth allows for the possibility of new interpretations that empower women, challenging the traditional narratives that have marginalised them. In her analysis of Greek mythology, feminist scholar Helene Cixous (1976) asserts that "a woman must write herself; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away" (p. 875). Cixous advocates for feminine writing that challenges the male-dominated narratives of history and mythology, allowing women to reclaim their stories and identities. This act of writing and reinterpretation becomes a form of resistance against the marginalisation that has characterised women's experiences throughout history.

Interrogating the Patriarchy Through Mythical Divine Feminine Figures

Usha Kishore's exploration of the divine feminine within the context of her upbringing in a Brahmin family reveals a complex interplay between reverence for the Mother Goddess and the pervasive patriarchal structures that shape her experience. Born into a family that idolises the Devi, Kishore experienced an ambivalent childhood, steeped in rich Indian culture, tradition, art, music, dance, language, and literature, yet constantly reminded of the authoritative presence of patriarchal values. This duality prompted her to interrogate the Brahmanical patriarchy that surrounded her, leading her to seek out the deeper meanings embedded in religious texts that exalt the Devi. Her ambivalence is articulated in her poetry, where she navigates the complexities of cultural identity and the role of women in society.

Traditionally, Indian mythology has served patriarchy by keeping women at the bottom of the social ladder. However, the tide is beginning to turn. The oppressed are now wielding the same tools that were once used to justify their oppression as a means of empowerment. In an interview, Kishore recalls how, as a little girl, she was surrounded by men who chanted Sanskrit and were the family's high priests. They forbade her from reciting the Gayatri mantra since they were patriarchal Brahmin males in Kerala. "When I was younger, I wanted to recite the Gayatri, but I was informed that guys only recite this mantra after their Upanayana" (Talking Muses and Myths with Usha Kishore, 2018). When the poet raised her voice against such inequality, asking the patriarchal society, "If Gayatri Devi is a woman, why can't I chant it?" (Talking Muses and Myths with Usha Kishore, 2018), she was immediately chastised and branded an 'upstart'. She expresses her discontent: "A goddess, a woman, is the personification of the mantra, and ironically, women were prevented from chanting this mantra with its female personification!" (A Postcolonial Feminist Sensibility: Usha Kishore in Conversation with Goutam Karmakar, 2018). "Twilight Prayer" is a feminist interpretation of the Gayatri Mantra. The poet asserts:

> I am the earth
>
> seeking the sky,
>
> at twilight time.
>
> I am that woman
>
> Gayatri-lover
>
> of Brahma... (lines 64-69)

Kishore's poetry collection *Night Sky Between the Stars* (2015) is a powerful exploration of the complexities of Indian womanhood, challenging traditional mythological conventions and celebrating the diverse facets of female identity. Through her poetic renderings, Kishore brings to life the fierce femininity of Draupadi, the virtue and silent strength of Sita, the devotion of Mira, and the loyalty of Gandhari, among others. The title comes from the Bengali 'Shyama Sangeet', a genre of Bengali devotional songs dedicated to the Hindu goddess Shyama, also known as Kali, whose complexion is often described as that of the night sky, devoid of stars.

In the title poem, Kishore invokes the goddess Kali, embodying the raw power and agency of womanhood. The speaker, identified as "she," is depicted as beheading herself at the altar of light, sucking her own life and devouring herself. This visceral imagery serves as a metaphor for the transformative and regenerative nature of the feminine divine. Kali, often portrayed as a fierce and uncompromising goddess, is a symbol of both destruction and creation,

embodying the duality of the female experience. The poet brings the power of womanhood to that of the goddess in the poem:

> I am she – beheading myself
>
> at the altar of light – sucking
>
> my own life – devouring myself. (lines 56-58)

In a patriarchal society, women are expected to dress, act, and always sit correctly. Goddess Kali's appearance ushers in a new generation of women who are dark and daring. Lorde (2007) emphasises the importance of embracing one's own power and rejecting societal expectations, writing, "When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid" (p. 41). Lorde's assertion aligns with Kali's defiant dance on the edge of time, as the goddess embraces her strength and rejects the constraints placed upon her by a patriarchal society.

Draupadi, a prominent female figure in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, is a powerful example of a strong-willed woman in Indian mythological narratives. As the shared wife of the five Pandava brothers, Draupadi is depicted as both physically attractive and intellectually capable. She is unafraid to voice her opinions openly, even in the face of patriarchal authority. In addition to her outspoken nature, Draupadi is also portrayed as a skilled fighter who actively participates in the Kurukshetra War alongside her husbands (Greenwood, 2019, p. 1053). Her multifaceted character challenges traditional gender roles and expectations, positioning her as an empowered heroine within the male-dominated world of the *Mahabharata*. Then why did she not inquire as to why she was compelled to marry five people when she only loved one? This is what we refer to or call the internalisation of patriarchy because patriarchy is so deeply embedded in women's minds that they are unlikely to raise the issue. The 'Swayamvar Sabha' of both Sita and Draupadi is an example where neither Sita nor Draupadi were given the choice to select their husbands. Kishore also mentions Indian wedding rituals, which have entwined women's knots since the dawn of time. "The Henna Ceremony" is a poem about the feelings of a bride-to-be about to marry a man she has only met for a few hours:

> Before my henna fades, my husband would fly away,
>
> and I would watch the color
>
> dulling in my palms, wait for my visa,
>
> and pray to the eternal bride for a land of dreams. (lines 20-23)

The poem "Gandhari" conveys Gandhari's visceral reaction to the humiliation and violence inflicted upon Draupadi. The character of Gandhari expresses deep sorrow and anger over the treatment of Draupadi during the infamous disrobing incident in the *Mahabharata*: "I felt her ritual body contract with spasms; dragged by/ the hair in front of a blasphemed court of coward kings, by a hand/ that stirred in my womb" (lines 25-27). The "ritual body" signifies not only Draupadi's physical form but also her dignity as a woman, which is being violently violated in a public and shameful manner. Gandhari laments,

> In my heart
>
> I cursed that blind emperor,
>
> that grand old man bonded to the throne

by his celibate oath and that Sire,

who spoke bitter truths,

all blindfolded to the disrobing of womanhood

that wept from pillar to post. (lines 28-34)

She critiques not only her husband, Dhritarashtra but also the broader patriarchal structures that perpetuate women's suffering. The "blind emperor" symbolises the inability of men in power to see the injustices faced by women, while his "celibate oath" reflects the contradictions in his role as a leader who is supposed to protect his family yet fails to act when it matters most. The lines "Let me curse you, Krishna! Destiny's dark charioteer, master illusionist/ your charming deceit, your damned politics, your comely guile!/ Yudhishtira! Let me burn your feet with my unfolded eyes" (lines 81-83) reveal Gandhari's deep disillusionment with Krishna, who is often seen as a divine protector. By calling Krishna a "master illusionist," she accuses him of manipulating circumstances to serve his ends rather than genuinely advocating for justice.

One of the most famous examples of a strong female character in Indian mythology is Sita, the wife of Rama in the *Ramayana*. Sita is a competent warrior who is not hesitant to advocate for herself. She is also a dedicated wife and mother, but she is not hesitant to question Rama's authority when she believes it is incorrect. As Nabaneeta Dev Sen (2005) argues, "Sita is not just a passive, suffering woman. She is a strong-willed individual who questions the patriarchal system and asserts her own identity" (p. 45). In her poem "Sita," Kishore delves into the complexities of Sita's character in the *Ramayana*, a narrative that often portrays her as the epitome of wifely virtue and devotion: "Who are you woman,/ waiting on Saryu's banks / Water pot in hand?" (lines 1-3). Kishore challenges the traditional portrayal by exploring Sita's inner turmoil and strength, emphasising her resilience in the face of adversity: "You have a heart of gold, chained/ to the kingdom of the Sun" (lines 9-11).

"Ahalya" reinterprets the mythological figure of Ahalya, who is often depicted as a victim of her circumstances. She is cursed by her husband, the sage Gautama, to turn into stone for her infidelity with the god Indra. In the traditional narrative, Ahalya is portrayed as a passive victim of Indra's deception and Gautama's wrath. Seduced by Indra, who disguises himself as Gautama, Ahalya is discovered by her husband and cursed to remain in stone form until the day Rama, the seventh avatar of Vishnu, touches her with his foot, breaking the curse. However, contemporary feminist scholars and writers have sought to reinterpret Ahalya's story, challenging the notion of her as a mere victim and exploring the complexities of her character. Some argue that Ahalya's infidelity was a conscious choice, a rebellion against the constraints of her marriage and the patriarchal society in which she lived. Her seduction by Indra can be seen as a moment of agency, a defiance of the expectations placed upon her as a dutiful wife. In Kishore's portrayal, Ahalya emerges as a complex character who embodies both vulnerability and strength:

Now, I, lover of Sakra the purifier,

sleep in stone, awaiting a dark youth,

with a golden bow, to tread me back

into my fluid feminine form and to find a place

among the virgin stars. (lines 45-49)

The poet believes that there is a need for some criticism of the current state of Indian womanhood. Why are women so damned in a country that is personified as a woman called 'Bharat Mata' where goddesses are worshipped left, right, and center? For the anonymous Indian women, whose defiled and burned bodies form a daily story in the media, Kishore asks in the poem "Don't Tell Me Her Name:"

> Do I weep for myself,
>
> for I am lost hope,
>
> beating my weathered
>
> bosom in the annals of history?
>
> Or do I re-write myself
>
> as Kali incarnate
>
> trampling a nation's shame? (lines 24-30)

Indian feminist theorist Nivedita Menon (2012) focuses on the importance of recognising women's agency in her work *Seeing Like a Feminist*, where she states, "Women have always been active agents in their own lives, even when they are oppressed" (p. 23). Usha Kishore, who calls herself a feminist poet, has used the feminine characters from Indian mythology to raise questions and resist the marginalisation of women. In a poem called "Daughters," she asks:

> You, who worship mother goddesses,
>
> exorcise your daughters, like doors shutting out the storm.
>
> You burn us, like orphaned corpses in the crematoriums
>
> of your minds. Daughters, where do we belong?
>
> Look at us falling into the night, like light scattered.
>
> In a myriad crystal tear, we tumble from your eyes,
>
> to be silences between the words of a soaring song. (lines 8-14)

The poem "Kamakhya" explores the mythological figure of Kamakhya, a Hindu goddess associated with fertility, sexuality, and female empowerment. It presents Kamakhya as a multifaceted and powerful deity who transcends traditional boundaries and embraces her divine essence:

> Buried in the blue
>
> mountains, a stone lies
>
> incarnadined, fecund.
>
> It is I, goddess of passion. (lines 1-4)

Kishore personifies Kamakhya as the stone itself, which is described as "incarnadined" (reddened) and "fecund" (fertile). She declares herself as the universe, encompassing both the physical and metaphysical realms: "I am the universe, in dark hues/ of darkling bronze. I am Kamakhya, flaming in adorned in/ my stars; my breath, the living air" (lines 9-11). In her poem "Dakshayani," Kishore reinterprets the tale of Sati, who self-immolates in protest against her husband Shiva's rejection. Kishore's portrayal of Dakshayani emphasises her strength and

agency, transforming her from a passive figure into one who actively challenges the patriarchal norms that seek to confine her:

> Let me be born again and again to question pater ire,
>
> To wipe womanhood's grief, to triumph over the sins
>
> Of womb and breast that relentlessly bear generations
>
> For your unending wars, your sky searching quests,
>
> Your bloodthirsty might. Let me immolate myself,
>
> Again and again to retrieve time's long lost honour. (lines 32-37)

The Ganga, revered as a sacred river in Hindu mythology, serves as a powerful symbol of purification and renewal. Kishore's portrayal of the Ganga transcends her traditional representation as merely a physical entity; instead, she presents the river's role as a nurturing force that embodies the complexities of womanhood and the inherent strength of the feminine divine. Instead of being a victim of circumstance, the Ganga is depicted as an active agent, tasked with the monumental responsibility of "purging" and "washing away sins." This assertion aligns with feminist critiques of mythology, where women are often relegated to subordinate roles, their narratives shaped by patriarchal values that diminish their contributions. By asserting that the Ganga's purpose is to "save lost souls," Kishore reclaims the narrative, positioning the river as a powerful force for transformation and healing. In "Descent of Ganga," the poet says:

> But she was not born to drown, she was born
>
> To purge, to wash away sins, to save lost souls,
>
> to revive fallen mantras with her deepest draughts
>
> of soma, to marry the sky and the sea. (lines 45-48)

Mrinal Pande, an Indian journalist and author, highlights the importance of questioning the patriarchal biases ingrained in language and representation. Pande (1991) argues that "the language of patriarchy is deeply embedded in our everyday speech and writing" (p. 27), suggesting that the reclamation of language is a crucial aspect of feminist praxis. Kishore's poems, with their bold reimagining of mythological narratives, can be seen as an attempt to challenge the patriarchal biases inherent in the language of myth and legend. In the poem "Usha Dreaming Aniruddha," the speaker Usha, inspired by Raja Ravi Varma's painting, questions the patriarchal norms and double standards prevalent in Hindu mythology. Through a dramatic monologue, Usha challenges the notion that male deities can seduce mortal women, while a female demon like herself is denied the same agency and freedom to pursue her desires:

> If God men can seduce earth
>
> maidens, in the guise
>
> Of dazzling light, why can't I, demon damsel,
>
> Spirit away from the demiurge of my dreams
>
> In the silky arms of the sensuous night? (lines 36-39)

The tone of resistance can also be heard in the poem called "Creation:" "What of the earth woman /who bore the primeval man? /To which of these deities, /do I offer my verse sacrifice?" (lines 35-36). The speaker demands recognition for the "earth woman" who gave birth to the first man, suggesting that the female principle is equally, if not more, deserving of veneration and poetic tribute. In "Creation," Kishore refers to Vedic poetic meters in which a Vedic deity is invoked through a verse meter. She interrogates the Vedas' inherent patriarchal baritone, and hence she asserts:

> In my mind's eye, I see them all, the gods
>
> who line the roaring sacrificial fires and those who perform
>
> the sacrifices in ritualistic meter, binding and unbinding.
>
> But, what of the goddesses who birthed these gods? (lines 31-34)"

In the poem "Mira," the speaker expresses, "Your people plague me with curses/ feed me with poison/ damn my song and dance/ and question my inviolate self," (lines 6-9) reflecting the struggles faced by her. The "curses" and "poison" symbolise the harsh judgments and criticisms from her community, which seek to undermine her identity and artistic expression. But "I have left you for the Lord/ of my dreams. No, I will not/ immolate myself on your funeral pyre" (lines 15-17). It signifies a powerful assertion of independence and identity. Mira's determination is firm to live authentically and resist the oppressive norms that seek to confine her to a life of subservience. The poem "Wishing on the Moon" also emerges as a powerful anthem of resistance and self-affirmation where the speaker identifies herself as a woman who challenges divine authority and traditional boundaries: "I am the woman, defying the gods,/ chasing Yama to his kingdom/ in the netherworld" (lines 43-45).

Conclusion

The pervasive influence of patriarchy has prompted the emergence of feminist movements as powerful forces for social change, striving to challenge and dismantle oppressive structures while advocating for gender equality and justice. These movements encompass a wide range of activism, from grassroots organising to academic scholarship, all aimed at raising awareness and fostering dialogue about the need for systemic change. As Angela Davis (2016) asserts, "I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept" (p.197). This powerful call to action emphasises the agency of individuals and communities in confronting the oppressive systems that govern their lives. In this context, the re-examination of traditional myths through a feminist lens offers critical tools for challenging patriarchal structures and reimagining more equitable futures. By channeling the voices of goddesses and other mythical women, poets like Usha Kishore engage in a form of cultural translation, bringing ancient myths into dialogue with contemporary issues of gender and identity. Kishore's work not only honors these mythological figures but also reclaims their stories, positioning them as symbols of empowerment and resistance against ongoing patriarchal oppression. Engaging with mythology, both critically and creatively, enhances our understanding of the complex history of women's struggles while also envisioning new mythic narratives that empower women and promote a more equitable world. For Kishore, writing serves as a form of resistance and subversion in an oppressive environment, reviving the concept of the divine woman to raise awareness of women's issues in countries like India. However, the eulogisation of the devi as the universal mother often remains confined to

religious spheres, where pressing issues such as female infanticide, denial of inheritance rights, and gender-based violence persist. If the future of a country is to be resurrected, women—who constitute nearly half of the population—must cast off the shackles of social taboos, superstitions, and ignorance. Only then can they be shaped as equal partners in society. Kishore speaks not just for herself but for all women, offering a unique and innovative blend of Sanskrit verse, Indian mythical figures, and a native consciousness that breathes new life into contemporary poetry. This distinctiveness establishes her work as one of the brightest stars among a constellation of diasporic writings.

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