
UNIT 1 MYTH, RELIGION AND THE BODY

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Myths, religion and women's bodies are tied together intricately and loosely, depending on the socio-political, historical and cultural contexts. Some religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam claim historical evidence for their existence, and therefore don't give much importance to myth, while other traditions like the Hindu traditions, sometimes conflate myth and history. However, both kinds of religious traditions consist of explanations and practices that define gender roles or codify their customs according to gender. In this unit, we will study the relationship between organised religious practices and gender roles in many ways: how religious prescription impacts the lives of women; the ways in which religious concepts inherently inform gender rituals and practices as well as review certain moments when freedom of religion has fought for primacy with gender equality. While religious traditions are fairly consistent in the way they determine gender roles and expectations, myths present us with more complex situations.

While we can treat myths as stories from which we can take away morals, more often than not, that is not their function, or only function. Different cultures use, weave, record and retell myths in different ways. As a result

it is difficult to assign a moralistic function to myths, unless the myth itself proclaims that it is a moral tale. This does not make the function of myths any less important. They are important because they often structure our thoughts, emotions, and responses to the world, sometimes even without our knowing. Briefly consider the case of Sita in the myth *Ramayana* - Popular portrayals as well as scholarly studies have debated the portrayal of Sita in the story. In India, essential connections are being made between Sita and the construction of womanhood. According to Herman (2011), Sita and Sati as goddesses continue to influence the construction of Hindu women while reflecting the duties of a *pativrata*. Here, *pativrata* can be described as a model of power which can be achieved by women who perform her duties towards her husband. While Sita has been venerated for being a devout wife, her story is also used to reflect on the oppression of women confined by structures of patriarchy. More recently the roles of characters, such as Surpanakha, Tataka and Mandodari have been interpreted as examples of caste-based women's oppression. Also, different forms of representations offer insights into the multiple aspects and careers of a myth. Keeping the same case in mind we could study the story of Sita through the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, its film versions, a performance by a local drama or dance group and the way the story is told by different people. Every articulation of a myth is often different from the previous articulation and each interpretations of an articulation can be various.

This unit is divided into two sections. **Section 1** provides an overview of some of the ways in which religious traditions define gender roles in their belief and practice as well as some of the main debates about these gender roles and traditional practices from a Women's Studies perspective. **Section 2** offers the readers a variety of myths from across the world and some important themes that recur in the stories of women in these myths.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Locate the representation of gender bodies differently in religion and myth;
- Discuss feminists question pertaining to the women's definition of body and role in religion; and
- Critically analyse the relation between gender and myth.

1.3 RELIGION: PRESCRIPTION AND PRACTICE

This section presents an overview of some of the major themes that relate to women and religion - feminist theology, gender roles assigned by religion, issues concerning ceremonial restrictions of nudity and veiling as well as

woman-centred religious practices. Questions about who prescribes the texts for whom, and who interprets them, have also been raised by feminist theologians.

1.3.1 Feminist Theology

Feminist theology is a name commonly given to feminist critiques of theologies in traditional Abrahamic religions - Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Feminist theologians use the term 'theology' to signify a reflection on the divine from a feminist perspective. They have established that the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran were written within cultures that were systemically patriarchal. 'Patriarchal' here not only refers to male domination and sex-gender inequalities but also racism, colonialism and classism. Some of the systemic forms of oppression written into the texts and interpreted later include the use of male-centred language which has the ability to make women secondary as well as make sacred the experience of man while making invisible, and thus excluding, other "powerless" people such as women, people of non-White races and people belonging to lower socio-economic background. It is designed to secure patriarchal interests such as property, wealth and control over economic situations. Thus, feminist theologians have subverted patriarchal biblical interpretations by employing historical reinterpretation and by uncovering a range of religious works written by women. The underlying aim of feminist theology is to show that since the meaning of texts is produced according to socio-religious location of individuals, there should be multiple and competing definitions of social reality which include a variety of authentic truths and divine revelations. The pursuit of truth is thus seen as a spiritual journey and not one that uncovers a single epistemological truth (Grove, 2009).

Islamic feminists, for instance, promote reinterpreting traditions in relation to social, cultural and historical circumstances. For instance **Taheri** and **Parker** believe that the Qur'an's 'universal and egalitarian verses' have been overlooked so as to enforce institutionalised power structures that favour men (Taheri & Parker, 2009). Scholars writing about Islamic feminist movements the world over, reflect on the ways in which freedom of religious expression and the need for gender equity have come into conflict. Islamic feminism refers to a kind of mobilization for gender equity that pays close attention to women's interpretation of the Qur'an and their practices in accordance with these interpretations. In Section 1.2.5, under the title 'Ceremonial Nudity and Ceremonial Veiling', we will learn more about the relationship between the interpretations of Qur'anic texts and its emancipatory impact on women's lives in terms of political agency.

1.3.2 Religion and Gender Roles

This section will focus on the question: How does religion interact with gender to shape the public and private experiences of the lives of women and men? It is commonly assumed that religion often prescribes certain roles for men and women and these prescriptions lead to different life experiences for them in different religious contexts. Let us examine gender roles in the context of Mormonism, a Christian religious denomination also known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Mormonism was established in New York in 1830. The church was organised according to the patriarchal order called “the priesthood” which is the authority to act in the name of God. The priesthood is established as an exclusively male right and responsibility. About a decade after the Latter Day Saints (LDS) church was established and their priesthood, the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo was organised to provide women official roles in the patriarchal organization. Mormon women as a result were able to participate in politics, economic activities and social life through the rest of the 1800s. However, as the church grew in size, it became increasingly bureaucratic and the functioning of the Relief Society was curtailed and overpowered by the priesthood authority. Under these circumstances Mormon women became subordinated and more feminised.

As a result, women’s roles in Mormon society became restricted to daily labour that would support and strengthen men’s leadership roles at the head of the church. The family became a space where women’s roles were clearly defined in terms of marital relations. While both husband and wife had the responsibility of child care, the wife’s role was circumscribed within the house, while the husband was to provide resources for the upkeep of the family. The changing economic and social environment in the United States, however, drew Low Development Society’s (LDS) women into the workforce and in time the church’s view of women’s roles also underwent changes. Nevertheless, the ideological norm of the LDS church holds that women will perform roles that maintain the household and children while men perform roles that supply material resources for the same. (Kane, 2009)

Within Roman Catholicism, women cannot be priests and in the context of Islam, women cannot be Muslim *imams* or religious leaders. In Hindu traditions, women cannot take the role of the *Shankara-acharya*, that of a leader and ritual specialist. Gender is demarcated spatially in some places of worship. Women and men sit apart in Orthodox Jewish synagogues and some mosques the world over. In most mosques, however, entrance is denied to women. At the *Ayappa* temple in Kerala only pre-pubescent girls and post-menopausal women are allowed entry. These spatial distinctions, one must remember, reflect different obligations for women and men in these religions and traditions. These restrictions are valued and weighed

differently in each traditional context. More recently, some synagogues have stopped separating women and men and have supported women's ordination as rabbis. Leading roles in many Protestant Christian denominations are now open to women. Within the Buddhist tradition, while male monks are invested with high status, women have become nuns and teachers.

1.3.3 Bhakti Traditions and the Feminine Devotee

While there are religious traditions that assign specific roles to women and men, certain religious concepts such as that of 'devotion' may be regarded as intrinsically gendered in nature and its practice. Consider the case that in case of devotion, the relationship is between a god and a devotee, where the former could be said to be male by virtue of it having the more powerful position in the relationship and the latter, female, by virtue of the devotee being in service to god. In the context of the Bhakti tradition in India, the role of the devotee is consistently female, even if the devotee is in fact a man. Kumkum Sangari (1990), an established scholar, examines the role of the devotee in *Bhakti* traditions as inherently feminine, evident within various threads of worship, most obvious in the tone that Kabir (a Bhakti poet renowned for his couplets) assumes in relation to his god.

Tracing the history of the devotional voice and the 'feminine' relation to god, Kumkum Sangari (1990) avows that this voice is present through *saguna* (a tradition that extols the attributes or qualities of god) and *nirguna* (a tradition that extols god beyond form or qualities) bhakti traditions, the *advaita* (non-duality) and *dvaita* (duality or twoness) theology as well as *Shaivism* and *Vaishnavism*. While a sense of 'lowliness' of women is implied in characterizing the devotee as feminine, this aspect is rendered differently across the many traditions. For instance the 7th century Alvar saints characterise *Goda Andal* in her *madhuryabhakti* for Krishna as mingling erotic elements of *shringara* (act that leads to clean and beautiful appearance) with spiritual desire. So also, the Nayanars too (in Sambhanday, 7th century AD) describe divine union in terms of conjugal love where the bhakta is a love-sick woman whose heart has been stolen by god, the thief. Other instances include the Vaisnavite Tamil saint Nammalvar (c 600-800 AD) who thought of himself as a woman, and Akka Mahadevi (c1100) who betrothed herself to Siva, singing "I saw the haughty Master/ for whom men, all men,/ are but women, wives" (Moon, 2010, P. 27). Sangari suggests that there is a loosening of boundaries between the feminine and the masculine that occurs in the adoption of female roles by male bhaktas, as in the case of the voice that Kabir (c 1450-1575) adopts in his dohas. However, it cannot be refuted that woman and *maya* (illusion) are combined together as hindrances to true devotion and renunciation in the songs of Surdas and Kabir. In opposition to these forms of *bhakti*, Mira's bhakti is rendered as a struggle; it has a radical protesting nature as well as a compensatory mindset. Mira's *bhakti* attempts to challenge brahmanical

hegemony and feudal relations in medieval Rajasthan as her practice of *bhakti* does not differentiate between spiritual renunciation and social critique. Practising one entails the other (Sangari, 1990).

In the case of Bhakti, maleness and femaleness are roles assumed by those in the position of god and devotee respectively, thereby allowing male devotees to perform female roles. Now, let us proceed to review examples of women in religious traditions, where it is necessary for all participants in the ritual to be female, which means possessing a female body and not just perform the role of femininity.

1.3.4 Wicca: A Women-only Religious Practice

While *bhakti* traditions are instances of worship practices that are inherently gendered, **Wicca** can be considered as a **women-only religious** practice. Wicca is known as an ‘earth-based or neo-pagan religious movement’ (O’Brien & Alumni and Friends Memorial Book Fund, 2009) focused on nature and worship of goddesses. Its presence has been prominent in Europe and North America since the twentieth century, while its main influences are pre-Christian Indo-European religions among others. Wicca is also referred to as witchcraft or just ‘the Craft’ and the practitioners call themselves ‘Wiccan’ or ‘Witch’. The meaning of ‘Wicca’ according to its practitioners is ‘to bend’ or ‘to shape’, thereby implying the ability of magic to bend natural laws. While some Wiccans believe that their religion dates to paleolithic times when a great goddess ruled the universe, more modern Wiccans have opposed monotheistic patriarchal religious institutions which they believe to be sexist. Wicca provides women an alternative to patriarchal religion that chiefly view women’s bodies as sinful or impure. In Wicca, women are regarded as having special power and wisdom because of the distinctive connection between women’s menstrual cycles and the moon’s cycles. The Wiccan worldview offers women the opportunity to celebrate their bodies as invested with the goddess’s power (Letendre, 2009).

However, the history of witchcraft practitioners or Wiccans in Europe is a complex one. Depending on the cultural context, a witch is considered good or evil. A witch is someone known to possess supernatural powers, an intermediary between gods or goddesses and humans. In most post-Christian societies witches are considered evil, while in others they are thought of as having divine powers. The rise of Christianity also led to devaluing feminine deities and evil acts of witches were punished by fining and banishing or imprisoning before the Middle Ages, by burning in 11th century when the church stopped being lenient towards witchcraft and pagan beliefs. In 15th century Europe if a woman was accused of being a witch, it was considered reason enough to brand her as one and burn her alive at the stake. In 1486, a book titled *Malleus Maleficarum* (“Hammer of Witches”), first published in Germany by Dominican inquisitors served as a guidebook

for witch-hunting. The book strongly suggested that women's faith was wavering, that they were unable to control their carnal lust, that they were weaker in mind and body than men, thus furthering a gendered notion of witchcraft. In the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe and America, witchcraft became an excuse to put to death women who were considered independent by towns people or to deprive women who stood to inherit property in the absence of brothers. Similar expressions you can find in the tribal areas of Jarkhand, Bihar, North-East and Rajasthan, where single unmarried women and widow are considered to be witches; hence subjected to the social practice of witch killing. Women's sexual and economic freedom was feared and many witch trials (especially the New England trials in America conducted by the Puritans in the 17th and 18th centuries) were motivated by such threats (*Encyclopaedia of Gender and Society*, entry 'Witches').

Shaktism or Shakta, a tradition that includes the worship of the goddess, is another example of female-centred religious practice prevalent in parts of South Asia. The Shakti tradition is drawn from puranic texts such as the Devi Mahatmya which relates the birth of the goddess and her battle with the Buffalo Demon. The goddess takes the powerful incarnation of Kali to overcome the army of demons. The Tantra tradition is one of the forms that Shakti practice takes. Tantra practices depend on ritual and meditation to establish a spiritual connection with the goddess. Ritual is practiced with the guidance of tantrikas so as to create and maintain relationships with the goddess. Such practices cause the manifestation of powers such as that of extrasensory perception and also possession by the goddess (Marion, 2009). This section helps us understand that gender roles constitute religious practices as much as religious conventions constitute and stratify gender roles. We learn that in both Wicca and Shaktism, being a woman is essential to participation in the customs and practices, thus investing greater significance the bodies of women rather than in the performance of womanly roles.

1.3.5 Ceremonial Nudity and Ceremonial Veiling

The previous section has allowed us to understand the ways in which religious customs play a significant role in gendering society. In this section we will examine one such instance, the relationship between women's clothing and religion. The covering of women's bodies has been at the heart of several religious debates the world over. In this section we will study a few instances of religious prescription of women's clothing and examine the different kinds of debates on the subject. The image of a nun dressed in a full-length black habit is familiar to many of us as a symbol of a religious woman. Such a habit covers all but the hands and face, concealing any evidence of the sex of the person and allowing the nun to be gender-free, enabling the nun to transcend traditional 'woman' roles. It has been suggested that this space allowed women to perform roles in society, especially that of charitable

work, that would otherwise have been seen as unfit for a woman. The cloister of the religious space facilitates a life beyond the setting of the traditional home, where a nun can work with other women in different parts of the world. The emphasis however is on a personal relationship with God.

Let us then consider the practice of ‘veiling’ of women’s bodies adopted within religions like Christianity and Islam and the reactions of Womens’ Studies and Gender Studies scholars to this. According to the teachings of Islam, parts of the body that should be covered for men, lie between the navel and the knee; for women, the rules depend on the company they are in. There are many concepts in Islam that relate to veiling - *purdah* or ‘curtain’ consists of physical segregation of the sexes and the covering of the body, *hijab* or ‘covering’ has implications of modesty and moral privacy for both sexes, *libas* or ‘dress’ connotes a sense of shelter and protection. Contemporary meanings of these terms are caught in debates of modernization, secularization and globalization. Feminists identify certain trends in the way these debates are polarised (Taheri & Parker, 2009). While the custom of ‘purdah’ may be considered to be a limitation on the mobility of outdoor activities of women, within the Islamic feminist discourse it has been thought of as an expression of choice and an exercise of freedom of religious choice. According to the Islamic feminists, when we consider the issue of ‘veiling’ as an issue related to the objectification of women’s bodies, we make the mistake of seeing the custom through lenses that are framed by a male or patriarchal gaze. It is also important not to assume that women who adopt the ceremonial veil are not political agents or women’s rights activists.

Let us now study the question of ceremonial nudity or the issue of religious ceremonies where women perform certain rituals in the nude. Consider the following incident that occurred in 1986 in a town in Karnataka called **Chandragutti** where devotees at the temple of goddess Renuka practiced *bettale seve* or nude worship. According to newspaper reports, during *bettale seve* that year, the devotees attacked police personnel, media persons, social workers and activists gathered there to protest this form of worship. One of the organizations protesting the worship practice was the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti, (DSS) which aimed to inform the worshippers that they were being exploited by vested interests by being forced to parade in the nude. The leader of the DSS hoped to redress his village of caste and economic inequality; the protest was organised with a reformist view.

Linda J. Epp (2003), in her analysis of the incident, argues that it brings together a confrontation of ‘the religious’, ‘the sexual’ and ‘the feminine’. According to her the reformist standpoint on such forms of institutionalised nudity challenges certain insulting feudal traditions. Implicit in this standpoint is the belief that nudity is barbaric and such practitioners must be civilised.

This perspective may be used to show that upper caste men, landlords and temple authorities deliberately tie Dalits in superstition so the former groups can maintain their superior positions. On the other hand, the positions taken in the debate on ceremonial nudity show that male ascetic nudity and female *bhakti* nudity in the forms of Jaina Digambara and nude devotees are treated differently. While one is thought of as morally acceptable, the other is morally condemned. With regard to 'the feminine', the reform of the feminine has been a constant focus of reform movements that were directed towards the consolidation of India as a nation. In other words, reforming women and civilizing the feminine role is seen as part of what it means to be a modern nation (Epp, 2003).

Check Your Progress:

Is nudity viewed differently in different cultural and religious contexts? Look in the library and on the internet for debates on a female character called Bathsheba in the bible. Does every representation of her body in text, painting and film objectify her body from the point of view of a male gaze?

1.4 GENDER AND MYTH

This section provides a selection of myths from different cultures and the representation and characterization of the women figures in them. Every cultural context has its own way of organizing and instituting gender roles and norms. This makes it impossible to think that the 'female' and the 'male' are universally gendered in the same ways. We study myths to understand how people of one culture conceptualise the world around them. As a result, such a study can tell us something about the symbols that were used in the past, within a specific context and how they can be interpreted for contemporary use. For instance, feminists have interpreted and appropriated classical myths. In this context, appropriation refers to offering an account of the myth that strongly emphasises its ideological commitments. Every time a myth is narrated or represented in literature or art it offers us new ways of understanding the plot and characters of that myth. In this section myths from around the world are classified under some common themes that appear to cut across different contexts.

1.4.1 Violation of Women's Bodies and Political Change

The Roman myth concerning the rape of Lucretia has been used in western literature over the centuries, and each literary rendition has examined different aspects and angles of the story. According to the story supplied

by a Roman Historian, Livy (59 BC - AD 17), King Tarquin started a war against Ardea. At the time of the siege of Ardea, one night the princes (King Tarquin's sons) and Collatinus, their kinsman had a debate about who had the best wife. They decided to ride back to Rome to find an answer. They wanted to catch their wives unawares just to find out what they were doing in their absence. They found that the wives of the princes were enjoying dinner parties with friends in the absence of their husbands. They then rode to Collatinus's house, Collatia, where they found his wife Lucretia busy at home doing housework with her slaves. Thus Collatinus had won the argument about the best wife. However, one of the princes, Sextus Tarquin, during the visit had become attracted to Lucretia.

Some nights later he went as a guest to Collatia, entered Lucretia's bedroom, woke her and declared his love for her. When she did not accept his pleas or threats he told her that he would kill her and one of the male slaves and leave their bodies together so that it would look like she had been killed when caught in an act of adultery. Unable to bear this thought, Lucretia submits and is raped by Sextus Tarquin. Lucretia, distressed, sends messages to her husband in Ardea and her father in Rome saying that something terrible has happened. Both her father and husband come with a trusted companion each. When her husband, Colatinus asks her how she is, she replies that she is not well because no woman can be well when she has been dishonoured. She tells him that her body may be greatly soiled but her heart is pure and gives an account of what occurred. The men promise to find Tarquin and punish him and try to appease her sorrow. However, Lucretia says that while she absolves herself of blame, she cannot stop from punishing herself. Taking a knife she had hidden in her robe she kills herself amid the cries of her husband and father.

Brutus, who had come with Colatinus, picks up the bloody knife and swears that he will end the rule of Tarquin. Lucretia's father, Colatinus and Brutus take her body to the streets and Brutus makes a speech in a public place called Forum. Brutus' speech enrages the people against the Tarquins resulting in a revolution. The revolution is also the beginning of the Roman Republic (Gardner, 2010).

Box 1.4.1: What are the different ways in which we can analyse Lucretia's story?

- Several poets and writers in Europe have written about this story in different ways., English and French dramatists in the sixteenth century wrote plays that paid attention to the overthrow of the monarchy. Their plays did not focus on the fate of Lucretia. Shakespear's play focuses on the confusion and internal debates that both Tarquin and Lucretia go through. The times that these plays are written in are influenced by Christianity and the stories

therefore emphasise Christian ideas of sin and guilt. Saint Augustine in *The City of God* discusses Lucretia's story in detail. However, his discussion leads to a greater dilemma: If Lucretia's mind submitted to being raped then she is to be considered 'adulterous' and her death is the execution of justice; if her mind was innocent then her death must be considered as suicide which is also sinful. Further there is also the question: If she is made an adultress, why is she praised? (Gardner, 2010)

- Another way of analysing the story would be to dwell on the political aspect of the story from the Roman point of view, where the story of Lucretia is an incident in larger narratives that are political and belong to the world of men (Matthes, 2000).
- All the above readings are predominantly male in perspective. Must we regard Lucretia's rape and death as a sacrifice for a 'greater common good'? Or condemn it as an act of violence that particularly subjugates women and silences them in a world of men? From a Women's Studies perspective it may also be worthwhile to comment on the moment when Lucretia's body is paraded publicly to incite the crowds to take political action. Scholars have pointed out that the moment in the myth can be judged as a violation as her thinly robed body also becomes a sexual object when paraded before the largely male crowds.

Check Your Progress:

Read the story of Draupadi in Mahabharata and analyse it in terms of the questions raised above. Draupadi is shamed in a public place, gambled away in a game of 'chaukabara' and disrobed violently. Her public dishonouring also leads to certain political changes within the context of the myth.

Now read Mahasweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi' and write a paragraph of about 500 words discussing the differences and similarities between the myth and the story.

1.4.2 Beauty and Deformity

Many Greek myths emphasise the stories and lives of beautiful women. Stories of Athena, Helen, Aphrodite and Medusa tell us how beautiful these women. One of the most famous stories is of the 'apple of discord'. There was a big feast at the wedding of Thetis, a beautiful sea nymph and

Peleus, a mortal. All the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus were invited to the wedding except for Eris (also known as the 'goddess of strife'). Eris, in anger, bursts in on the wedding scene and throws an apple among the guests. On the apple are inscribed the words 'for the fairest'. Three goddesses present at the wedding, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite claimed the apple, contesting that they were the fairest. Zeus, the god of the gods said that the decision would be made by Paris, the heir to the throne of Troy, son of Priam and Hecuba. Paris lived on Mount Ida as a herdsman because he had been abandoned as a baby, due to a bad dream that his mother had.

Athena, Aphrodite and Hera went to meet Paris who was minding his sheep and each of them offered him a reward if he chose her as the winner of the apple. Hera offered him wealth and power, Athena offered him military strength and wisdom while Aphrodite offered him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris finds Aphrodite's offer most attractive and judges her as the most beautiful woman. Athena and Hera, furious with Paris, became the avowed enemies of Troy till the end of their lives.

Paris, much later, becomes enamoured by Helen who was considered the most beautiful woman in the world, daughter of Zeus and Leda. Helen was married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta. Paris came to visit Helen and Menelaus and was welcomed warmly by the couple. In return for their hospitality, the story goes that he abducted Helen and took her back to Troy with him. (Remember that he had been promised the love of the most beautiful woman in the world by Aphrodite.) All the kings and supporters of Menelaus helped in launching a war against Troy for ten long years. Once again, the abduction of a woman results in a battle for political power, similar to the Roman story about Lucretia (Burn, 2010).

Now let us consider the case of Medusa: Medusa, also an important figure in Greek myths, was extremely beautiful and one of three sisters, the others being Sthenno and Euryale. Medusa the only mortal of the three lived in a place in the north where the sun did not shine. She requested Goddess Athena for permission to visit the south as she was curious to know what the sun was like. When she was denied permission, Medusa became wrathful believing that this denial was a sign of Athena being jealous of her beauty. Athena, a goddess, more powerful than Medusa, turned her hair into snakes and made her face repulsive and fearful. She also cursed Medusa so that anyone who looked at her would turn into stone. Thus the most beautiful woman turned into a deformed being, that feared by anyone who saw her. However, it may be worthwhile to consider 'beauty' as an important value within the Greek historic-cultural context. If we consider the Narcissus myth, there is reason to believe that beauty was prioritised in general; it was a way of evaluating bodies of men as well as women.

Check Your Progress:

Make a note of the different ways in which the ‘beauty’ of the woman is given prominence in a single story. Now, consider the following discussion questions:

- *Is beauty equated with power with regard to women?*
- *Is deformity in a person a curse in all cultures?*
- *The next time you are browsing the internet look up the phrase ‘The Ugly Laws’ and make a short note on the historical conditions and cultural context in which they emerged.*

1.4.3 Fertility: Female Body as Creative Force

Almost every culture has a creation myth, that is, a myth that explains how the world was created. The biological ability of women to give birth is variously adopted in stories of how the world began, including the union of male and female elements in the production of new life. In Greek mythology, Gaia or mother earth is considered the beginning of creation. She emerged out of chaos or void along with Eros, or uncontrollable desire. The feminine was recognised as the creation of the world. She was maiden, mother and crone as well as the different phases of nature, of the moon and of agriculture. She is considered as the giver of maternal affection as well as the bringer of death and destruction. Devi or Shakti and Kali are iconic female figures in the Hindu traditions. Devi is known through many incarnations and her powers include life-giving as well as destructive ones. For instance as Amba she is the iconic mother, as Jagaddharti, the sustainer of the world, as Annapurna, the deity of food, the fearsome warrior goddess as Durga mounted on a lion and as Kali the one who personifies destruction, degeneration and death. Devi’s main activities consist of the preservation and protection of creation from the onslaught of destructive forces.

Let us consider the **Sumerian myth of Innana** and reflect on some aspect of creation as well as fertility myths that centrally focus on feminine procreative abilities. The story of Innana’s descent: Innana (also known as Ishtar), the goddess of life, light and love as well as the queen of heaven, decides to descend to the underworld in order to free her husband Tammuz (also known as Damuzi). She prepares for her journey by gathering together all her divine powers, her royal robes and jewels. The queen of the underworld is her sister, Ereshkigal, who is the goddess of death and darkness. Innana, aware of her sister’s powers, instructs her messenger Ninshubur

that he must wait for three days and if she has not returned from the underworld even after that he must raise a hue and cry in heaven where the gods assemble and plead with the god Enlil to save Innana. In case Enlil refuses, he should go to Ur and plead before the Sumerian moon-god, Nanna. If Nanna also refuses to help, Ninshubur should approach Enki, the 'god of wisdom', in the city of Eridu.

Innana descends to the underworld and meets the gate keeper who asks her why she has come there. She gives him an excuse and he lets her enter. As she passes through the seven gates of the nether world, parts of her robes and jewels are removed despite her protest. After she has passed the last gate she is taken in naked and on bended knees before Ereshkigal and the seven dreaded judges of the underworld. They subject her to the 'look of death' and transform her into a corpse and hang her.

Ninshubur, waits for three days and three nights and approaches Enlil of Nipur who refuses to help. He then appeals to Nanna of Eridu who also refuses. In the end, Enki, the god of wisdom fashions kurgarru and kalaturru, two sexless creatures, and empowers them with the 'food of life' and the 'water of life'. They are to enter the nether world and sprinkle the food and water sixty times on Innana's hanging corpse. Thus Innana is revived, but as she leaves the underworld she is accompanied by the ghosts and the shadows of dead people who live there. With these ghosts and shadows she wanders from city to city through Sumer (Doty, 2005).

The story of **Innana** depicts her as maiden, mother and crone and her encounter with **Ereshkigal** is considered as the meeting of creator and destroyer. Innana who has been regarded as powerful woman figure undergoes an immense transformation from a powerful queen to one who learns to accept that the cycle of life consists of sacrifice and death and birth. The Egyptian myth of Isis is similar to that of Innana. Isis is a strong woman figure who avenges the death of her husband Osiris and schemes to place her son Horus on the throne of Egypt. Within artistic representations of one mythical sequence, Isis is seen transforming from an old crone, then to a young girl and finally to a bird of prey. All these myths in different ways manifest a variety of creative abilities the woman's body represents in different cultural contexts.

Mother goddesses as symbols of fertility are widely prevalent across cultures. The archaeological remains in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro (now in Pakistan) of the Indus valley civilization consist of artefacts that depict images of the worship of a mother goddess in a tree, probably a symbol of fertility and creation. The mother goddess depicted on the seal is said to resemble those found on seals excavated in Neolithic Europe. Other prominent Mother Goddesses are Astarte in Syria, Ceres in Rome, Cybele in Phrygia and Demeter in Greece.

Activity:

- *Innana and Gaia are only two examples of creation myths. Compare and contrast these myths with the biblical story of the 'genesis' or the Christian story of creation where the creator is assumed to be male.*
- *Do you know of any fertility traditions? Talk to family members, friends and neighbours to see if they know of practices adopted when a woman cannot bear a child. Look up (on the internet, in the library) stories about Shah Daula's shrine or 'Shah Daula's chuhas' (the rat-children of Shah Daula).*
- *Discussion question: Are there any religious traditions or rituals for men who are impotent?*

1.4.4 Man to Woman; Half-man Half-woman

Myths have the special ability to offer us figures who don't match notions of reality and stereotypes of gender. Let's take the story of *Mahashasta* who is said to be the child of Vishnu and Shiva, both male gods in the Hindu pantheon. The story goes that Vishnu assumed the guise of an attractive woman, Mohini, and captivated Shiva. Shiva pursued Mohini and finally caught her. The lustful embrace that followed resulted in the birth of Mahashasta. Mahashasta, according to Wendy Donniger is identified severally as Skanda, Hanuman, Aiyanar and Hariharaputra (Doniger, 1999). Ayyappa, of the famous temple in Kerala by the same name, is also regarded as Mahashasta.

Ardhanarishvara, about whom you will read in the last unit of this block is thought to be an incarnation of Shiva (a male god) whose left half is the goddess Parvati or Shakti. Sculptures of this incarnation show a breast with a sari draped over it. According to one story Brahma the creator, made several attempts to create human beings who were capable of procreation. The created beings would become ascetic and not reproduce. He asked Shiva to separate out his female goddess feature in order that procreation could occur. Shiva does so. The female figure that stood before Brahma, at his request gave him the feminine energy that would allow him to create the human line. The depiction of *Ardhanarishvara* is to stand as a reminder of this story (Jones & Ryan, 2007).

Check Your Progress:

Look for other myths that depict the transformation of men to women or women to men. Here is a clue: Find out who the swan is, in the story of Leda and the swan, from Greek mythology.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

Myth and religion have different relationships in different cultural contexts. In some cultural contexts myth and religion are deeply connected, whereas in religious traditions that contain a strong sense of history, the role of myth is limited. Religions in different parts of the world organise notions of male and female variously. There are some religious traditions that are women centric - Wicca and Tantra serve as two examples. Religious traditions in some cases have specific prescriptions about women's clothing and nudity. Gender roles stipulated by religious institutions or leaders undergo changes in relation to the changing socio-economic and political conditions of locality or region.

Many of the myths discussed in this unit reflect the aspects of gender that are seminal to that culture or society. The myths discussed in this unit offer us insights into how different cultures and traditions think of differences between women and men. Different interpretations and uses of myths also inform us of the purpose and functions of myths. For instance, in the next unit you will read about the uses of the Oedipus myth in psychoanalysis.

1.6 GLOSSARY

- Bhakti Tradition :** The term “bhakti”, translated as devotion, is the name give to a large group of worship traditions, that consist of Hindu aspects, where the devotees express in their songs and poetry, the experience of a personal relationship with the divine. Bhakti traditions are also often called movements because they were considered to be just as interested in social as well as political reform as they were in devotion to a particular deity. It has also been said that the devotion of the Bhakti exponents was, in many cases, to causes that they espoused, rather than to individual gods. Many classifications of the Bhakti tradition include exponents as diverse as Râmânuja and Úrî Vaishnavism, Vallabha and the Pu??i Mârga, Caitanya and Gau?îya Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism, nirgu?a (aniconic) bhakti, Sants, Sikhs, and Sufis.
- Innana Myth :** The Innana myth is also known as a Babylonian myth. Sumer is an ancient region of South West Asia, in present-day Iraq, comprising of the southern part of Mesopotamia.
- Dominican :** Dominicans is the name given to the followers of a Christian order that was founded by the Spanish priest St. Dominic in the 13th century.

1.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the inter-relationship between gender, myth, and religion.
- 2) Critically analyse the representation of male and female bodies in the religion and myth.
- 3) How does women body get depicted in the myth. Substantiate the answer with suitable examples citing from myths in Indian context.
- 4) Analyse different myths in Indian culture or in any other culture, which depict the transformation of men to women and women to men.

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