

# The Cultural Creation: A Study of the representation of Women in Creation Myths

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## Abstract

World Creation myth or genesis myths explain the beginnings of human life. It is a fictional as well as symbolic account of synthesizing a community's religious, cultural, and social ethos with the origin of the world. The narrative is fictitious, but it encapsulates cosmos with the cultural symbols. These myths seamlessly coalesce geographical realities and biological facts to create fantastical images and symbols that resonate with diverse meanings. The definitions of creation myths often reverberate with religious and cultural overtones. For instance, encyclopedia Britannica's definition of the term associates it with religion,...philosophical and theological elaboration of the primal myth of creation within a religious community. The term myth here refers to the imaginative expression in narrative form of what is experienced or apprehended as basic reality ("Long")

The above definition links creation myth to monotheistic religions especially with Christian theology and the *Bible*. *The Bible* refers to many incidents that narrate the origin. Though, "The Book of Genesis" describes how God created the heaven and the earth, other accounts like "The Tower of Babel", "Cain and Abel" and "Noah and the flood" indicate different aspects of creation. The holy book implies that the earth is far inferior a place populated by sinned creatures because of transgressing god's will. Creation myth in *The Bible* creates two worlds, the first one is for the obedient and pious beings and the second for the cursed humans. The scope of this definition is limited to religious element. But Mary Womack, an anthropologist, expands its scope beyond religion and traces its roots to oral literature in its genesis.

**Keywords:** Creation Myth, Gender Representation, Patriarchy, Oral Epics, Adishakti, World Parent, Chaos, Emergence, Earth Diver, Cultural Narratives

## Introduction

World creation myths or genesis myths offer symbolic and fictional narratives that synthesize religious, cultural, and social ethos with the origins of life and the cosmos. Although fictitious, these stories encapsulate geography, biology, and cultural symbolism in fantastical forms that resonate across time and space. Scholars such as Charles Long, Mary Womack, and David Leeming have explored creation myths as not merely religious accounts but as evolving oral traditions that carry cultural memory, identity, and social codes. Particularly significant is the gendered dimension: creation myths often depict "chaos" in feminine terms, project creation as an act necessitating union or sacrifice, or assign centrality to masculine gods while symbolically relying on feminine elements. This paper examines the representation of women in creation myths, analyzing typologies such as Creation from Chaos, Ex-Nihilo Creation, World Parent Creation, Emergence Creation, and Earth Diver myths. By focusing on oral epics from Karnataka, such as *Male Madeshwara* and *Manteswamy Kavya*, the study interrogates how womanhood, gender roles, and patriarchal ideologies are woven into mythical narratives. Creation myths are symbolic stories describing how the universe and its inhabitants came to be. Creation myths develop through oral traditions and therefore typically have multiple versions. Variations in a particular creation myth reflect differences in language and regional affiliations. Though they may appear to be simply adventure stories about things that happened in the past, creation myths continue to have relevance by providing a social charter in describing how human society came to be. (81)

Womack notes that creation myths will be heard in multiple variants as they are an organic component of oral epics. They travel through time and evolve with each rendering of it. Several oral epics that are performed even today provide space to offer new versions of the same creation myth.

The above definition focusses on the diversity of creation myths and how they evolve over a period. David Adams Leeming, a scholar who has spent decades to understand creation myths offers a descriptive notion of the term that defines its wide scope.

No cultural dream is more universal or clothed in more particular cultural clothes than the creation myth. Creation myths are as ubiquitous as our need to know where we came from, where and how we began the plot; the overall mythos, which is not only our individual and family lives, but our cultural lives as well.... Naturally, creation myths, like all myths, are colored deeply by particular understandings formed by particular environments and particular dominant activities. (XiX)

Leeming observes creation myths as cultural accounts and shared experiences that make an impact on human psyche. Further, while defining the typologies of creation myths, Leeming identifies its association with the representation of gender. He defines one of the typologies “creations from chaos” in the following way, whatever form it takes, the primeval chaos can be seen as a feminine principle. Whether the waters, a drop of milk, the primal mound, a mysteriously appearing birth sac, or, most especially, the cosmic eff, the source of creation from chaos myth is the undifferentiated mother. (15)

Creation from chaos presupposes a chaotic world that compels a divine being often a male god to create a new world that emphasizes on ethical or moral life. Leeming identifies that the source of this creation resides in symbols that are related to the “feminine”. This myth involves a male god trying to put an end to chaotic world by creating another abode for the humans to lead ethical life. Here, a male god, as Leeming says, depends on sources that are often associated with the “feminine” to create a new world thus symbolically projecting the process of procreation.

Genesis myths’ roots reside in the cultural understanding of the human biology. Creation from chaos reiterates the union of two different genders for the creation of a new world. Leeming also explains other set of typologies and their symbolic creation. One of them is Ex-Nihilo Creation. It “...is a supreme deity, existing alone in a pre-creation emptiness or void, who consciously creates an organized universe on his own” (2). This is the most popular form of myth that finds its place in religious narratives. In fact, the *Biblical* genesis, the reference to the formation of the earth in *The Quran* and even several folk narratives construe their myths with the singular god trope.

World Parent Creation indicates two sets of patterns—conjugal relationship and sacrifice— that recur in creation myths. The first pattern represents the creation that is caused due to unification of two beings or entities. Marriage, unification of the land and water and the sun and the moon are the repeated images that denote World Parent Creation myths. It indicates the involvement of two beings or entities in necessitating an act of creation. The second pattern describes creation that is initiated due to sacrifice of a being. This pattern involves violence as a method of creation and several myths adopt to this pattern to describe their world.

Emergence Creation myths weave stories that involve creation of beings through a supernatural evolutionary process. It indicates the germination of life from different sources like seeds, eggs, or sacred ash. Leeming says that “emergence creation myths” symbolize the biological process of creation and uses womb like images to indicate birth. “Earth-Diver Creation” involves a supernatural being playing an important role in helping the communities to survive destruction or to inhabit a new world. These typological distinctions denote the gender dynamics and patriarchal attributions in different ways. While creation from chaos involves a supreme being that uses elements associated with the “feminine” to create a new world, World Parent, Emergence and Earth Diver creation myths fictionally fashion and represent the gender norms. The paper intends to focus on the following oral texts to ask and examine certain questions and issues such as how does gendered genesis myth put forward woman and womanhood? Do the myths reinforce patriarchy? How is such reinforcement different from each oral narrative? Who and what makes such differences? Is it region or cultural beliefs or tradition or social and religious life of the people?

Now if we explore the gender aspect, a lot of studies have been done to explore the role of gender. Lisa Maurice and Tovi Bibring’s edited *Gender, Creation, Myths and their Reception in Western Civilization* (2022) is a seminal book that puts together the notion of gender and creation myth. This book stems from one of the popular conferences that addressed the themes of Judaism and Christianity and their influence upon western civilization. But this further developed into a study of creation myth and symbols in western civilization. The book begins with several observations that range from the religious connotation of creation myths to their relevance to the present world.

In lieu with this, Lisa Maurice’s book’s scope is widespread but the chapter “Pandora, Eve and the Feminine

Ideal” explores how creation myth dealt with man-woman relationship with specific reference to Adam and Eve. In this section, Roslyn Weiss writes that the genesis portrays an uneven relationship between man and woman. She identifies all the images that portray woman as a subservient creature. This book is encyclopedic in recording western creation myths and their treatment of gender.

Marta Weigle in her article “Creation and Procreation, Cosmogony and Childbirth: Reflections on Ex Nihilo, Earth Diver and Emergence Mythology” (1987) identifies a grave issue that throws light on the “Classifications and analyses of creation myths and motifs are strongly influenced by masculine and Western notions of valued intellectual and artistic creativity...” (3). She narrates how creation myths involve gods and even images associated with masculinity. The paper develops Weigle’s arguments elaborately involving texts from different cultures and investigates if this holds water while studying oral epics of southern Karnataka. Wigle’s observation is spot on but there are other oral epics that portray goddesses with voice asserting their presence. Alan Dundes in his “Earth Diver: Creation of the Mythopoeic Male” (1962) traces how creation myths begin with the birth of a man and that too from different sources. He traces how cosmogenic depictions depend on several sources that are related to masculinity initiate creation.

*Male Madheshwara* is a folk epic composed in Kannada, performed by a community of singers called Deavara Gudda. It describes the life of Madheshwara, a 14<sup>th</sup> century saint. This epic starts with the primordial Adishakti at the beginning of creation. Alone, she creates Brahma out of her desire for a marital companion. Brahma refuses to be her husband because he considers her a mother. In her anger, Adishakti burns him to ashes and creates Vishnu in his stead. His fate is no different from that of Brahma and then Shiva is created. Shiva understands the desire of Adishakti and tells her he will satisfy her desire if she imparts her knowledge to him. He tricks her into burning herself and restores life to Brahma and Vishnu. The three of them create immortal human beings who live in heaven but without hunger. A serpent lures them against the gods will into eating fruit. This act of transgression angers gods, and they send human beings to the earth.

Another Kannada folk epic, the *Manteswamy Kavya*, narrates the deeds of Manteswamy who is worshipped on par with Allamprabhu, one of the important 12<sup>th</sup> century vachana poets. His tales also begin with a similar creation story. At the death of Jambavanta, with his ashes Manteswamy creates Adishakti who desires a companion and creates Brahma and Shiva. Both refuse to satisfy her carnal pleasure. A furious Adishakti burns them and creates Vishnu. Vishnu requests her to bring Shiva and Brahma back to life and coaxes Adishakti to burn herself only to create the world. This act ensues creation of the whole world and women to take part in the act of procreation. Being a fantastical narrative, these epic fuses the prowess of supernatural beings with human emotions. In addition, *Manteswamy* epic voices several concerns at the same time and reads like a complicated text with multiple voices. Both *Male Madheshwara* and *Manteswamy* narrate the accounts of genesis that are based on goddesses. In conclusion the paper draws inference that women’s representation in culture draws from their biological features. These epics, with their imagination divulge from the reality but still their mythical narrative emanates from the biological relationship of men and women.

## Conclusion

The study of creation myths reveals that women’s representation in culture is deeply tied to their biological and symbolic roles within mythological narratives. While Western traditions often emphasize masculine gods and patriarchal norms, South Indian oral epics such as *Male Madheshwara* and *Manteswamy Kavya* highlight powerful goddesses like Adishakti, who initiate creation, desire companionship, and influence the destiny of gods and humans. Yet, even in these narratives, patriarchal control reasserts itself through male gods who manipulate or redirect the goddess’s power. Thus, creation myths are not merely stories of origins but cultural blueprints that simultaneously revere and regulate womanhood. They demonstrate both the imaginative valorization of the feminine and its subordination within social and religious frameworks. Ultimately, the analysis underscores that myths are dynamic cultural artifacts, negotiating gender, power, and creativity in ways that continue to shape collective consciousness.

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### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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