Chapter 4

Redefining the Margins

The social process that the individual is subjected to involves a kind of sensitizing/consciousness-raising with regard to one’s place and position in the social organization, in terms of gender, class, caste and race. In effect, it becomes a psychological process of self-grading on the part of the individual, equipping him/her to accept the socially constructed identities, inferior or superior as the case may be.

Not only classical structuralism but all ideologies, old and new, are based on a conceptualization of phenomena in terms of binary oppositions, drawing “rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity, sense and nonsense, reason and madness, central and marginal surface and depth” (Terry Eagleton 133). A habit of thought is formed in this way, which prompts the subject to identify and classify him/herself in relation to others and their groups. As in the case of gender, differentiation of races, classes and other similar groups and formation of hierarchies automatically proceed from this way of thinking and perceiving things.

Of as much relevance to the creation of alterity as the formation of gender is the constitution of race, class and caste. Through social construction, various racial, social and economic classes and categories also come into being. Morrison’s Beloved offers a comprehensive and graphic exposition of the means by which the most obviously oppositional master-slave pair is formed and sustained by a continuous process of acculturation. As J.B. Miller points out, subordinate categories are formed by the dominant’s assumption of their inferiority and inability to perform “the preferred roles.” (6-7). The narrative
reveals how the ideology that fosters in each constituent of the pair the appropriate consciousness is eventually subverted by the slave who recognizes the politics that victimizes him.

At the Sweet Home Plantation, where Sethe and her friends have spent a major portion of their slave-existence, a deceptively perfect atmosphere of racial and class harmony prevails. The amiable master, Garner, observes a fine degree of political correctness in his dealings with the slaves and ingrains in them a profound sense of well-being. Gratitude, love, and respect from the slaves' part answer Garner's frank friendliness. For those of the slaves brought up on Sweet Home, their view of life and of themselves is formed from their understanding of Garner's views and ideas, through processes of suggestion and reflection. As for the other slaves who have known other masters and their nameless cruelties and for whom good fortune in life is constituted of the comparative merits of masters, Sweet Home and its master are a definite piece of luck. Through conscious effort and unconscious reflexes, they learn to become useful, untroublesome and valuable slaves. They become ideal subordinates by developing "personal psychological characteristics that are pleasing to the dominant group" such as "submissiveness, passivity, . . . , inability to act, to decide, to think, and the like" (J.B. Miller 7). Garner's kindness and openly expressed confidence in them act as invisible yet irresistible shackles that render them psychologically inert. Since no need of theirs that can be named is left uncared-for, insurgence is totally out of the question. Like the master's horses, they are well-fed and maintained. Flattered by the fact that Garner treats them as 'men' and not nigger 'boys,' they begin to take pride in designating themselves as 'Sweet Home men.'

Yet, however motivated and disciplined they are, there is a nameless yearning that grows in the men that the master is apparently oblivious of.
Except for Sixo, the wild man, who has found a woman for himself, to meet whom he has to make thirty-mile nocturnal trips, the Sweet Home men are sex-starved. Garner does not prefer women slaves on his farm, deeming it best for the discipline of his men to keep them out of temptation's way. Instinct, however, proves to be stronger: "They were young and so sick with the absence of women they had taken to calves" (Beloved 12). Anyway, when Sethe arrives on the scene, the men keep their self-restraint, bound by habit and a swollen notion of dignity that Sweet Home's training has instilled in them.

Sethe is disappointed to learn that a slave's life allows no scope, even at Sweet Home, for ambitions and aspirations. She had been encouraged by Sweet Home's benevolence to imagine that she and Halle would be having a marriage proper, with a wedding dress, church bells and a preacher. She is sadly disillusioned by the way it turns out, as just a change in her sleeping habits. The master approves of their sleeping together, and "Halle hung his hitching rope from a nail on the wall of her cabin" (33) as a sign of his claim on her. Thus begins the slave couple's wedded life.

When Sethe announces her intention to marry Halle, Mrs.Garner's first question is whether she is already carrying. The question points to a consideration that is central to master-slave economic relations. Though the concepts of marriage and family are vague and remote dreams for the slaves because these are not in the masters' interests, mating is generally encouraged for two reasons. In the first place, it curtails rebellious tendencies in the slave by channelling his primal energies in other directions. More importantly, the children born out of such unions are the master's property, serving periodically to replenish his slave-power; they are his to keep, sell, or kill. Since the father in each case may be different, the slave mother is the one who is left emotionally undermined by the losses and the partings that have become the
most essential feature of slave-life: "[I]n all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (29).

Garner keeps his boys disciplined to do without females. He allows the least number of women slaves, and for housework only, following his own model of labour economy. As a matter of policy, Garner never allows them to go out of Sweet Home unless accompanied by him. He thus forestalls the chance of their being on their own to see the world outside and recognize the lie they are living, programmed into robot-like work efficiency.

The naming that the Sweet Home men are subjected to is part of their discipline and an act of appropriation on the part of the master. They are all Paul Garners, distinguished only by their initials, except for Sixo, the wildman, and Halle Suggs whom his mother insists on naming after her husband. The significant fact is, the men are made to feel that their manhood is recognized at Sweet Home.

The enigmatic Garner who gives his slaves "the privilege not of working but of deciding how to," succeeds in creating confidence in them by discreetly doling out privileges. They value their relationship with Garner because "they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to" (154). Garner's diplomacy pays in multiple ways; it never inconveniences him or deprives him of authority and power either. As for the slaves, having never known or formed the concept of a free world and its difference from theirs, the subtle terms of their service under the Garners do not strike them as slavery at all.

In relations of power, "[d]ominants are usually convinced that the way things are is right and good, not only for them but especially for the
subordinates” (J.B. Miller 7). Despite the kindness of the Garners and the tactfulness of their policies to keep their slaves contented and peaceful, however, some of them have their vague moments of self-realization and consequent discontent. Though Sweet Home is the best place Baby Suggs has known, “the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home” (Beloved 172). Questions of existence and subjectivity rack her, for she knows nothing about herself: “Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife?” (172). Baby Suggs grows rueful on contemplating Garner’s ‘bounty’ in allowing Halle to buy her freedom against his own young, healthy self as guarantee: “... But you got my boy and I’m all broke down. You be renting him out to pay for me way after I’m gone to glory” (180).

The very concept of freedom is so alien to Baby Suggs that when she gets it, she is confused as to its use, having none of her family to share it with. Being free in a wide world, with no masters either to chastise or to protect her and no fellow-slaves to be compassionate with, scares Baby Suggs. Gradually, the significance of her son’s gift to her in her old age dawns on her, “that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in this world” (174). For the first time, she notices that she has got a heart that beats. She discovers each part of her body anew, and exults in that she is now in complete possession of her self.

Sethe too is bewitched by the Garners’ kindness and promptly makes a distinction between them and other white masters. The spell Sweet Home has cast on her is so strong that later Sethe is horrified at the perversity of her memories in bringing to mind Sweet Home in its “shameless beauty,” after all that the place had done to her. “[A]lthough there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream,” the place “never looked as terrible as it
was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too” (7). “The last of the Sweet Home men.” Paul D keeps bitter memories of the farm, having had occasion to see the place and its proprietors in their most horrible aspects. For after Garner’s death, the schoolteacher gives the men a taste of real, down-to-earth slavery. Tragedy overtakes their attempt at escape; Sixo is burnt, Paul A is hanged, and Halle goes out of his mind. Sethe having managed to escape, Paul D is the only person left to bear witness to all that happened to the Sweet Home men, but he is silenced with an iron bit in his mouth and his hands crossed behind him. Later, reminiscing his slave-days with Sethe, Paul D makes his verdict on Sweet Home: “It wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home” (17).

It is Halle who exhibits the deepest discernment regarding their slave state, and makes a succinct statement on the motives of the master-class; even the soft-speaking variety like Garner, according to him, means ill for the slave: “What they say is the same. Loud or soft” (240). He knows better than to imagine that it is out of sheer philanthropy that Garner allowed his mother to be bought off. It had been a good bargain for him: Halle was paying for the last, unserviceable years of his crippled mother; and in her place the master had got a healthy slave-couple and their three children. Halle’s premonitions prove right when after Garner’s death, the schoolteacher who takes over makes exclusive claims on his labour; he forbids Halle from selling his services out to make extra money. So Halle is unable to pay off the remaining debt in his mother’s account. The master’s new edict also obliterates the hope Halle had cherished of eventually buying off his wife and children.

Inequality inevitably brings on conflict. Oppressed groups are “impelled toward group consciousness by the very conditions of their subordinate status” (Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 219). The change in Sweet Home’s
slave-management strategies under the schoolteacher and his nephews causes the vague fears and suspicions of the slaves to surface; their remote dreams about freedom and a future beyond the slavish present undergo tension. For the first time at Sweet Home, hierarchies are unequivocally defined and strictly maintained. Corporal punishment is introduced. The men are roused to a new awareness of their slave-existence, its hitherto hidden aspects clearly brought to view, disenchanting them of their complacencies. They are treated virtually as "trespassers among the human race" (Beloved 155), and strict surveillance is kept over their activities and movements on their master's property. The least thing they touched is seen as stealing.

The enforcement of rules and norms by violent means inevitably brings on rebellion and lawlessness: "School teacher took away the guns from the Sweet Home men and, deprived of game to round out their diet of bread, beans, hominy, vegetables and a little extra at slaughter time, they began to pilfer in earnest, and it became not only their right but their obligation" (234). Sixo, the wild man, on being questioned for stealing a shoat, justifies himself with an amusing redefinition of stealing as a means to improve the master's property, namely himself: "Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop; Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work" (234). For his impertinence, the schoolteacher beats him and ties him up with the stock at night to prove that "definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (234). For if the subordinate develops characteristics like intelligence or initiative, he is defined as 'unusual' and hence a threat to the dominant order (J.B. Miller 7).

Sixo exhibits the wildman's instinctual scepticism and mistrust in the schemes of the white masters; he stops speaking the master's language "because there was no future in it" (Beloved 31). Even Gamer's brand of slavery has
not deluded him; perhaps he is the only one among the men who has mentally cherished the dream of freedom and has resisted Sweet Home in those benevolent days. He would sneak out into the woods at night for "dancing," to "keep his bloodlines open" (31). Sixo is the first of the 'men' to find a woman for himself, breaking the code of celibacy enforced at Sweet Home. Being the only man to have explored the world outside Sweet Home in his clandestine roamings, he is the one who identifies the direction in which freedom lay for all of them but which only Sethe and her children manage to take. He is roasted to death for attacking his capturers, and he meets it "without a tear just so the roasters would know what a man was like" (155-56); he starts singing a song in strange words, only its sound is intelligible as hatred set loose. Sixo laughs and shouts "Seven-o," as he burns because "his Thirty-Mile Woman got away with his blooming seed" (281-82). The schoolteacher is obliged to shoot him to stop his laughter.

All of the Sweet Home slaves, except Sixo, have believed that it is the schoolteacher who undermined them; that he "broke into children what Garner had raised into men" (271). In truth, there was not much for him to break, for without Garner and outside Sweet Home, they were less than a bunch of children, "isolated in a wonderful lie," "protected and convinced that they were special" (271). They never suspected the precariousness of their existence at Sweet Home or their dispensability for the master. As Sixo had correctly divined early enough, for them "everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs fell to pieces" (270). It is in retrospect that Paul D perceives that if Garner had "called and announced them men," it was "only on Sweet Home, and by his leave" (271). Rather than recognizing manliness in them, he had flattered them into an inflated notion of their worth, in order to satisfy his own whim. So their manhood was Garner's gift rather than their own merit.
If the slave-system had unmanned Paul D and his friends, it had been downright inhuman to Sethe as woman and mother. Sethe had regarded it as funny when the schoolteacher measured her up with a string and counted her teeth. But when he instructs his pupils to classify her human and animal characteristics, her complacency is shaken. A casual remark from Halle on the schoolteacher’s possible intentions regarding her children sets her thinking of her slave destiny and its repetition in her children. Like Baby, Sethe too has to submit to physical assaults and sexual indignities as slave woman. The school teacher’s mossy-teethed nephews take the pregnant Sethe out to the barn, tie her down, and rob her of her breast milk which she had jealously guarded for her young ones hungrily waiting across river Ohio with Grandma Suggs. In retaliation to her reporting the boys’ shameful act to Mrs. Garner, they break open her back with cowhide, which leaves a permanent scar spreading on her back like a chokeberry tree with branches and leaves. It makes her decide to quit on her own though Halle who was expected to take her is missing. Despite her protruding belly and bloody back, she manages to escape.

The schoolteacher holds his nephews responsible for the flight of the “breeding woman” and her foals; slaves should not be beaten “beyond the point of education” because those were the “creatures God had given you the responsibility of” (184). He drives his masterly point home with a telling analogy: “Suppose you beat the hounds past that point thataway. Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else” (184). Since Sethe is “property that reproduced itself without cost” (281), the schoolteacher cannot afford to give her up. The waters of the Ohio is no deterrent for the slave catcher

Sethe apparently misjudges the outreach of the slave system and the laws that protect the slavemaster’s interests. With the law that permits the slave
catcher to invade the tranquillity of Baby Suggs' home and lay hands on Sethe and her children, no place seems to be safe. In that desperate moment when she must, by any means, stop the schoolteacher from getting at her children, the only thought that makes sense to her is to send them off to a place beyond the unpredictabilities of life, where they would be safe.

Rich observes: "The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children" (223); it chains women "in links of love and guilt . . ." (276). Though Sethe is able to "outhurt the hurter" (Beloved 288) and establish her mother's right over the codes of slavery, she is permanently trapped in the aftermath of grief, of the inexorability and irrevocability of death that separates her beloved from her love. The ghost of the baby-daughter she killed strikes 124 Bluestone Road with a vengeance. Its malice drives Sethe's sons away. The house, from where Baby Suggs loved each and everyone of her black neighbours, is shunned by those very people she taught to love, which makes her withdraw from her self-assigned mission of preaching the Word. With her death, the silence that envelops 124 stills the lives in it. Denver opts to go deaf rather than hear her mother's answer to a question she has to ask her. Sethe lives in her rememory engaged in a soulful dialogue with the baby ghost, explaining her baby-killing as the supreme act of love of a slave mother who could not offer a greater gift to her beloved than freedom, on the other side of life if not on this.

The paradox of subaltern existence in a dominant system is most forcefully brought home in the delineation of a black mother's desperate love that is driven to baby-killing. Sethe's story is, in fact, an extraordinarily brilliant statement in fiction of the ethnic issue, as viewed from the black woman's angle.

Class tensions form a part of the issue of race inscribed in bold colours in Morrison's work; each narrative traces in detail the diverse courses that
marginalization takes. In *Tar Baby* the climactic confrontation that Ondine has with her white master makes her sharply aware of her racial as well as social marginality. This is particularly disillusioning, since she has been deceived by Valerian’s polished manners to believe that despite her race and colour, her personal merit has won her an honourable position in the master’s household and in his esteem. Until she crosses her master’s path, nobody questions her privilege too. She is conscious and confident of her worth as cook and has established her dominion in the whiteman’s kitchen where she dislikes being directed. She is indignant at being ordered out of the kitchen to give way to Margaret’s culinary experiment and then being expected to take over, when Margaret abandons her special dishes half cooked because the expected guests fail to arrive. On top of this comes her master’s unceremonious dismissal of the kitchen hands she engaged for Christmas, which leaves her with a huge quantum of unfinished work to be managed alone. She holds that she should have been informed before they were sacked. “I may be a cook, Mr. Street, but I’m a person too,” she declares indignantly (208).

“Within a framework of inequality the existence of conflict is denied and the means to engage openly in conflict are excluded” (J.B. Miller 13). Valerian’s reaction to Ondine’s self-assertion is unexpectedly harsh, his Christmas goodwill evaporating at what he takes as the impudence of his domestics, questioning his rights in his own home. Ondine is categorically reminded of certain plain facts—that she has a subaltern status in the house, that though Margaret is usually not taken seriously, she is white and belongs to the master category, whatever her failings are. Sydney’s proud statement to his master, “my wife is as important to me as yours is to you and should have the same respect” (*TBY* 208), does not carry much weight, for when it comes to a racial and class conflict, the dominant category has the walk-over. Ondine’s attempts at self-assertion earns
her only a painful uncertainty about the future, which would certainly have turned out bleak for her and Sydney if not for the nervous stroke that renders their master incapable of implementing his resolve.

The conflict suddenly places things in the right perspective for the black couple. Though Sydney had been elated at the honour of sharing Christmas dinner with the master, now it is clear that they have only been “emergency guests” (194) who would help the master “to get through the day” (195). As Son observes later, there is a most valid lesson for them to learn from the experience, namely the irreconcilability of their separate worlds: “It means that white folks and black folks should not sit down and eat together. . . . They should work together sometimes, but they should not eat together or live together or sleep together. Do any of those personal things in life” (211).

This sharp critique on inter-racial relations provides an insight into the only kind of identity that the black has access to in the dominant system: as servant, chef, janitor, house keeper or nurse in the whiteman’s establishment. There is also a recognition that the only forum for the black to realize the value of his/her self is the black community, and the only way to assert his/her legitimate identity is through integration with that community.

The strong sustenance that the black community offers to its members works as an effective counteraction to the dominant tactics of alienation and marginalization. Though in Morrison’s fiction, there are numerous situations of conflict occasioned by the individual’s aspiration to break free of communal codes, the symbiotic bond that exists between the subject and the nurturing community is seldom seen to yield under tension. For Morrison’s black woman, her powerlessness against dominant forces is in a way compensated by the possibility of empowerment within the community. Racial solidarity that
transcends gender tensions is, in fact, a subversive strategy that enables the subaltern to counterbalance her exclusion from the mainstream.

According to Patrick Bryce Bjork, “Morrison’s work consistently shows that identity and place are found in the community and in the communal experience, and not in the transcendence of society, or in the search for a single, private self” (vii). The black communities or ‘neighbourhoods,’ that are a charming feature of Afro-American life, make their persistent presence felt in Morrison’s narratives. They have a healthy function to serve, offering constructive criticism that dissuades blunders and indiscretions, support in times of weakness, and nourishment in need. All of its members are natural beneficiaries of the neighbourhood’s good will.

Conversely, the same benevolent and nurturing community can turn a cold shoulder and withdraw its sustenance, if anyone breaks its moral or ethical code, as happens with Pecola, who becomes pregnant with her father’s baby. Sula, too, scandalizes the neighbourhood by her sexual escapades and her disrespectful treatment of her grandmother; and Sethe offends not so much by murdering her daughter as by her proud self-sufficiency. In such random cases where the relationship between the individual and the community is fraught with tension, the larger socio-economic and cultural factors that render the system oppressive and thereby necessitate the individual’s estrangement are also exposed.

For instance, the adult black community in The Bluest Eye is evidently gender-biased in incriminating Pecola, the victim of rape, rather than the culprit, her father. In Sula, the institutions of marriage and family have a destabilizing effect on Nel’s stalwart self; though she religiously conforms to the social mores and has the community behind her, the loneliness Nel suffers is more severe than Sula’s self-imposed ostracism. In Beloved, the grand dinner
that Sethe and Baby Suggs throw to celebrate the family reunion offends their poor neighbours by its opulence and creates a class tension. Their bruised feelings prevent them from reporting the slavecatcher’s arrival to Baby Suggs which could have avoided Sethe’s baby-killing. Baby Suggs’ heart collapses not because of Sethe’s act which she can neither approve nor condemn; but because of the withdrawal of bounty of the community: “[T]o belong to a community of other free Negroes—to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed—and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance—well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy” (217–18).

Stamp Paid too is bothered by the unforgiving conduct of the neighbourhood towards Baby Suggs’ family, contrary to the word of love she has preached. He is surprised at the blacks’ blind mimicking of white attitudes, which prompts them to deny hospitality to Paul D because he is too proud to ask. Paid opens a tirade on Ella on this score: “What is going on? Since when a blackman come to town have to sleep in a cellar like a dog?” (229). After all his rehabilitation work for freed and fugitive Negroes, this behaviour that is quite uncharacteristic of black codes wears Paid’s marrow out. However, Ella is conscience-stricken and ready to make amends. In fact, it is an easily pleased and yielding community that Ella represents, one that never keeps a grudge too long.

Perhaps Sula is the one Morrison heroine in whose case the community is adamantly unforgiving for her relentless quest for an identity in rejection of communal values. She has chosen to follow her own inner lights because of her early disorientating experiences that obliterate her faith in the reliability of an other. Sula is never obstinate, but has firm convictions not only about her rights but also of her wrongs. Her alienation from the community owes a good deal to
her inability to express or explain herself fully: her motives, and the emotional and psychological influences that drive her. She is destined to remain misunderstood even by Nel, her best friend, for whom the puzzle that Sula was solves itself only after the latter's death.

The absence of a neighbourhood that nurtures the young black woman is noticeable in *Tar Baby* and *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola's small-town neighbours are too busy with their own existential concerns and have little time to spend over a poor, unhappy black girl's problems of growing up, or to respond to her great yearning for love that seems to be denied to her from all quarters. Pecola ends up heart-rendingly disoriented, craving for the white skin and blue eyes which, she hopes, would render her lovable. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine, who has grown up and been educated on the generosity of the white masterfolk, is culturally crippled by the dearth of the vital sustenance that only a sympathetic black village community can provide to its young. Ashamed of her native values and ways of life, Jadine seeks to identify herself with the dominant environment she has been transplanted in. She becomes the proverbial 'Tar Baby,' engulfed in the cosmopolitan culture, her black moorings permanently and irretrievably lost.

For Morrison's other female protagonists who pursue a path away from the community's interests, there is a final come-back and redintegration, in mutual understanding and empathy with the community. Sethe's act of infanticide becomes intelligible as an act of love to the community of Bluestone that relents after years of silence and withdrawal, when another calamity threatens to disintegrate Sethe's family, the neighbourhood rushes to her aid. The community in *Song of Solomon*, that takes offence at Pilate's mysterious powers, her physiological peculiarity and her wine business, forget their grievance as they listen to Pilate's hymn of love and grief at her beloved
granddaughter's funeral, and an answering compassion rises in their hearts. In *Jazz*, the crazy Violet's re-entry into the community's sympathies is marked by the patient hearing that Alice Manfred gives to her narration of her thwarted dreams and hopes.

As Bjork comments, Morrison's fighting women come to realize sooner or later that "to transcend and/or to repudiate the community, discontinues dialogue and diminishes the potential for cultural regeneration" (ix). It is a relationship of mutual dependence between individual and community that is envisioned in her works. It may be seen that Morrison's resisting black female protagonist is driven by twin compulsions in her relationship with the environment. As marginalized woman she has to assert her female difference in a patriarchal community where she is a lone fighter, remaining aloof from the crowd that conforms to the dominant values. At the same time, she is very much part of the black community that struggles against the devaluation of its native culture and values by white hegemonic powers.

The black ethos in Morrison's fiction answers to the description she has given in one of her interviews, of the neighbourhood where she grew up which expected "close conformity in terms of the survival of the village, of the tribe," but allowed its members much personal freedom. This, according to her, is out of consideration for their utter lack of that freedom in their social existence: "Before sociological microscopes were placed on us, people did anything and nobody was run out of town. . . . People permitted it, perhaps because in the outer world the eccentrics had to be a little servant person or low-level factory worker" (Leclair 374-75).

In this essentially native attitude of indulgence to the oddities, eccentricities, madness, or even violence of its members, the black community performs its historical function of deconstructing the dominant expectations and
specifications regarding black behaviour. This influence shows in Morrison’s depiction of deviant behavioural patterns in women, effecting a subversion of the patriarchal construction of black femininity to serve imperialistic ends and interests. Even the resistant black woman has a place of her own within the native community where the negative descriptions of an inferior black ‘other’ that the dominant category has attributed to her are set aside as irrelevant.

The post-colonial concern with the categories of aggressor-aggrieved, dominant-subaltern and master-slave is explicated more often in gender relations than racial or class divisions in Sarah Joseph’s stories. However, caste tensions are seen to exacerbate the gender issue for the Indian woman, just as in Morrison the ethnic factor, as a powerful co-determinant of the Afro-American woman’s marginality, acquires a corresponding relevance. The relegated feminine that merges with the socially or racially marginalized is placed at the centre of Joseph’s narratives, and their subaltern experience, both social and sexual, is revived and reviewed. The extreme repression they have survived or surrendered to is re-evaluated.

In *Aalaahaayute Penmakka*, the community of Kokkancira is a subaltern group constituted of thrown-outs from the centre-stream of life: the casteless people like scavengers and butchers whom upper caste people are averse to sharing living space with. The story is spun out of their resistance to dispossession, poverty, disease, and natural calamities. It is an excavation of and a passage through the marginal history of the God-forsaken hinterland of Kokkancira and its strangely hybrid and predominantly female community. Its very geography has sealed Kokkancira’s destiny of marginality: being a hollow at the foot of the Gosai Hill on the fringes of the upcoming city of Trichur, it had originally been a convenient dumping ground for poor, anonymous, and unowned human and animal carcasses.
No better than that of the dead is the fate of the living population of Kokkancira, who had originally been driven to this abandoned lot by the sheer misfortune of being in the way of the developing city. The exclusion of Kokkancira and its inhabitants from the geographical and historical records of the city, however, has not obscured the fact of their true story behind the squalour and dirt that have become the hallmark of life in Kokkancira. This unrecorded history of a people who became scapegoats for the city's creation, and got ousted from their land and home, is preserved in the memory of Ammamma, Kokkancira's oldest female. Ammamma rakes this up for the benefit of her granddaughter, Annie. Through Ammamma's narrative, orally passed on to the third generation, the truth about Kokkancira's past is ensured perpetuation. Annie's consciousness indelibly registers the unyielding pride and determination to survive that have built up Kokkancira's community. This erases all the embarrassing preconceptions she has had about her native place and the undignified life of her people, of which she has been at once ashamed and defensive.

Like the physical space the Kokkancerites occupy, their social position and culture also are enclosed in disprivilege. The stigma attached to Kokkancira is based on the worthlessness of the occupations of its settlers—scavengers, butchers, petty thieves, bootleggers, sex workers—all evicted from the city's privileged circles. The earliest settlers in Kokkancira were the scavengers, who cleaned the city of its dirt. The city people found it convenient to disown their own dirt and, by some perverse logic, identified the scavengers with it, as they were the people responsible for its removal. Ironically, this becomes the latter's disqualification for the privilege of residence in the space they made livable. Rejected by the city, they were compelled to seek shelter in Kokkancira,
the very place where they dumped the dirt, and the only place nobody grudged their occupying. Soon the population of the place boomed, with other outcasts from the city also migrating to this subhuman realm.

When the city needs a slaughterhouse the only space that can be spared for it is found in Kokkancira. Already burdened with the stench of human excrement and decaying corpses, life in Kokkancira now becomes totally unlivable for its hopeless residents: the blood of slaughtered animals forms pools in their yards, and the cries of dying cattle disturb their children's sleep. Kokkancira virtually becomes the wastebin into which is thrown anything that mars the beauty and glamorous centrality of the city.

A subaudition of *Aalaahaayute Penmakkal* yields deep structures of subversion of patriarchal power relations. The neglected feminine is reinstated here at the centre, against the dominant political agenda of marginalizing it. Here one encounters women who work out “self-representations that challenge phallocentric discourses . . .” (A.R. Jones 365). The women of the story are Aalaaha’s (“God’s”) daughters; since God is genderless, this problematizes assumptions of patrilineage. Ammamma, the leading female in the life-drama enacted in this end-of-the-world place, performs as its ‘unchurched preacher,’ like Baby Suggs in *Beloved*. She has no respect for any of the established, priest-ridden churches which seem to serve only to impede her relations with God. Her conversion from the Catholic to the Caldic faith is rather a flippant gesture than an act of conviction; it is the expedient she resorts to in order to facilitate her daughter’s marriage to the deacon, David. Furthermore, it releases her from the obligatory religious observances of the Catholic church. She remains a freethinker at heart because she does not seem to need intermediaries between herself and her Maker.
The magic formula of Aalaaha’s Prayer that Ammamma is in possession of is continued in the maternal line. Supposedly a legacy from God, it entitles her to the status of unanointed matriarch of Kokkancira, as against the anointed patriarchs of the Christian churches. It is also a perpetual ground of dispute between Ammamma, the infidel, and Amma, the faithful; the former’s individualistic notion of religion as direct business between God and human being clashes with the latter’s undaunted faith in the Church as the mouthpiece of God. Amma, who observes the dictates of the Church to the letter, holds that no woman has the right to exercise religious power or to appoint herself as healer and miracle worker from God. According to her, Ammamma not only challenges the institution of religion but also presumes to replace it with an alternate, personal religion.

In spite of Amma’s impugnment of her mother-in-law’s deviant religion, however, the latter’s influence on the suffering Kokkancerites remains intact; in all sorts of troubles, they come to her and she responds with her natural kindness. The beneficiaries of Ammamma’s goodwill never consider her or her work evil. Her work is one out of which she finds self-fulfilment of the kind that Friedan speaks about, done as it is “in the service of a human purpose” beyond personal ends (Feminine Mystique 290). That hers is an altruistic faith is evident from the fact that she never uses the Aalaaha’s Prayer for material benefit for herself or her family. The only one occasion when she chants it for her family’s sake is to stop the furious storm and the flood that threaten to capsize her house with her progeny in it. It is then that Ammamma deems it time to pass on the legacy of Aalaaha’s Prayer to her granddaughter. By this act, Ammamma problematizes the system of male monopoly in religious practice; she affirms the presence of a female tradition in an area kept inaccessible to woman, and her right of mastery in matters of faith and worship.
Ammamma’s striking correspondence to Noah, the grand patriarch of the Old Testament, is of particular significance with regard to the underlying theme of revival of the subaltern. Relegated from the dominant society, the Kokkancerites are God’s chosen herd, the predominantly female and Christian counterparts of Israelites. According to Kuttipappen’s anecdotes, they too had received, along with the inmates of Noah’s Ark, God’s promise of protection from the Flood; the rainbow that God had placed on the clouds as a sign of His covenant had its one end in Kokkancira. So “with Noah’s Ark, Kokkancira also remained floating above water” (AP 145). In the second flood that threatens Kokkancira, Ammamma’s house with the perpetual bean bower that shelters it becomes the safe Ark, with the old woman as its captain. It is remarkable that with the death of Kuttipappen which happens during the flood, the survivors in the ark happen to be all women. They, the Aalaaha’s daughters, are the ones chosen to revive life in Kokkancira. They are, in fact, history-making women who deconstruct “the myth that women are marginal to the creation of history and civilization” (Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* 221).

Viewed from another angle, ‘Aalaaha’ may well mean Ammamma herself; with her mysterious powers, she may be seen as the earthly and female counterpart of Aalaaha. In this hazarding of the probability of a female God, the traditional western concept of God as male is jeopardized. Aalaaha’s daughters, in this context, are not just Ammamma’s issue, but the whole female section of humanity deprived of their heritage and history. And the story turns out to be an account of their quest for reclaiming an equal share in human birthright.

Yet another of Joseph’s stories, in which racial and class tensions are foregrounded in addition to the gender issue, is “Attappadi” (NA 28-34), that tells of exploitation, violence and revenge. The youth and vitality of the casteless Cakkilias of the tribal settlement of Attappadi are preyed on by the gold-toothed sandalwood merchant who represents the rich, oppressor-class.
The innocent tribal girl, Nancamma, who becomes victim to his cruelty, emerges out of her subject position and is transfigured into the Goddess of vengeance that takes toll on the atrocities her tribespeople have suffered.

While the whole Cakkilia colony is bristling with activity on the eve of Utirankali's festival, preparing offerings for the deity to propitiate her for rain and good harvest, news of Nancamma's disappearance falls upon them as thunderbolt. It stuns them because in the preceding festival season too, they had been greeted with tragedy. Death by violence and violation has been the destiny of the young men and women of Atlappadi. The Cakkilia mothers' wombs have become pulsating wounds, since their young sons who had left the colony for work returned as decaying corpses. Their budding daughters had disappeared and been later found as ravished, ant-eaten bodies among the cactus thorns. Afflicted with an arid, unyielding land, and with nothing to relieve the fatality of hot winds and impotent clouds, the Cakkilias attribute it all to the anger of the goddess. Nancamma seems to be the latest victim to the misfortune that envelops their existence. The elders grieve to have failed in protecting the life and honour of their young.

But it is with unforeseeable force and effect that the inevitable resurgence of the underdog happens. Nancamma's father, Manikyam, who climbs the hill in response to an irrepressible inner urge, becomes the dazed witness to a blood sacrifice to Utirankali atop the hill sacred to her. It seems to him that it is the pleased deity herself who is dancing in the blood that streams down the hill, her thousand anklets clinking in fury. As the colony waits in terrible uncertainty, they see Nancamma descend the hill, all steeped in blood. To the watching crowd, She looks the embodiment of the goddess, offended and vengeful.
Nancamma, daughter!

The mothers of Āṭṭappadi cried as one. Nancamma threw at their feet a bundle she had been holding close to her bosom. A flash of lightning that fell on it shook the earth. The Cakkilias were transfixed by the gleam of golden teeth that hit their eyes. (NA 33)

A reversal of fortunes transforms Nancamma into the frenzied high priestess, and the predator into the sacrificial offering to her deity. By this ultimate victory, the girl delivers her people. The severed head of the offender seems to be the best offering she can make to Mother Utirankali, as well as to the Cakkilia mothers who have lost their children in a number of mishaps over the years. As if the gods have been propitiated by Nancamma’s blood offering, all on a sudden black clouds settle over the accursed land of Āṭṭappadi and rain pours down in a torrent. Streams break out of the Utiram hill, soaking the parched earth and flooding the withered river Ciruvani.

The myth of the inability of the subaltern “to fulfill wider or more valued roles is challenged only when a drastic event disrupts the usual arrangements” (J.B. Miller 7). It is significant that it takes a mere slip of a girl to bring to a close the scourge of intimidating serfdom suffered by the tribe of Cakkilias. By an act of violence on the part of one female, who has dared to stand up and avenge her own violated self and her tribe where men have remained in terror-stricken helplessness, the fire in the wombs of the Cakkilia mothers is extinguished; and the honour of their daughters is restored.

The primordial fear complex of the slave that is transmitted to his progeny and is kept alive through the dominant tactics of exclusion and denial is narrated in “Viyarpadayallangal” (“The Marks of Sweat,” KKK 29-33). The story portrays how the fear in the subaltern’s collective unconscious renders him incapable of effective resistance. The protagonist is a brilliant girl who has
emerged from her subaltern surroundings; her only stronghold and her only hope for liberation is 'the book,' her interest and proficiency in learning. But the masters do not want to recognize her mastery in anything. In the first battle that she fights for fair deal, she is forced to make an ungraceful retreat. She knows that if she were to survive she has to find her own voice to speak for her. But the big problem before her is that “neither I nor my brother, nor my father and mother, nor their parents have ever possessed the courage for that” (31-32).

No amount of consciousness-raising or education seems to be effective enough in erasing the remnants of a historical servility that lingers on in the psyches of the casteless multitudes of the Indian society. This is reiterated in the fear complex that enchains Professor Thevan, the other subaltern character in the story. He is aware that “the girl who has stepped out with bowed head is a continuation of the history” of oppression and that the marks that her sweating feet have left on the floor constitute one of those “oft-repeated historic moments that go unrecorded” (32). An instinctive reaction of righteous indignation surges in Thevan; but the mere thought of protest makes him tremble and sweat as usual, which he tries to explain away as the expression of the inevitable conflict between the mind and the body. However, his daughter Namita has discovered that it is his fear that has made him an introvert who gets flustered and wordless in public. She also attributes her own manifold fears to her paternal legacy of an inferiority complex. Her father secretly admits that it is his ancestors, who had stood before their masters with a hand at the mouth, probably to prevent unwarranted exercise of voice, and their body bent double in abject submission, who transmitted fear into his own consciousness and to his offspring’s.

There is a crucial difference between Thevan and his daughter in their reactions to the complex that grips them. While the father tries to run away or
hide from the forces that demean him, Namita accepts her caste, tribe and
colour as factors that constitute her identity which she values above everything.
She is not willing to exchange the odour of sweat and of tilled earth that lingers
on in her genes with any of the scents of Paris. The younger generations
possess what the older ones lacked: the insight to recognize the power politics
that has held their people in bondage for centuries; the courage to question the
legitimacy of the system that persists in tactics of subordination and exclusion;
and an unyielding spirit that engages in ceaseless battle to reclaim their rightful
social space.

The theme of resistance hallmarks Joseph’s “Ashoka” and “Taikulam,”
which re-read two episodes from Ramayana from a different angle, bringing the
undergrounded feminine/subaltern perspective back to focus. In both stories,
the established order of the male with its moral and ethical concepts is put to
question. Rama is presented in both as an ordinary human being, devoid of the
divine aura, and therefore prone to err. Each narrative reviews Rama’s story
through the eyes of a wronged female: those of Sita in “Ashoka,” and of
Surpanakha in “Taikulam.” While “Taikulam” recaptures the episode of the
disfiguration of Surpanakha and Ayomukhi that becomes the background for
the battle of Lanka, “Ashoka” is a subversive rendering of Rama’s victory over
Ravana, and the subsequent events that end in Sita’s fire-ordeal.

Sita appears in “Ashoka” (NA 9-15) not as the honoured queen of
Ayodhya for whose release the battle is fought, nor as the victor’s beloved wife
triumphantly retrieved from the enemy camp, but as an insulted and disgraced
woman. She has been humiliated, and her integrity questioned, not by the
enemy who held her hostage, but by the husband whom the whole world
venerates as the embodiment of truth, justice and fair play. All through the
long, agonizing months of separation, Sita has eagerly waited for her husband’s
soothing gaze of love to heal the bruises left on her mind and body by “sun, mist and rain, avid looks and destructive glances,” and “the scabs left by tears and festering wounds of shame” (Joseph, “Ashoka,” Katha 134). But the moment of reunion brings an anguish that totally eclipses the past months’ distress. She who has looked forward to the gentle voice of reassurance is given a curt order similar to the ones issued by the victor to the womenfolk of the vanquished: “Let Sita immerse herself in water and come before us with her hair still wet” (134). The unholy implications of this command, of impurities that need to be cleansed before she is fit to present herself before her husband, humiliate Sita beyond measure.

Since her abduction by the Lankan king, her fate had been related to the destinies of Lanka; now apparently it has ceased entirely to have anything to do with her victorious husband. Sita realizes that in her husband’s regards, she has lost her privileged position; and there seems to be not much distance between her and the bereaved wives of Lanka who, after a dip in the sea, perform the rituals for the repose of their dead husbands.

Though Sita has unconsciously identified herself with the unhappy Lankan women, her position is even more precarious, for those women have the certainty at least of widowhood to hold on to, whereas she has none at all. With exceptional prophetic insight Sita recognizes the marginality of her being; soon her victorious husband is to deny her any part in his future plans. With deathly finality the righteous king severs connections with the woman “who had allowed her name to be tainted” (138), and declares in ruthless tones that he had fought the war not to get her back but to remove the shame that had fallen on him and his family. Sita’s humiliation as woman is complete when her husband categorically expresses distrust in her chastity: “How long could he [Ravana] have held a beautiful woman like you in his power and been
satisfied with merely looking?” (139). It is an image-blasting moment for Sita when her venerable husband thus succumbs to the very mediocre emotion of jealousy.

In fact, the Rama who makes this speech is a subversion of the traditional concept of the righteous king who, despite his absolute faith in his wife’s purity, is compelled by the ruler’s constraints and obligations to send her to a fire-ordeal, confident of her successful accomplishment of the task. In Joseph’s deconstruction of the epic motif, what is brought out is the wounded ego of the male that will not tolerate the slightest trespassing on his property. The ruler’s justice turns out to be unjust to the woman; a mere suspicion of a possibility is enough reason for her rejection: “As for you, you stand before me facing the suspicion that you are not chaste. . . . Therefore, leave me and go away to any of the ten corners of the world” (139).

During the battle of Lanka, Sita has had a singular position as victim of abduction and the bone of contention between the fighting sides. For Ravana, she has been the invaluable hostage that he is unwilling to release; and for Rama, his precious possession, to retrieve which he would stop at nothing. But when the flags have been put out, Sita’s status suffers a marked depreciation, like the land of Lanka that, once invaded, is of little value to the victor. Ravana has forfeited in death his claims over Sita as her erstwhile custodian; and Rama has withdrawn his, as if for him war and victory have been ends in themselves. In the latter’s eyes, she is culprit rather than victim: the woman who provoked a stranger’s desire, brought shame upon her husband and his clan by being held hostage in that stranger’s home, and became instance to unnecessary bloodshed and destruction.

But even the uncouth Lankan crowd is aware of the injustice of the judgement passed on Sita. Rama’s merciless verbal whiplashes, administered as
if to an adultress, shock them; for during her short stay, Sita has acquired a worshipful place in their uncivilized hearts. Sita herself is not surprised, for the relentlessness of the victor’s law is not unknown to her. She is at once reminded of a blinded crow back in Panchavati, “screeching loudly, unable to find its way out,” and a dismembered woman running from beneath a tree in full bloom, “screaming helplessly, splattering blood everywhere” (139). In her present state of deprivation, Sita does not have any claims of superiority over the jungle woman, Surpanakha, who was mutilated by her husband for begging for his love; she now shares with the woman of the wild the agony of rejection of love and also of negation of selfhood. If Surpanakha has suffered maiming of a physical nature, Sita has been ripped to pieces in her mind and spirit with even greater and more enduring impact. She is left defenceless in a stranger’s land. Ayodhya has disowned her, and she has a feeling that Lanka will be a far kinder refuge:

Sita suddenly felt as if she had slipped from a peak. She was hurtling towards rocks below when . . . it seemed as if two strong, dark, hairy arms caught her. A voice that held the salt and the moisture of the sea said to her: Lanka is entitled to enjoy great wealth and prosperity. . . . Rain will fall again over Lanka and the Ashoka forest will bloom once more. . . . Therefore, let your tender feet walk over the expanse of Lanka with joy. (138-39)

Sita, the rejected woman, and Lanka, the defeated land, are identified as one: “The earth that the victor snatched and threw away is Lanka. Sita and Lanka are the same” (138). The oppressed class/caste and woman are united in an identity of interests.

The disenchanted Sita, freed of notions of conjugal duty and loyalty, with eyes discerning and no more blinded or biased by excess of love, makes a
fair judgement at last on the victor and the vanquished. There is a moment in which Sita empathizes with the Lankan, and responds to his humiliation and dishonour as if these were her own: “Somewhere within her, a stream of compassion broke free and flowed out. Sita caressed the Defeated One’s head tenderly. Instantly, he was turned to stone to sink into a tranquil sleep that would last thousands of years” (139). For Ravana, the offender, the tender touch of the one he offended does not bring any curse; though it petrifies, it actually releases him from the ignominy attached to his *rakshasa* incarnation. He is acquitted at once of the criminal status the world has attributed to him, and of the disgrace of death in defeat. The fact of his being petrified in “tranquil sleep,” lulled by Sita’s forgiving touch, entitles him to a resurrection into another peaceful *yuga* and *janma*, aeons away from the codes that legitimize righteous wars, massacre and annihilation. The emergence of the subaltern is envisioned here as inevitable.

Though Ravana is thus freed from guilt in Sita’s eyes, Sita herself has no escape from the fate awaiting her. Her husband’s Parthian shot is full of the presumptuousness of an imperious, self-opinionated male: “You can spend your life with Lakshmanan or Bharatan or Sugrivan or Vibhishanan. . . ” (140). But Sita is weakened only for a moment. Once she is excluded and her love is rejected, she has a clear course of action open to her. The codes of the victor do not bind her any more, and she will not allow the man who has become a stranger to her to arrange her future for her. From then on, Sita is back in her elements; she is the elements themselves that would remain after life is disintegrated, enriched and ready to generate further life. Daughter of the earth, soiled by the impurities of lived life, she must cleanse herself in fire before she returns to her mother’s womb for regeneration. Therefore she asks Lakshmanan to prepare a pyre for her:
Earth’s daughter stepped into the fire, her right foot first. I am Sita, the earth that can destroy fire! She who carries in her womb the rains that have always fallen over the earth. She whose mind is fixed steadily on the thought of future rains. She who must receive rain and seed, fuse them with fire, and lay them out, a fresh, living green. The fire spread and blazed around Sita. Earth, molten and purified, lay clean: awaiting seed and rain. (140-41)

As a subversive reinscription of another episode in *The Ramayana*, “Taikulam” ("The Matriarchate," NA 35-40) pairs with “Ashoka,” but inveighs more sharply against dominant practices. The highly charged texture of the narrative is in agreement with the explosive thoughts of the mutilated Surpanakha of the Panchavati episode, the junglewoman belonging to the race of giants. Unlike the gentle Sita, Surpanakha’s mental processes do not remain muted but are externalised in eruptions of frustration, rage and vengefulness. This princess of the jungle had never known defeat or rejection in love until she was weakened by her infatuation for the handsome stranger in Panchavati. Not only is her love spurned, but in an extreme explication of dominant virtue and morality, the Aryan king hacks off her breasts and nose as punishment for her unwelcome advances. She carries the mark of that torturous repulse within and without, forever.

When in a similar incident the tough, able-bodied Ayomukhi too is mutilated in an almost identical fashion, Lanka clamours for revenge. The female clan of Lanka takes this as an affront to the venerated maternal, more than a mere disfigurement of two of its handsome women. A blow has been struck at the fountainhead of life-sustenance and mother’s nurturing love for generations of the tribe’s young; it is a shame and disgrace to the Taikulam, the matriarchate of Danavas. The weapon-bearing stranger’s encroachment upon
their territory—where battle and enmity are unknown and weapons are superfluous; where the trees, the animals and the humans live in close affinity with one another—and especially the blatant violation of its codes are unforgivable offences for the jungle tribe. It is in their own home that their women have been mishandled. Being totally unkeyed to the mores of the civilized world, the grandmatriarch of the clan fails to find a rationale for the intruder’s act of punishing a woman for her love. She is struck by the irreconcilability of the two cultures: “It is in desire that the tree puts forth buds; the jungle blooms and the sea heats up in desire. If woman’s desire is castrated, it will be the ruin of mother earth . . . . This is not good for our jungle; the stranger has his ways, and we have ours” (NA 36-37).

Surpanakha’s reflections on the subject, even in the grip of her “wordless anguish” (38), are indicative of a mature wisdom and perceptiveness that contradict the image that Rama’s act evokes, of a frivolous woman of uncontrollable lust. Conversely, Rama’s own image gets devalorized as Surpanakha problematizes the practice of attributing the status of absoluteness to the dominant notions of right. His conduct is found lacking in comparison with that of the junglefolk:

No man in my jungle has committed such brutality; if unable to oblige a woman ablaze with desire, the man will gently discourage her with a brotherly word and direct her elsewhere. King Ravana has never raised his sword to devastate a mother’s body. No one of my race has become hero by ravaging woman’s fullness and charm. (35-36)

Surpanakha’s rage and despair are communicated in a tumultuous monologue in the narrative. Stripped of the wholeness of her self, she is gripped with an overbearing sense of loss; an invisible block has been placed upon the unqualified freedom she had enjoyed in her native elements. The wild
had been her lover: each of its beauteous aspects had roused her to ecstasy; her instincts and impulses had free reign in it until the invader’s sword ravished both the wild and the woman. The dominant forces have trespassed on the privileges of both woman and nature.

The narrative reveals how the divisive strategies of the dominant are operative through the tendency of some members of the subordinate group to internalize the dominant values so as to be “partially accepted into their fellowship” (J.B. Miller 11). To one for whom power has always remained beyond access, any chance of a share in it is immeasurably enticing. Thus Vibhishanan is easily duped by the glitter of the throne, which will be his reward for allegiance with the Aryan king though it presupposes betrayal of his brother and his tribe, with fratricide, communal disharmony and mass destruction as its predictable ramifications.

As Lerner suggests it is in an environment of oppressive power relations that the subordinate categories form a consciousness of their inferiority, of the unnaturality and injustice of their situation and of the need to remedy the wrongs (The Creation of Feminist Consciousness, 14). An awakening of a subaltern consciousness is evident in the narrative pair examined here. Quite a number of social, political, and ethical questions, unraised in the androcentric reading of The Ramayana, are brought under the critical eye through a revival of Sita’s and Surpanakha’s perspectives. An image-shattering takes place as woman sits in judgement. In Surpanakha’s view, the Aryan king has committed the serious crime of trespassing while her own mistake, if it is one, has been provoked by his uncalled-for presence in Panchavati. The forest has been the rakshasa territory, their natural abode, where their innate instincts and drives have always had free play. It is here that the outsider had exercised his rule and imposed punishment upon the jungle’s daughters according to his artificial, hypocritical codes, though their conduct had been quite natural and in keeping with the conventions of the jungle. A conflict is evident here between the civilized world’s ethics and morality.
that work by suppressing natural urges, and the values of the wild where to deny woman’s right to love and to communicate it to its object is not just a violation but unforgivable crime. According to the natural order of the jungle, as appropriate as woman’s desire is man’s willingness to fulfil it. This justifies Surpanakha’s conduct.

The difference in the treatment accorded to woman by the righteous Aryan king and the uncouth Dravidian is drawn attention to in the narratives. Surpanakha is mercilessly dealt with by Rama for what he takes as a challenge to his virtue. The sophisticated codes by which she is judged are unashamedly unjust to her. On the other hand, Ravana, in his approach to Sita, is remarkably refined for a savage. In “Ashoka,” Sita is compelled, despite her wifely loyalties, to notice this difference in attitudes and make her impartial judgement on the victor and the vanquished thus:

Who then was the sinner? Was it the prince, the epitome of Aryan masculinity, who had cut off the nose and ear [sic] of the dark-skinned woman who had committed the grave mistake of begging for his love? Or was it he who, as the embodiment of popular justice, had laid hands on the woman of the Aryan and on his earth, in revenge? (136)

The established order of the male in “Ashoka” and “Taikulam” is one that excludes not just the female but the racially, culturally and socially marginalized. This order is built upon assumptions of the mental, intellectual and moral weakness and worthlessness of the unenlightened ‘other’ and the contrastive infallibility and moral correctness of the dominant category, whose authority, codes of conduct, and justice thus stand legitimized. It is such preconceptions that are put to question in these stories, in the light of woman’s experience. By retrieving woman’s untold version of the Ramayana story, the accepted, male-oriented perspective is subjected to revision. In a critical re-evaluation, the Aryan’s codes turn out to be egoistically motivated, his reasoning biased, and his verdicts inequitable. A social system that ratifies violation of woman’s integrity, justifies fratricide
and turns a blind eye to political espionage, and a sovereign justice that ignores personal convictions and is too heavily dependent on popular opinion, are also problematized.

A feminist reading of the epic motifs exposes the contradiction inherent in the mythical concept of the feminine. It also brings to light the humiliations that women had been subjected to in their relations with the patriarchate and the extreme limits of tolerance, patience or sacrifice demanded of them without consideration for their willingness to yield to such situations (Ravindran 70-73).

The narratives provoke thought on the dominant moral precepts that are conceived and interpreted in ways advantageous to the male. For instance, desire in the male is accepted as a most normal aspect of his biology, whereas in the female it is a dangerous and unnatural eruption that must be severely suppressed. The junglewomen, Ayomukhi and Surpanakha, have literally to pay through the nose for seeking male attentions because they are regarded as posing a challenge to dominant virtue. Sita is forced to make amends with her life, not for any active crime of hers, but for allowing herself to become the object of male desire. There is an interesting subtext that lies between the lines here. Woman, in either of the conflicting aspects in which she appears to man, as repulsive sexuality or as irresistible charm, is a threat to his mastery. The sexual politics of power therefore demands that her othered status be confirmed by whatever means—repression, annihilation, or castration of this subversive feminine.

The issue of cultural conflict raised in “Taikulam” also points to a persistent problem in cross-cultural relations, namely the blacks’ fascination and admiration for the fair-skinned and, conversely, the contempt with which they are treated by the latter. These respective attitudes (which may be seen as the manifestation of the colonial consciousness) have been formed by the universal
acceptance of a thought system favouring the white against the black. This concept of white superiority is as religiously subscribed to by the coloured sections as by the whites themselves which explains its prevalence as a world view. The Aryan king in “Taikulam” is reminiscent of the aggressive white man who feels it “incumbent on him readily to define and redefine the domain he surveyed” (Said 228). His unflagging pride in his racial superiority manifests itself in his aversion for the black woman. In fact, he simulates the white colonizer’s techniques of domination: invading the black man’s territory, humiliating his woman, using the services of a native to spy on and betray his people, overpowering the enemy with advanced weapons and by fighting from under cover. The disaster he has brought on Lanka is summed up in Surpanakha’s words: “He cut off the roots of my tribe. Insulted my colour and race. Destroyed my body and speech” (NA 39). He also destroys the religion of the natives: “They killed Selvan [the high priest] and displaced the deity he had kept pleased through performing rites of penance; they built their own bower there” (38).

His attitude toward the junglefolk exactly corresponds with the white colonizer’s who imagines to have "an executive responsibility" (Said 226) towards the colonized. They are taken to be unmannered savages who need an iron hand to teach them good manners. No respect is paid to their native codes that give precedence to noble values such as mutual respect, chivalry and honesty in love and war. Just because the junglefolk are different, they are dubbed as inferior. This view becomes problematic when the jungle and the junglewoman are brought to the foreground and the Aryan’s attitudes and conduct are reviewed through her eyes. An inevitable inversion of scales happens, and there is a disruption of the given notions of hierarchy. The social values of Ayodhya disintegrate as an elaborate lie built up on shaky foundations while the natural, down-to-earth, human goodness of the jungle prevails.
Sarah Joseph has pointed out in an interview that the only way in which
the subaltern/female ‘other’ categories can rewrite their destinies is by formation of
solidarity groups wherein they begin to experience power, the power of being
together (Joseph, personal interview 7 Apr. 2002). Joseph’s fiction bears witness to
the fact that internal structures of power within female subcultures impede notions
of solidarity. The female ethos in her fiction is not a single, unified whole as in
Morrison’s; its many divisions—of caste, creed, language and religion—are
unnegligible hurdles that block feelings of female solidarity. While Morrison explores
the possibility of amiable co-existence even of interracial female groups as in
Beloved, in Joseph’s stories, relations between women of different social categories
often lack that spontaneous flow of fellow-feeling that can germinate active
friendships. Frequently, considerations of caste and class obscure the deeper and
more fundamental human issue. For this reason, inter-caste and class connections
are characterized by tension, if not active hostility, and they are often prevented
from growing into stable, mutually nourishing ties.

For instance, in “Taikulam,” Surpanakha’s unrelenting antagonism is
directed against the whole class of Rama, though it is true that the Aryan king’s
moral codes have passed equally inexorable judgement upon his own wife and
the subaltern woman. The similarity of their feminine experience at the hands
of the dominant male does not seem to provide a satisfactory enough reason
for Surpanakha to identify with or even feel pity for the Aryan’s wife. The
apparent callousness in the jungle woman is, however, amply justified by the
nature of the crime committed against her. For Surpanakha, what Rama
inflicted is not a wound that would heal with time; it has affected her deep
down in her feminine core. It is a terrible wrong that neither she nor her tribe
can ever forgive or forget; their vengeance is directed not only at the man, but
his land, his tribe, and his woman as well.
In sharp contrast to Surpanakha's unconcealed ire towards the Aryan's wife in "Taikulam" and her exultation over Sita's fall from grace, there is a protective and sympathetic community of women that extends solace to Sita in her grief, in "Ashoka." Here, the parochial considerations of tribe and race give way to a broader humanity. The women of Vibhishanan's court form a perceptive sisterhood that responds to Sita's anguish with profound understanding, when the unsparing verdict of her husband, the victor in war, falls upon her, the disowned wife: "They moistened her eyes with milk from their breasts and held her in a caress that came like a cradle song to her heavy heart. They held her on laps which were large enough to hold the whole universe" (135-36).

The strange rapport built between the princess of Ayodhya and the oppressed womenfolk of Vibhishanan's harem shows how women's community and sisterhood provide "both a refuge from and a challenge to the oppressive facets of a patriarchal society" (Palmer 126). The uncouth women of Lanka show a greater sensitiveness to Sita's suffering than her own husband, who is the epitome of Aryan culture and refinement. Their humaneness that transcends race and culture touches her deeply and reassures her. In fact, it is their unobtrusively supportive presence that fills her with a strange confidence and tranquility, enabling her to arrive at her own choice regarding herself, in rejection of the options the victor has defined for her, and thus to take the decision out of his hands.

In "Karutta Tulakal," ("The Black Holes," OS 16-23), a different perspective is highlighted on the ties between the dominant and the marginalized categories. In spite of the wide gap in their social situation, a close relationship develops between Kikeyi, the queen of Ayodhya and Mandhara, the maid, by force of circumstances. The latter, by her intelligence and
shrewdness, assumes the role of the worldly-wise counsel and confidante to the naive Kikeyi. It is at her own personal risk that she endeavours to safeguard the interests of her mistress. Her astute powers of judgement enables her to outwit her opponents, and ensure the throne for Bharata. But her reward is torture at the hands of the young princes of Ayodhya; even the beneficiary of her schemes, Bharata, turns against her, blinded by excessive loyalty to the father's order. Mandhara is branded as traitor for all her zeal in protecting her mistress' interests; even Kikeyi fails to defend her in her disgrace.

Mandhara has been a pawn moved according to the whims and wishes of kings and masters who exploited her sharp wit and capacity for improvisation to promote their schemes of expansion. Her stay in Ayodhya has given her many crucial insights into the world of power. It is predominantly the father's world, and the ethical code of the patriarchate that the sons of Ayodhya are brought up on instructs that "power should be maintained even if it means aiming the sword and axe at the mother's throat" (Q5 19). It is also a world sustained by a hypocritical ideology that covers up the lust and greed, the treachery and cruelty of those who wield power.

Mandhara is fed up with the injustice inherent in the codes that ratify matricide in the interests of the paternal order. Even Kikeyi, the queen, is helpless, as disowned mother, to react to the humiliation that she is subjected to. Kikeyi's destiny, as Mandhara predicts it, is: "Ayodhya has always been your prison; now it has become your tomb, from which you can never escape" (23).

Mandhara is determined that once she is out of Ayodhya and gets the reward promised by Aswapathi, she will have her day at last. She rails at the falsities of the dominant system where people like her, who can afford only a subaltern existence, are more like worms than humans. She decides that she is now accountable to no man, neither king nor prince; her loyalty is and need be
to the reward only. With her experience in Ayodhya, Mandhara is done with royal connections. All such connections have been established for the convenience of the kings, and have invariably fared ill for the subservient category. When the purpose has been served, the association becomes a liability for the masters. When the old maid at last refuses to oblige any more, Kikeyi herself explodes in fury and calls her a devil. It gives ample evidence to the fact that no sustained relationship is possible between the dominant and subordinate classes.

Mandhara who has danced to the tune of masters all her life asserts her space in the last lap, undermining the conventions that endeavour to keep her underling. By her last gesture of disruption of ties with the dominant, Mandhara divests herself of “the disguise that her subaltern existence has compelled her to put on just for the sake of three meals a day” (22). Now she affirms her independent self that is no longer anyone’s slave. In her self-liberating act, there is a reversal of fortunes. It is the princess who begs and weeps, while the servant denies and derides; while Mandhara escapes to freedom, Kikeyi is left behind in Ayodhya to suffer.

The subaltern perspective centralized in the narrative brings to focus a different version of the Mandhara episode in *The Ramayana*. The hitherto neglected human side of a character who has been branded as a meddlesome, spying, and gossiping woman who misguides her benefactress, and the circumstances and motivations that legitimize her acts, are highlighted.

Rich speaks about certain “gynocentric” periods of human culture “which have shared certain kinds of woman-centered beliefs and woman-centered social organization” (93). A revival of such a community is evident in the woman-centered narratives examined here. In *Aalaahaayute Penmakkal*, there is a mutually enriching women’s community that resembles those in
Morrison’s fiction. Ammamma’s matricentred household accords a gratifying picture of female solidarity. The strong bond of love that exists between Ammamma, her daughters, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter remains undisturbed by temperamental or perspectival differences that sometimes lead to heated verbal exchanges, especially between Ammamma and Amma. These arguments rather provide Annie with an opportunity to perceive and respect diverse points of view. The mutual relationship of these women is marked by unswerving loyalty that is strengthened by calamities. Amma saves money out of her penury for the marriage of her sisters-in-law, Cinnamma and Ciyyamma. She is as grief-stricken as Ammamma is, at the sad fate of Valiammai. When Cinnamma’s unmarried pregnancy hits the family like a thunderbolt, Amma and Valiammai join forces and manage to keep the shameful secret from Ammamma and Kuttipappen and from the rest of the world. Even Annie who chances upon the secret is impelled by an inner urge to hide the terrible knowledge.

Outside Ammamma’s clan, too, Kokkancira’s women make and live their history together. The fact of their having shared misfortunes and griefs keeps them together to relish their small enjoyments with added flavour. Over and above the anguish of women’s being in the margins, life in Kokkancira reveals the beauty and power of women being together.

Gender solidarity acquires a political significance in feminist fiction, as a highly functional means to woman’s empowerment against a scheming patriarchy; it is a way of asserting the feminine space and resisting its denial through group reactions. As Rich points out, “intense relationships between women in general” as well as those between mothers and daughters are “profoundly threatening” to patriarchy (226). The female friendship bonds that are a prominent preoccupation in Toni Morrison’s novels can be read as part of
the project of centring the feminine as a powerful entity with its own potentialities, capable of functioning as autonomous subject. Apart from the very live and persistent presence in her texts of female generational communities, there is a focussing especially on the solidarity of comradely adolescent relationships. In *The Bluest Eye*, the girls Frieda, Claudia and Pecola are most comfortable in one another’s company; their togetherness renders the difficult business of growing up easier for them. Between them, their clumsy ways and blundering opinions, which the adult world views with extreme impatience, take on a charming authenticity and acceptability, imbuing them with much self-confidence and mutual trust.

A community of interests holds them together, such as the exclusively feminine, adolescent secrets like menstruation, conception, and childbirth. Together they face the harshness of life’s experiences and the callousness of the adult world impinging upon their innocent childhood’s sanctity and harmony. In Pecola’s alienation from herself as well as from the external reality, consequent to the sexual crime committed against her, Frieda and Claudia still retain that deep unselfish fellow-feeling for her: “[W]e were embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally we just felt sorry for her. . . . Our sorrow was all the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story” (*TBE* 148).

A different kind of friendship that transcends considerations of age and social class exists between Pecola and the merry whores, which has a decisive role in her growing up. It is from their confabulations that she forms her rudimentary notions on man-woman relationship. She understands it as ‘love’ in its most innocent, naive sense, though, ironically, her first experience of ‘love’ turns out to be a disastrous one, markedly different from what she had gathered from the whores’ insinuations. Evidently, even the whores are not
morally depraved enough to visualize such a perverted version of love as her father offers her. In fact, it is from these fallen women that Pecola receives what her parents have denied her, namely love and nurturing, which instils a deep trust in her mind for them. They accept her as she is—a defenceless, unloved child who cannot help her ugliness—and take her to their hearts.

An easy camaraderie exists between the three whores themselves. Despite the delicate nature of their vocation, there is absolutely no competition between them, though they often engage in playful arguments, and poke fun at one another. They have certain subtle features in common more than a common trade: their contempt for men for being weak and inadequate; their hatred for "sugar-coated whores," that is, women who cheated their husbands; and also their strange respect and admiration for virtuous, god-fearing, family-women, whose unfaithful husbands they treat with vengeance. Since they are outcast from the mainstream society and not just marginalized, they enjoy absolute freedom from the norms of the society; its laws do not smother them or drive them to tight spaces. They have formed a community and a dominion of their own, apart from and in rejection of that other society, where they enjoy an unbounded space and unrestricted speech, which their law-abiding neighbours can never claim. So they remain outside the dominant order, undermining its foundations from without, with their unconventional activities that involve and implicate patriarchs who conform to that order.

In *Sula*, a powerful story is built around the theme of friendship. The adolescent pair, Nel and Sula, are conceived as complementary counterparts despite the wide differences in their personality-traits and upbringing. Together, they give the impression of a harmonious whole that eventually gets split by circumstances. At their first meeting, "they felt the ease and comfort of old friends," and "found in each other's eye, the intimacy they
were looking for” (Sula 52). Each uses the nurturing presence of the other to grow upon: “in the safe harbour of each other’s company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (55). Their intimacy renders the restricting space of their black womanhood less claustrophobic; together, they learn to prevail over the rough edges of adolescence; with the help of the new horizons of thought that they explore, they set out to create their selfhood out of their blackness and womanness.

The bond between Nel and Sula is strengthened by the fact that both are psychologically alienated from their mothers, though for different reasons. Nel is helpless victim to Helene’s excessive enthusiasm to create a dignified life for her; but she is permanently disgusted with her mother for the humiliating way in which the latter’s dignity swooshes out in abject obsequiousness at the sight of the dominant white male. Unlike Helene, Sula’s mother is indifferent to her daughter’s growing up, and leaves her entirely on her own. Left without an axis for direction and growth, she does whatever suits her whim, and never feels compelled to convince the society of her consistency or to make excuses for lapses. In her wanderings away from home, Sula has sought wholeness for her womanhood; her relationships with the other sex have convinced her only of her own aloneness and separateness. It is only in Nel that Sula has discovered the force that counterpoised her incomplete self, “the other half of her equation” (121). It is the need to reconstruct a decentred self that draws her back to Bottom and Nel, after ten years’ absence.

The only person in Bottom to welcome Sula’s coming back is Nel. It brings back into her life the magic of the springtime, its energy, enthusiasm, and good humour: “It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home. Sula, who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy” (95).
Out of joy for Sula's return, Nel is ready to forget the shabbiness, the boredom and the impatience that life has come to be enveloped in. Even her love for Jude “which over the years had spun a steady gray web around her heart, became a bright and easy affection, a playfulness that was reflected in their lovemaking” (95). It is in Sula’s company that Nel breaks out into that free, deep, invigorating laughter that makes her feel “new, soft and new” (98).

Nel has always been fascinated by the inscrutable quality in Sula that makes whatever she does seem right. So when Nel chances upon her husband and Sula in the act of love, her wrath concentrates not so much on Sula as on Jude; it is Jude that Nel is unable to forgive because only his act strikes her as obscene and as betrayal. Though in her last encounter with Sula, Nel accuses her friend of a breach of trust, she later analyses that in Jude’s case Sula has not behaved any differently from how they together used to in her own premarital days; it is she herself who has changed into a jealous and possessive woman. This realization helps her to rise above her natural wifely bitterness towards the woman Jude has forsaken her for; she pays tribute to Sula and their friendship in her impassioned cry after Sula’s death: “‘All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.’ And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. ‘We were girls together,’ she said as though explaining something. ‘O Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl’ ” (174).

Unlike the young pair in Sula who are separated by circumstances, two women of incompatible age and temperament are thrown together by circumstances in Jazz. It is a strange and complex kind of relationship that develops between Violet Trace, the wronged wife, and Alice Manfred, the meddlesome young mistress’ distraught aunt and guardian. The girl Dorcas, who is no longer a living presence, becomes the common factor that makes dialogue possible between the two, though each entertains different feelings
about her. The mortification Alice feels about the fact that her dead niece had been a marriage-breaking hussy, and the indignation she ought to feel at Violet’s having messed up Dorcas’ funeral by trying to violate her dead body, are enough to make her deny access to Violet. She is indifferent, impatient, and dismissive by turns, but Violet’s perseverance and firm resolve earn her entry first into Alice’s house and eventually into her confidence and affection.

For Violet, Alice’s house provides the shelter that she has been seeking to sit down and sort out her troubles in, for want of which she had once sat in the middle of the road. She tells Alice at her first visit, “Let me rest here a minute. I can’t find a place where I can just sit down” (Jazz 102). Known to the whole city as unhinged not only for stabbing a corpse in its coffin, but for her silent spells, and an attempt at child-stealing, there appears to be no person she can approach without being reviled or derided. It is in Alice that she finds the sympathetic other she has been seeking. She tells Alice that she has approached her as the woman who raised Dorcas, hoping that she might help her understand what kind of woman her husband preferred her to be. But the ultimate effect turns out to surpass her initial motive: the sessions she has with Alice enables her to open up and understand the working of her own mind. She talks about Joe and herself and how they began building up their life; about the city life that changed her; about the childlessness and the loss of moorings; about the distance that developed between her and Joe that drove him out into the streets, and that between her inner self and the external reality that split her consciousness itself into two halves—one crazy and the other rational.

At first, Alice is disinclined to have any association with this queer woman, and is eager to get her out of the house. But then by degrees, there is an improvement in their relationship. Soon Alice finds herself waiting almost eagerly for Violet’s knock which has come to be recognizable to her by now.
These visits make a strong though imperceptible impact upon Alice: “The thing was how Alice felt and talked in her company. . . . No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them. But something else was—clarity, perhaps. The kind of clarity crazy people demand from the not-crazy” (105).

Before long Violet becomes “the only visitor she looked forward to” (106). Though they do not see eye to eye in all matters, especially relating to female conduct, Alice encounters in the other an entirely different perspective from which she has certain things to learn. While Alice is prejudiced against the fancy women who are Violet’s clients, Violet holds that their trade should not be considered in evaluating their human worth: “they were good to me while nobody else was” (106). If they “share men, fight them and fight over them” (107), she considers it none of her business; besides, the environment that compels them to do it is more responsible than they are. However, Alice insists on making a distinction between the socially and morally abiding women who, despite the many wrongs suffered, never take up arms, like herself, and those females of lax morals like Violet’s clientele or even the weapon-wielding, killing type like Violet herself. Violet points out that she was not born with a knife, but was driven by circumstances to settle scores with those who meddled with her life. According to her, it is the most natural and proper thing to fight for one’s man.

Violet’s words open the dam-gates of painful memory and Alice remembers how she had craved for the blood, not of her unfaithful husband, but of the woman who had stolen him. She is able to see the truth of Violet’s bluntly expressed views on woman’s allegiances and hostilities, her passions and resolves. She now realizes why Violet turned violent at Dorcas’ funeral and why she is still protective of her husband despite his guilt. A bond is suddenly established between the two women, which proves mutually beneficial.
It provides each with an opportunity to review her life and experience impartially, with the help of the other's uninvolved perspective.

Sometimes, the need to defeat the repressive and isolationist strategies of a powerful male persuades the formation of women's sympathetic communities, the putting forth of a gendered oppositional front. Thus in Song of Solomon, Ruth, the ill-treated wife, and Pilate, the insulted sister, join hands to resist Macon Dead's tyranny. Pilate has been denied entry into her ambitious, empire-building brother's house, since her lowly life-style prevents him from acknowledging her as kin. Ruth, Macon's wife, is degraded into a non-entity, deprived of her woman's and mother's rights and punished with ostracism within her family, neglected equally by her husband and the two daughters. When she conceives for a third time, Ruth is immensely happy and places all her hopes on the yet-to-be-born child. But to her horror, Macon insists on an abortion. The only person she has recourse to in her predicament is Pilate, her charm-working sister-in-law. Pilate's intervention with her magic rituals and potions frightens Macon enough to leave his wife alone.

Though Pilate rarely visits Ruth at Macon's house after the birth of Milkman, there is an implicit mutuality of affection and understanding between them. Pilate considers herself the godmother of the child she has restored to life and provides him with the home that his own mother has been helpless to make. For Ruth, since her father's death, the only person who has taken genuine interest in her affairs and has recognized her as an individual is Pilate. She is also the only sympathetic female company she has ever had in her secluded life. It is Ruth's unqualified faith in her ability and willingness to support her in need that prompts her to approach Pilate a second time on behalf of her son. This time the adversary from whom she begs protection for him is the jealous Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter. Though Pilate has every
reason to be incensed by Milkman's jilting of Hagar, she promises Ruth that her son's death will not happen by any woman's hand but that a woman will actually save him. She keeps faith too, when later she yields her own life, in lieu of Milkman's, to Guitar's gun.

In *Tar Baby*, Valerian's island home is the site of complex race-class-gender power hierarchies existing between husband and wife, and between master and servants. The agreeable relationship that sprouts between Margaret, the young white mistress, and Ondine, the young black maid, promises to grow into a strong interracial and intercultural bond, until external interferences prevent its natural course, disorienting both the women.

Margaret had inevitably turned to Ondine, the only female available at Valerian's home to communicate with, and readily shared the latter's interests: "Margaret was not a regular listener but she became one with Ondine and a maiden friendship flowered... She looked forward to the chats with Ondine..." (*TBY* 57). The friendship helps Margaret to rediscover her young, enthusiastic feminine self as different from the awkward, fumbling woman that is overawed by Valerian's domineering personality. Married too young to finish off her adolescence properly, Margaret now sets out to live and enjoy her youth in the sympathetic, nurturing company of Ondine. Unfortunately for her, her husband takes strong exception to her "consorting with Negroes" (57) with an implied criticism on her inability to rise above her origins. Valerian's interference results in a disruption of the friendship, with Ondine relapsing into proud and offended reserve, while Margaret is left to grapple with her loneliness and the frightening "afterboom" (56) that filled the spacious rooms. Due to the unexplained withdrawal of confidence, Ondine holds Margaret guilty of racial discrimination, and in her turn feels justified in looking down upon her for her lack of social distinction.
Having been let down by her friend, Margaret is faced with total isolation. The unconcerned sardonicism of her husband is unbearable. Even the birth of her son does not fill up her psychological emptiness; her attitude to childcare and nurturing is full of ambivalence. While she loves her child, she finds it aggressive and exploitative. Already unnerved by its father's contempt, Margaret hysterically resists the child's taking her readiness to satisfy its every whim for granted. The pleasure that she accidentally starts deriving from hurting the baby becomes a means not only to thwart the demanding child but also to relieve her lonely life of its uneventfulness and boredom.

Ondine who is silent witness to this unmotherly violence, later confesses that she had kept her mistress' secret to herself initially out of self-interest; she was afraid she and Sydney would be sacked. Besides, "There was nobody to tell. It was woman stuff. I couldn't tell your husband and I couldn't tell mine" (243); for "once I started keeping it then it was like my secret too" (243). Though she holds a grudge against Margaret, it does not prevent Ondine from making an impartially analytical evaluation of her mistress' act: "She didn't stick pins in her baby. She stuck em in his baby. Her baby she loved" (281).

Ondine's hostility to her mistress has been occasioned by the blow that the latter's distancing has dealt to her self-esteem. She suddenly finds herself faced with a problem of self-definition. Having served upper-class white people for a major portion of their lives, Ondine and Sydney have come to think about themselves as an essential part of the existence of that master category, equipped with something that marks them apart from the "stinking ignorant swamp nigger[s]" (100). Valerian, in his complacent carelessness, is inclined to ignore the airs of the black couple who are valued as servants; he is willing to allow them certain licences so long as they do not transgress the limits he has marked.
But Margaret is too forthright to have recourse to the sophisticated games of intercultural fraternizing as played by Valerian. She unconsciously reflects in her attitude to Ondine the humiliations and frustrations she suffers at the hands of her husband, and inadvertently manages to make the black woman conscious of her subaltern status. This necessitates self-assertion on Ondine’s part. She holds herself to be more refined than her mistress, and has a greater sense of belonging and ownership about her master’s property. It is this that makes her bold enough to have a show-down with Margaret, when she tries to impose herself upon her, and to blurt out: “Yes my kitchen. Yes my kitchen. I am the woman in this house. None other. As God is my witness there is none other. Not in this house” (210). What begins as a heated argument between the two women soon gets out of control when they come to blows and name-calling. In a fit of rage, Ondine bursts out with the stunning revelation of Margaret’s secret.

Though the revelation has served Ondine’s immediate aim of humiliating Margaret, it has a long-standing purging effect for both the women. It marks the end of that difficult phase of their relationship marred by mutual spite and arrogance. Having got her pent-up hate out of her system, Ondine mellows enough to analyse her own feelings and attitudes. She is now able to understand the other woman as one subject to power politics as she herself is, but of a different sort. For Margaret, the revelation has brought immense relief: “[T]he wonderful relief of public humiliation, the solid security of the pillory, were upon her” (237). Being exposed gives her an opportunity to recapitulate the past and explain herself which in itself is enough self-punishment for her. She is suddenly consumed with a need for Valerian’s understanding and a sharing of the pain, horror and guilt-feeling that she has for long borne alone.
Though what Margaret volunteers to communicate is the obvious part of her guilty past, Valerian is not psychologically prepared even for that, shocked as he is, his massive self-confidence and complacence permanently undermined. Nevertheless, it enables Margaret to reposition her relationships. Between her and Valerian, there is even a reversal of positions. Freed of the weight of secrecy, Margaret becomes stronger while there is a marked deterioration in Valerian's physical and mental health. Having lost his will to dominate, Valerian allows Margaret to take charge of affairs, which she does with remarkable capability, easing his hurt as best she can.

With Valerian subsiding into a senile passivity, past the point of caring about his wife's interclass, intercultural affiliations, the first task Margaret launches is to patch up the rift between her and Ondine. Taking up from where she has left off, she has a frank and honest session with the other woman, who too responds with good grace. Together, they sort out their mutual feelings and grievances and decide to grow into “wonderful old ladies” (244) together; however late it appears to be, they want to retrieve what is left of their repressed identities and have that wonderful feeling of being liberated in the spirit.

Yet another interracial female friendship community, surprisingly free of tensions and complexities, is introduced in Beloved that engages with the horrors of racial hostilities. The warm though short friendship that springs up between Sethe and Amy Denver at their first and last meeting is an exceptionally exquisite example of gender solidarity. They meet in the hills: Sethe, the pregnant black slave woman, running away from Sweet Home's dogs,; and Amy Denver, the self-lawed white girl, determined to survive, headed for Boston. Sethe has given up hope of crossing the river to Ohio, her head splitting, and her feet numb and swollen, and has settled down to die
when Amy comes along, with a head having “enough hair for four or five heads” (*Beloved* 40), a “tenderhearted mouth” (96), and “cane-stalk arms” that are “as strong as iron” (40). Amy brings good luck to Sethe; her incessant talk, soothes her; even the baby kicking inside her grows quiet and sleeps, lulled by her voice.

Though Amy is in a hurry to get to Boston, when she sees the pregnant woman’s predicament, she stays back to tend to her. She rubs Sethe’s dead feet back to life, intermittently calling on and chastising Jesus and running a commentary on what she is doing: “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (43) and “Can’t nothing heal without pain, you know” (97). She hunts for spiderwebs in the bushes to treat Sethe’s pulped back. In order to relieve her own shock at what the slavedrivers have done to Sethe, she proceeds to give a graphic description of her crushed back; she says it looks like a “chokeberry tree” with “little cherry blossoms” (97). To cheer Sethe up, she recounts some of her own experiences as a bonded labourer to Mr. Buddy, a mean master. Amy volunteers to deviate from her own path to take Sethe down to the river, across which she will be safe. Since Sethe is unable to walk, she improvises a pair of shoes for her with dry leaves and rags. She does not mind her own bare feet in the rough terrain while she supports the exhausted Sethe. Commanding, cooing, and cajoling, she manages to take her to the river, and would have gone her way then, except that labour starts for Sethe. Despite the seventeen year old’s inexperience, Amy sets to delivering the baby, begging to Jesus and cursing His father by turns (103); with her “good hands” (100) she brings the baby safely into the world.

In a ramshackle boat, beneath a starry sky, the two young women are alone to witness this wondrous moment of creation. Though perfect strangers to each other till that day, their instinctive understanding and spontaneous
response to nature’s phenomena join them beyond the boundaries of race and colour, in a special kind of bond. It is this bond of selfless humanity that enables the runaway niggerwoman to trust and depend completely, without shame or embarrassment; and equips the white woman to comfort, support and cherish, without fuss, impatience or reserve. Away from the centre of life’s activity, ignoring the differences that divide them there, and unimpeded by patriarchal interferences, these “two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws” accomplish together a great work:

They never expected to see each other again in this world and at the moment couldn’t care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something together appropriately and well. . . . There was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well. (104)

This joint accomplishment of two women in the woods is relived years later by Sethe and the daughter that Amy Denver helped to deliver and whom the grateful mother named after her as Denver. The white girl who redeemed their lives is remembered by both in gratitude. Before parting, Amy had said to Sethe: “She’s never gonna know who I am. You gonna tell her? Who brought her into this here world?” (104). Indeed Sethe tells Denver; by recounting the story, Sethe records and perpetuates it in her daughter’s memory. Thus the remembered Amy, the reminiscing Sethe, and the listening Denver constitute a friendly female community that reshapes the painful past and the unlivable present with pleasurable thoughts of an exclusively female experience. As Helena Michie comments, ‘sisterhood’ is evoked in feminist work as a challenge to patriarchy, as a part of the project “to reclaim the family and to reproduce it in altered form” where it ceases to be the locus of women’s oppression (58).
The narratives that come under discussion here, which focus on woman under patriarchal power relations, show an “interlocking of the structures of gender, race and class” (Palmer 77). A close reading of the subaltern ethos in Morrison’s and Joseph’s fiction reveals, over and above differences, many convergences and correspondences as regards the process by which the marginalized categories—of race, class and gender—are created and sustained through social and psychological drilling and conditioning. The black-white and slave-master power relations depicted in Morrison, and the caste, class divisions in Joseph both draw attention to the various matrices along which marginalization can affect woman. In both, women’s mutual understanding and solidarity are seen to inspire the formation of empowered communities that rise above their given subaltern status and thus subvert the dominant power structures. Here are women who, in Showalter’s words, “have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society and have been unified by values, conventions, experiences and behaviours impinging on each individual” (Showalter, Warhol and Herndl 273).