Reviving the (M)Other’s Order

The devaluation of woman’s role and work that has been obtrusively in process in history and tradition indicates a gender politics involved in it. This, in fact, is a trans-ethnic and trans-cultural issue that women writers across the world have seriously concerned themselves with. For instance, the sexual assumptions that have contributed to the establishment of the patriarchal order are subjected to a re-reading in the works of the two writers under consideration here. Beyond their unlike cultural backgrounds and the disparate circumstances of female life depicted in their stories, certain commonly shared interests can be read out. Women’s neglected potential as well as her actual contribution to life, especially her staple influence in the mothering and nurturing of generations, are focalized; the marginalized female ‘other’ is reviewed in its various positive aspects. Woman who subverts the given concept of the female as preserver of the father’s order is brought to the centre stage; simultaneously the possibility of the existence of an order that is dominantly feminine is also explored. The recentring of decentred categories and experiences and thereby the reviving of the Mother’s order are thus major preoccupations in the texts examined here.

For Morrison, this concern finds articulation in an engagement with the black American’s and more specifically the black woman’s experience. As with most other African-American women writers, the ethnic issue is as powerfully imprinted in her work as gender. Morrison characterizes her own work as “village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. . . for my people” (Leclair 370). This colouredness in writing comes natural to her: “When I view the world, perceive it and write it, it is the world of black
people. . . . I just know that when I am trying to develop the various themes I write about, the people who best manifest these for me are the black people whom I invent” (Morrison, qtd. in Samuels and Hudson-Weems 139). And it is the black woman who epitomizes femininity in her fiction; by “placing black women centre stage in the text,” Morrison proposes to fill a vacancy in American literature, the “vacancy [that] was me, or the women I knew” (C. Davis 419). Most of her novels are decidedly black woman-centred, with female protagonists who undermine the established male order and, overcoming their gender limitations, emerge as liberated individuals.

Morrison’s fiction has a remarkable variety of powerful females. Sethe, the young, fugitive slave woman, full with child, accomplishes her flight to freedom virtually unassisted and fiercely guards this hard-won freedom. Violet would stop at nothing to assert her personal, wifely, and familial rights. And Sula, the prodigal daughter of the Bottom black community, is self-willed and arrogantly independent; for her nothing matters beyond the gratification of her self; though widely resented, she becomes the strongest influence on the Bottom blacks while alive and remains a taunting memory after her death.

Even the strongest of her men seem to be overshadowed by stronger-willed women, like Pilate in Song of Solomon whose brother, Macon, and nephew, Milkman, are overawed by her mysterious powers. In Beloved, Paul D finds himself persistently outwitted by a determined girl ghost. In Jazz, no white masters can defeat the determined Violet, who “handled a four-mule team in the brace” and “chopped twice the wood that was needed into short logs and kindlin,” so as to make sure that they would not pester her while she had her rendezvous with her man (119). In Tar Baby, Son finds a formidable trait in almost every one of his female acquaintances—his mother who managed horses as a girl; his grandmother and aunt who built cowsheds and rooms;
his sister Francine who outran any man; and his former wife Cheyenne who
drove wagons when she was nine years. He also fails in remoulding Jadine to
suit his ways and beliefs, however convinced he is that she is in the wrong; as
does Valerian, the white man, in unmaking his wife Margaret, who remains
subdued only until the time comes for her to prove her mettle.

The prevailing tone of Morrison's fiction is set by a belief in the existence
of a black female tradition and a concern for its retrieval and transmission.
Morrison has explained her work to be one of bearing witness. She is extremely
conscious of the significance of the past in black lives and its bearing on their
present, and is filled with a sense of loss at its being obscured. She describes the
feeling thus: "Like something is either lost, never to be retrieved, or something
is about to be lost and will never be retrieved. Because if we don't know it
(what our past is), if we women don't know it then nobody in the world knows
it—nobody in our civilization knows it" (Morrison, qtd. in Samuels and
Hudson-Weems 139).

It is through women—grandmothers, mothers, and daughters—that
myth, folklore and magic are preserved; especially, rituals that pertain to
religion and community are seen to be monopolized by women, in both
Morrison and Joseph. The business of sustaining tradition is left with women
who act as the connecting links between the past, the present and the future.
Old Baby Suggs in Beloved, "the unchurched preacher" (106), who possesses
special powers to preach the Word despite her ignorance, is engaged in such a
transmission: of the gospel of love, solidarity, mutual-and-self-respect, and faith
in the goodness and inherent value of the blacks. In Song of Solomon, it is in
Pilate, the crazy old woman, that native magic and rituals are kept intact.
A similar theme is dealt with in Joseph's Aalaahaayute Penmakka! where
Ammamma, the grandmother, is in possession of the magical formulae of
Aalaaha’s Prayer, the incantation of which has the power to quiet the elements, control natural calamities, and drive off evil. In all these novels, time-old traditions kept in the female line are ensured continuity in the grandchildren to whom the grandmatriarchs bequeath the legacy.

The preoccupation with history and tradition, more prominently and consistently featured in Morrison’s fiction than in Joseph’s, brings to focus the older female generation of mothers and grandmothers. As Susan Willis observes, “the black woman’s relation to history is first of all a relationship to mother and grandmother” (5). Storytelling has a key role in this respect—of keeping alive the collective memory of a people. Sethe rememories, for the benefit of her daughters, things forgotten and never shared with anybody else: “. . . I’m telling it to you because it might help explain something to you. . . ” (Beloved237); that ‘something’ is her experience of being a black slave woman and mother in a white set-up and the pressures and compulsions it places her under, which explain everything about her life, including her baby-killing act. Knowledge of her mother’s (and her fellow slaves’) encounters with the whites serves as a warning to Denver to beware of them in her own post-slavery world too; for “All news of them was rot. . . . She didn’t want any more news about whitefolks; didn’t want to know . . . about the world done up the way whitefolks loved it” (231).

Baby Suggs’ recounting of her slave experience to her daughter-in-law and granddaughter is equally revealing, loud with the unspoken, even unidentified fear and despair that lurk in her. Though the Gamers “ran a special kind of slavery” (173), it was still slavery, and “the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home . . .” (172). From the wisdom and vantage of old age, Baby Suggs’ observations on white masters show a greater discernment than Sethe’s. In her youthful inexperience and easy credulousness,
Sethe had trusted that “she could discriminate among them. That for every schoolteacher there would be an Amy; that for every pupil there was a Garner, or Bodwin, or even a sheriff whose touch at her elbow was gentle and who looked away when she nursed” (231-32). It takes Suggs’ insight to convince her that for all the privileges kind masters have bestowed on them, masters are still masters, and they still slaves.

Baby Suggs exerts a deeper and more subtle influence on young Denver than her own mother does, because the overtness of Suggs’ revelations and the resoluteness of her reactions lend a greater authenticity to her testimony of black female slave existence, in contrast to Sethe’s taciturnity and inwardness of experience. It is from Baby Suggs that Denver learns her lessons about the curious power relations between the white masters and the black slaves, which would help to shape her own black woman’s destiny beyond repressive gazes: “Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. . . . She said for me not to listen to all that. That I should always listen to my body and love it” (257).

It is Grandma Baby who testifies that there is no defence for her yet against the whites who “could prowl at will, change from one mind to another and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did” (299). She had warned Sethe in her youth: “there’s more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain’t a battle; it’s a rout”; Baby Suggs now exhorts her granddaughter that the only resistance for her is to “[k]now it, and go on out the yard” (300).

Baby Suggs devotes her free life to impart what she has learnt in slavery not only to her family but to her fellow blacks at Bluestone. At the community
gatherings that she presides over, Baby Suggs becomes their preacher and 
prophet, teaching them of the love that would hold them together and help 
them to retain their self-esteem against a universal contempt for their blackness: 
"Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. . . . You got to love it. 
This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need 
to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong 
arms I'm telling you" (108). Baby Suggs' final verdict on white people is also 
her parting advice to her daughter-in-law and granddaughter: "Those white 
things have taken all I had or dreamed—and broke my heartstrings too. There 
is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks" (109).

Baby Suggs' home, 124, Bluestone, Ohio is an establishment where the 
maternal reigns in state. She is the venerated matriarch not only to the inmates 
of 124, but to the whole black community of Bluestone. She takes it upon 
herself to dictate the rules for their bodies, minds and hearts, with her wealth of 
experience, as a slave of sixty years' standing and becomes the unanointed 
priest of the Bluestone blacks. When the "grief" strikes 124 in the shape of the 
schoolteacher's attempt to reclaim the children and Sethe's violent reaction of 
child killing, Baby Suggs stands by her daughter-in-law, even as the whole 
community brands her. Later when the baby ghost strikes 124 with a 
vengeance, it is with the backing of Baby Suggs' infinite wisdom that Sethe gets 
used to it and eventually over it.

Baby Suggs has been such a solid tower of strength and courage that 
when her stout heart fails at last, 124 is virtually orphaned. But Sethe has the 
tradition set for her by this powerful woman, which stands her in good stead in 
the years of her exclusion from the community. Her proud self-sufficiency and 
the prompt refusal to seek the help of the Bluestone community are at once the 
cause and the effect of her neighbour's indifference to her subsequent to
her unmotherly act. She cannot and does not explain to anybody the rationale that worked behind the act, as it is inexplicable to anyone who has not passed through the pain and duress of a slave-mother. In fact, the maternal at its most poignant is manifested in Sethe’s act of giving a perfect death to her “crawling-already? girl” (187) to save her from the ignominy of a slave’s life. As she later rationalizes, “it’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (202). Compared to the slave experience, death is more dignified, and death is the only place where Sethe can hide her children, beyond the reach of slavery.

The maternal in Sethe and her sense of race are a legacy from her own mother whom she has seen only a few times. As Sethe recounts to Denver, her mother’s duties as a slave prevented her from nursing her daughter properly. When the child Sethe woke up in the mornings, her mother would be at work, and she could identify her only as one of the women bending in a line in the fields. But her mother had given her a clue to her identity: the stigma of a galley-slave burned in the skin on her rib: “This is your ma’am . . . . I am the only one got this mark now . . . . If something happens to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark” (76). However, Sethe is not able to identify her mother’s dead body from those of the other slave women who were hanged with her. It is from her wet-nurse, Nan, that Sethe, learns much about her mother—as a woman who was very selective about motherhood, and rejected the white seeds of life forcefully planted in her slave-womb: “She threw them all away but you [Sethe]. . . . Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never” (78).

Sethe’s craving for family matches that of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, who, when freed, makes determined though futile efforts to trace the
sons taken away from her in childhood. She is elated at the re-union with the family of her youngest son, Halle, though Halle himself fails to turn up. For Sethe too, family has been a luxury denied to her. She is overwhelmed with joy at the miraculous return of Beloved, the baby ghost now grown into a teenager, to reclaim her mother’s love in full measure. Out of contriteness for the years of maternal affection Beloved has lost as child, Sethe yields to the irrational excesses of the girl-ghost, who demands as much indulgence as a two-year old, but with the strength and vigour of a mature woman. Her greedy love tires Sethe out. Still, in her eagerness to convince her of her mother’s motives, Sethe wastes herself away, neglecting her own needs as well as those of her living daughter, Denver.

As Rich observes, “the physical and psychic weight of responsibility” on the mother is “the heaviest of social burdens” (52). Slave life places even greater pressures upon Morrison’s mothers. Still they yield to such exactions even to their own detriment. In fact, the maternal becomes their greatest strength.

The nurturing aspect of the maternal in its reverse order is seen in Denver’s protective instincts towards her mother and elder sister. Though Denver was too small at the time of Beloved’s death, she is the first to recognize her invisible presence in 124. The stunned silence into which she withdraws at the first tip-off from Nelson Lord on the nature of her mother’s crime is relieved of its dreariness by this ghostly presence. She watches over it, fondly indulging its pranks, never afraid, because she has sucked its blood together with her mother’s milk. And when Beloved appears in flesh and blood, she has no difficulty in recognizing her as her murdered sister. From that moment, Denver takes it upon herself to safeguard her sister from possible harm, for “all the time I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again” (Beloved 252).
Nonetheless, she does not judge her mother; for she believes that whatever terrible thing her mother has done, she has the right to do it to her children, as what makes her do it is not in herself but outside in the world. Therefore it falls upon Denver to protect her mother as well as their home from what prowls outside: “So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can’t happen again and my mother won’t have to kill me too” (252-53).

Later, when the girl-ghost tries to choke Sethe without provocation, it becomes Denver’s responsibility to watch over both mother and ghost-daughter from hurting one another in the intensity of their love. So Denver, who has never left the house since Nelson Lord’s inadvertent revelation about her mother, goes out to seek outside help and, in so doing, retrieves the goodwill of her neighbours that her mother had relinquished years back. In a reversal of mother-daughter roles, Denver rewrites her mother’s self-administered destiny to wear out in expiation of her child-murdering act: by bringing her back to reality, and helping her to rub off the remnants of her bitter slave-memories with the soothing balm of Paul D’s love. By this, Denver qualifies herself to be heir to the great love that is her mother’s only bequest to her daughters. She also reclaims the black woman’s legacy of community-membership: by depending on the community for her mother’s sake, she compensates for Sethe’s offence of alienating it.

In most of Morrison’s narratives, a female generational chain of grandmother-mother-daughter is found: like the Baby Suggs-Sethe-Denver axis in Beloved, Pilate-Reba-Hagar in Song of Solomon, and Eva-Hannah-Sula in Sula. As Friedan observes, women who are “denied access to satisfaction of those needs in society” as individuals, make “home and family into a vehicle for [their] power, control, status and self-realization” (The Second Stage 92). There is a subversive aspect to the female groups in Morrison’s fiction in that
each forms a parallel community with its own rules and codes of social and moral conduct. In *Sula*, an unconventional trait runs in the Peace family holding the women together. Eva, who mutilates herself for the insurance money with which she feeds her hungry children, is ready despite the excruciating pain it causes her, to burn her son Plum to death, as he has gone soft in the head and is trying to crawl back into his mother’s womb: “... I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man” (*Sula* 72). Eva’s daughter Hannah who uses her sexuality as a gift that she is generous in giving, is a “day light lover” as she is “fastidious about whom she slept with,” for “sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment” (43-44). “Manlove” is a common legacy for all the Peace women; they “simply loved maleness, for its own sake” (41). But even in this, they retain their individual traits and subtle differences: “While Eva tested and argued with her men, leaving them feeling as though they had been in combat with a worthy, if amiable, foe, Hannah rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was...” (43).

Between Eva and Hannah there exists a bond of deep affection, understanding, mutual respect, and trust. It is this that deters Hannah from judging her mother harshly about Plum’s death. It is also this bond that gives Eva her mental tip-off on impending disaster just in time to see Hannah in flames, and strengthens her enough to jump out of the window from her cripple’s wheelchair, in an effort to save her daughter.

Eva has her own definition for parental love which she does not see as a matter for exhibition in conventional ways. She exemplifies motherhood that is capable of much sacrifice but never makes fuss. She is indignant at Hannah’s question whether she loved her children or played with them: “You settin’ here
with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes, full of maggots if I hadn’t” (68). Her love has always taken a practical turn, never suffocating its object with excessive zeal. Efficiency and responsibility combine with maternal affection in her. No act or movement of hers as mother is confused or meaningless. Even as her children have a firm hold over her feelings, emotions are never allowed to cramp her self; no tie is considered worth sustaining once it impedes individuality and stunts growth.

This precept is observed even beyond the letter by her granddaughter, Sula, who outgrows all stifling influences including Eva’s and develops an absolute self-interest. Hers, unlike Eva’s, is a self-assertion that negates responsibilities to others. Thus Eva’s heritage undergoes a weather-change in its extension to the third generation. Most contemptuous of conventions, Sula rejects notions of family ties too. On her homecoming after ten years’ unexplained self-exile, she deliberately seeks a break with Eva, who is too akin to herself to make good friends with. The rupture is culminated in Sula’s sending her grandmother off to an asylum. For her, it is a gesture of total rejection of all reining forces. Eva’s keenly observant eyes and clairvoyant tongue distract her from her search for a free self. Since both of them are equally self-determined, their reactions equally unpredictable when feeling unsure or threatened, both are wary of one another. For Sula, in the making of her absolute self, the elimination of Eva becomes imperative.

If the one-legged Eva is a metaphor for self-negating mother’s love, there is an outright rejection of the maternal in Sula. To Eva’s suggestion that she should ‘make’ some babies to settle herself down, her response is remarkable: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). As Eva points out, the difference between herself and Sula is that while Sula
has chosen to remain on her own, she herself was persuaded by circumstances
to fare alone in a man-made world, and to fight every inch to eke out her space
there. Eva has never neglected her familial commitments. She has a social
existence though deviant, which is successfully combined with the individual's
inner life. By virtue of her sharp wit and perception, which are not blunted by
old age, even her queer, non-conformist ways go unscathed.

In Eva and Hannah non-conformity is rather a spontaneous response to
the environment, but when it comes to the third female generation, it acquires
more of a deliberately subversive character. In Sula, there is less tolerance to
the restrictive morality and ethics of the dominant order than there is in Eva
and Hannah. Though Sula repeats Hannah in her deviant sexuality, there is a
marked difference. For Hannah, sex is a purely biological need while Sula uses
it as a platform to satisfy her whims; for both, it precludes emotional
involvement and helps in the assertion of a free self, but in different ways. With
Hannah, sex is a gift bounteously bestowed on grateful lovers who feel elevated
by it. Unlike Hannah, Sula is interested only in affirming her own selfhood, and
not in helping her men find their authenticity. Hers is experimental sex that is a
means to “fill in her empty spaces” (144).

With all these differences, the power of self that is released and the
autonomous female’s tradition that is set off in Eva’s family community are
proudly borne by Sula even in her illness and death, and beyond the grave
from where she continues to affect the convention-ridden, Bottom community
as a powerful but ‘negative’ model of self-affirmation.

In Pilate’s household, the corporate feeling and responsibility that unite
the three generations are never for once missing. The three women—the
bootlegging, voodooing Pilate; her ever-lucky gambler-daughter Reba, who
gives away all that she earns; and the granddaughter Hagar, as strong and
muscular and as capable as a man and unused to taking anyone’s orders—
possess entirely different temperaments. But this does not affect the integrity of
their self-contained community.

Pilate’s house is as quaint and wild a set-up as Eva’s. The inmates make
and follow their own rules, totally unmindful of the norms of the external world.
They keep their own hours for eating, sleeping, and doing work. Pilate is afraid
of neither man nor devil. Nor does she believe in any exhibition of feelings; the
only instinct to which she yields is the maternal, which is reputed to be as
strong as that of a tigress so that nobody who knows Pilate meddles with her
children. Like Eva, Pilate has bequeathed to her daughter Reba and
granddaughter Hagar an unyielding spirit, her own unblinking courage and
pride, and that squareness and determination with which she herself has
faced life.

However, in her involvement with Milkman, Hagar loses grip of her
autonomous self. Though Hagar has inherited the fierce spirit of her
grandmother in full measure, which drives her to take revenge on Milkman for
his faithlessness, she allows herself to be distraught by an excess of emotion
that renders her helpless. She forfeits the independence that Pilate and Reba
have maintained in their relationships with men so that no male has ever been
indispensable in their lives. Love does not help Hagar to define her self but
only to lose her integrity and self-esteem. “Totally taken over by her anaconda
love, she had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own”
(SCR 139). Unlike Sula, Hagar loses all convictions regarding herself and hence
is persuaded to evaluate herself by Milkman’s gaze of rejection. Pilate’s legacy
of self-sufficient femininity thus suffers a waning in Hagar who neglects to
sustain and defend it.
In *Jazz*, Violet's unyielding spirit is direct legacy from her grandmother True Belle, who defeats the dreariness of life with laughter. Violet's mother, Rose Dear, though a brave woman who makes her family survive against hard times, her husband's frequent vanishing spells, and strangers picking around her property, at last buckles up when they invade her home and snatch the last piece of furniture from under her. True Belle who takes charge of their dismal household—five hungry, terrified children and their defeated mother who silently nurtures the wrongs of life—brightens it with her laughter and Baltimore stories. For four years, "True Belle was there, chuckling, competent, stitching by firelight, gardening and harvesting by day" (126). Then Rose Dear quits for good by throwing herself into the narrow depths of a well, and is at last "free of time that no longer flowed but stood stock still when they tipped her from her kitchen chair" (126), an indignity to her self that whips her more than indigence or neighbours' charity. The most significant lesson Violet learned from her mother is, never to have children: "whatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama?" (126).

But from True Belle, who "thanked God for life, and life for death" (125), Violet learns the basic lessons for tackling life and its tasks: to fight uncompromisingly for what she has set her mind on, and never to give up like her mother did. So when she meets Joe she decides upon him as her man, and gets him. And later in their middle age, in spite of young, pretty Dorcas' interference in their lives, she is able to keep her man by her side to face squarely the desolateness of a childless existence, just because she is bent on it.

The maternal instincts have been suppressed in Violet because of her mother's "distress" (122) and her own determination never to have children to crowd around her for hunger, confirmed by the unsuitability of environment that she and Joe have to face in the city. These, however, are revived,
rejuvenated, and matured, under the influence of Alice Manfred. Alice fills the void left in Violet's life by Rose Dear's suicide; her seasoned views on life and death transform Violet's impetuosity into an enlightened discernment that helps her to see a daughter in Felice and thus strike a new phase in the generational.

In *Tar Baby*, however, there is a spurning of the maternal influence by the young heroine. Jadine's failure to receive and respond to the black female tradition is occasioned by a combination of circumstances. As an orphan, she has been deprived of the nourishing and nurturing of a mother. Though the aunt and uncle who raised her love her as their own daughter, Jadine's immediate loyalties are fixed on Valerian, her white benefactor who has given her a fine education. The sophisticated life and career this has exposed her to inevitably result in her drifting away from her native heritage to the extent of resisting it. The friendship that she enjoys with Valerian's wife Margaret is more valuable to her than the maternal affection of Ondine which, she suspects, has strings attached to it. She is not prepared to honour Ondine's parental claims and fulfil the role expected of her as black woman by becoming the daughter who "cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her" (283).

The kind of woman Jadine has taken pains to make herself into is one that pays tribute to the whiteman's order and conforms to white standards. This naturally alienates her from her own community and kinsfolk. The light skin and the refined ways that she proudly considers as what distinguishes her from the worthless black lot, makes her the target of contempt. However, her white training is deep enough to ignore the criticism of the community that she wants to sever ties with. Jadine's break with Son, whom she loves intensely, is the direct outcome of her need to escape the demands of a tradition that she is indisposed to fulfil. She wills herself to sacrifice her personal happiness for the
sake of her carefully cultivated, urbane identity. It is one of the mainsprings of the Afro-American’s existence that Jadine disregards in her ambitious search for self-advancement, namely, loyalty to the native culture and tradition.

In fact, a hankering after one’s roots informs all of Morrison’s black female-centred narratives, with their frequent focussing on native magic and ritual in association with mother figures. There is a strong indication here that “survival is possible when their protagonists make use of black support institutions” such as the female, especially maternal, communities (Mckay, Warhol and Herndl 258). In Song of Solomon and Tar Baby where this sense of race is strongly inscribed, the maternal-generational theme is approached from a different angle, with male heroes who, in contrast to the general pattern, act as bearers of prominently female-oriented black tradition. The protagonists in both are obsessed with a profound sense of pride in their black origin. All through his wanderings, Son, the run-away criminal in Tar Baby, feels the magnetic pull of his hometown, the all-black Eloe, which runs itself and is too proud to have anything to do with whites. As he tells Jadine, the best thing he considers to have happened to him is the first-ever dime he earned for helping out a black man in Eloe; that was the only real money he ever had, which he proudly spent on his first personal purchase. Though he has done jobs since, money has never attracted him. Jadine, who considers poverty as bad as prison, points out that if he had had money, he need not have had to steal, lie or hide; he could have appointed a good lawyer to disentangle him from the clutches of law. But Son would rather hide and starve, and take his own punishment, than be made accountable to any white law. A sense of being possessed of immense power urges him to live by his own law: “[H]e never wanted to live in the world their way. There was something wrong with the rites. He had wanted another way” (167).
So he lives an outlawed life for eight homeless, nameless years in “that great underclass of undocumented men” (167), but never for once does he miss sight of his real identity as “Son,” “the name that called forth the true him” (139).

It is his great regard for true identities that fills him with outrage at the snobbery of blacks brought up on white establishments, as exhibited by Ondine, Sydney and Jadine in “defending property and personnel that did not belong to them from a black man who was one of their own” (145-46). He jeers at their insensitivity to the real black identities and names of Gideon, the gardener, and Therese, the washingwoman, whom they insist on calling, after the white fashion, ‘Yardman’ and ‘Mary’ respectively, just because they respond to those names. Their shameless sense of superiority, for being favoured servants of a white man, over the lesser blacks of the island, is also criticized.

Despite his overpowering love for Jadine, her sophistication and her carefully cultivated European manners do not impress him as anything but the outcome of a misplaced loyalty. He feels contempt for her “for basking in the cold light that came from one of the killers of the world” (205). In her pursuit of continental elegance, Jadine is eager to exuviate her native culture and everything that represents it, and neglect her responsibilities to that culture wherein her roots reside. She wants to forget the past as there is “nothing any of us can do about the past but make our own lives better” (274), which she does by staying clear of black ways. She imagines that she is avenging her race by using the white education and culture to defeat the enemy at his own game. Son, on the other hand, reminds her that her education is of little worth since it has not helped her to learn anything about her own people, the black mothers and the black children, and about her own black self. In fact, it is this conviction that enables him to make the painful choice at the end, between his love and his “ancient properties” (308).
In *Song of Solomon* too, an indestructible black heritage is centralized. While woman’s immediate relation to it is a main theme, the tradition is allowed to be continued in the male line. Pilate’s specialized knowledge and magic, rooted in primordial instinctual drives, are inherited not by her daughter Reba or granddaughter Hagar. Both of them are too much absorbed in the present to possess, as Pilate does, that sacrificial, single-minded interest in the past as an inextricable part of one’s self: as something that bears on the present and offers a prophetic vision into the future. Being cut off early from people because of her eccentricities, Pilate has relied entirely on her dead father for directions so that her present has always been moulded mysteriously by the past. Milkman, her nephew, to whom Pilate bequeaths her spiritual properties, has an equally consuming “concentration on things behind him” (35) that qualifies him as her perfect successor.

His interest being ignited by stories of an African ancestor who could fly, Milkman goes out in search of his roots, leaving behind the tempting call of a material bequest. Even as he retrieves the missing thread of his genealogy he also gains entry into Pilate’s world of magical charms and spells, and learns its full significance. He traces his name as well as her occult powers back to their great ancestor Solomon/Shalimar, the African who flew off to his native land to escape slavery in a foreign country. Flying has always been a great preoccupation with Milkman; the absence of wings had bothered him as a child. For him, therefore, the discovery of such an outlandish connection is immensely satisfactory. Pilate, with her esoteric faculties, serves as his link to this exotic past.

Pilate herself has never been away from her African descent in spirit. She has retained in her queer self the essence of her native culture and has lived in religious adherence to its codes. She has meticulously resisted material
progress of the kind that turned her brother Macon into a ruthless adherent of money power. For Macon, to own things is to “own yourself and other people too” (55). Pilate has never owned anything more than what she immediately needed. While Macon believes that money is the “only real freedom there is” (163), Pilate considers it a burden and bondage. For her, nature alone has the power to liberate.

This is hardly surprising, considering the strangely ‘natural’ way in which she was self-born out of her dead mother’s womb, with no apparent effort, dragging her own cord and afterbirth. After the cord had shrivelled and fallen off, no navel had remained as a reminder of any prenatal maternal nourishment. By this unmothered birth, Pilate seems to have established a direct link with Mother Nature herself, uninterrupted by any human mediation. Macon remembers her even from her childhood days as smelling like the forest, from her constant chewing of pineneedles; a “woods-wild girl” (234) who craves for “her own cherries, from her own cherry tree with stems and seeds,” or “a tomato off its vine,” and the warm milk straight from the teat of their cow (167).

When Pilate learns during her wanderings that her lack of a navel is abnormal enough to drive people away from her, her natural reaction is to conceal it. She succeeds in having a love life, carefully keeping her secret. When she gets older, however, she grows tired of the secrecy, with the result that Pilate comes to be regarded with suspicion and superstitious fear. People sweep up her footprints and hang mirrors on her door to ward off evil. The fact that her frightening defect denied her “partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion” (148) drives her to a self-outlawed life.

Though Pilate lives the life of the wilderness, it is one “where there was system, or the logic of lions, trees, toads, and birds”; her “equilibrium overshadowed all her eccentricities” (138). She has her own code of politeness
and hospitality. She "had read only a geography book but had been from one end of the county to another" (139) to compensate for the lack of academic knowledge. Besides, she is reputed for her extra sensory perception that facilitates communication with the dead. Her special powers include those for natural healing and peacemaking. Macon sums up Pilate's fabulous intuitive powers in a question: "Who knows what Pilate knows?" (206). Despite her unconventionality, Pilate respects other people's privacy as sacred, and at the same time has "a deep concern for and about human relationships" (149).

It is her singular, almost mystical connection with nature, her profound knowledge of life, and her knack for reassuring one in doubt with her mere presence that draw Milkman to Pilate. In the presence of this strange woman who bears his own surname, the funny label of 'Dead' all on a sudden becomes a precious thing to be proudly possessed of and defended; to belong to the same name and clan with Pilate seems to be a privilege. In her crumbled old house with its disorganized surroundings and unkempt inmates, Milkman has the feeling of family, which has been missing in his own sterile household.

It is from Pilate that Milkman imbibes a sense of lineage. For Pilate, her name is of infinite value, for it has been given to her in accordance with the black tradition of naming children (except the first born male) by blind selection from the Bible. Despite its infamous associations, Pilate literally hangs on to it as solid evidence of her black identity and parentage, the one link with the tradition of her ancestors. She keeps the sheet of paper with the name written on it in a tiny brass box, and hangs it from her earlobe as her only ornament. Till the last, never for a moment does it leave her.

The only other possessions Pilate has laid by and guarded jealously show her sense of history: the geography book that has helped her to get her moorings during her wanderings, and a heavy green sack that she keeps
hanging from a beam in her bed room. The latter contains two things: rocks collected as souvenirs from the places she has been to, as if to establish that she too has a claim to those places; and the mortal remains of the old white man her brother had accidentally killed in a cave out of sheer fright. As she explains later to Milkman and Macon, "if you take a life, then you own it. You responsible for it. You can't get rid of nobody by killing them . . . the dead you kill is yours" (208). It is her great humanity and respect for the earth and the life it engenders that compel her to do what others consider crazy: carrying the heavy sack around in her wanderings. The kindness of the gesture pays too, since it turns out later that the bones are really her own father's.

If Pilate had been instrumental in bringing Milkman into the world "when only a miracle could have" (120), she plays the nourishing role of a parent in his adolescent years, reshaping his sensibilities and attitudes to life. Accepting him as her protege, she passes on to him the precious wisdom she has acquired from her roamings. Her influence effects a total perspectival change in him that renders his privileged social and economic position meaningless. Spiritually, Pilate becomes more of an ancestor to Milkman than either of his own parents: his father's materialistic pursuits allowing no space to accommodate the inner needs of the son, and his mother remaining imprisoned in a small silent world surrounded by the hate and neglect of her husband. Pilate's closeness to nature's life produces a corresponding respect in Milkman towards the elements which take on a friendly aspect for him, giving him a liberating sense of belonging to an all-embracing presence.

Every moment of his acquaintance with Pilate is an epiphany for Milkman, with immediate as well as far-reaching impact on him. He finds that those simple natural laws and codes that Pilate has always abided by have more justice and morality in them than any sophisticated ethics or etiquette.
She never interferes in other people's affairs nor does she tolerate interference in her own life. After Milkman's rejection has killed Hagar, Pilate waits for Milkman to return and receive his punishment. To let the culprit scot-free is to lay too heavy a stress upon her great love for Hagar and the bottomless grief at her death. Yet Pilate should maintain her ethical standards; she cannot take the life that she has helped to make. So when Milkman arrives at last she knocks him down and locks him up in the cellar, where she places near him what remains of Hagar: her hair that he hated, in a cute shoebox. Milkman, who is well-versed in her code of justice and her strange rationale, understands the significance of the gesture immediately: the one you kill becomes permanently yours. So he takes it home, this time as a valued treasure, to keep as his own forever.

The toning up of Milkman as Pilate's sole inheritor to an undying tradition becomes complete when his hunt for a mundane treasure, begun at the behest of his father who considers it his rightful inheritance, accidentally changes its direction into an intense search for a more enduring legacy. Milkman's search for his roots is a retracing of time itself into an unknown past where his own family's connections with the ancestral tree had been severed. His enquiries lead him to the astounding revelation that the song he first heard Pilate and her daughters sing tells the story of his own great-grandfather, Solomon or Shalimar, the flying African. The whole of the village of Shalimar turns out to be his own kinsfolk, the clan of Solomon, descendants of his twenty one children.

Before he is equipped to inherit Solomon's flying tradition, evidently Milkman requires a pruning, a shedding of unnecessary weight. Guitar's observations on the proud, strutting peacock that cannot fly because of the weight of its fancy plumes ironically reflect on Milkman's false airs of
refinement: “Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (179). Milkman’s journey backwards in time to trace his genealogy effects a stripping down of his rich black’s attitudes that render him insensitive to the seething problems of the common black lot. His pretensions of sophistication and all the paraphernalia of an imitation culture that impede his coming into his blackman’s birthright are left behind, too.

If Pilate’s first interference with death on behalf of Milkman is to bring him to life as Macon’s heir, her last one is to make him the gift of an extension of that life, by taking Guitar’s bullet aimed at Milkman. Significantly, Pilate’s dying words, devoid of hate or rancour, communicates, as last message to Milkman, an article of love, which is her formula for liberation: “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (336). Her single earring that bears her name and identity is claimed by a bird that promptly flies away with it. Now the full significance of the native magic of his flying ancestor dawns on Milkman. He realizes that Pilate too possessed that emancipating power of levitation; she could fly even without leaving the ground.

He now experiences the same irrepressibility and unyieldingness of spirit as marked his ancestors. By shedding the entrapping weight of fear and its accompaniment of self-doubt, Milkman has ultimately found self-liberation. And from that vantage, the realization of his childhood dream of flying does not seem impossible: “For now he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” (337). Milkman has at last reclaimed his identity as inheritor of Solomon’s and Pilate’s great heritage. Pilate’s bequest of fearlessness and freedom, and love and humanity, which had been at the root of her magic, also becomes his now. He has done his filial duty by helping Pilate bury his grandfather’s bones in the very soil sacred to his
great-grandfather, Solomon’s Leap. The obsessions and pretensions of a sophisticated urban culture, whose product he had imagined himself to be, he is now ready to eschew as worthless, bland, and uninspiring, as he stakes claim to the timeless, rich African tradition, his original legacy.

The Afro-American’s concern for defending his Africanness against the white American culture that threatens to engulf it is clearly in evidence in Morrison’s narratives. This may be seen in Guitar’s grudge against Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, in Son’s grievance against Jadine in *Tar Baby*, in the sheer malice that Claudia feels towards Maureen Peal in *The Bluest Eye*, and in the fierceness with which the men of Ruby guard their “eight-rock blood” (*Paradise* 194) in their all-black settlement. Morrison declares in an interview that “the reclamation of the history of black people” in America is “paramount in its importance” because “the presence and heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours” (*Davis* 413). Predictably, the specificity of race is foregrounded as an important part of black woman’s experience in her narratives.

Unlike Morrison, Joseph’s involvement with the woman-issue is not connected with race. As a feminist writer who has declared war against the ideology of sexual domination, she regards it her mission to write about the world of woman “where she has been deprived of even the right of choice upon her own body” (*Joseph, preface, PT*, n.pag.). Like Morrison, Joseph is deeply concerned with the effective manipulation of language to suit her feminist’s purposes; she appears even to favour a ‘woman speak’ that can deconstruct the patriarchal construction of femininity. Just as Morrison writes for the black people of America, Joseph writes “for daughters and mothers,” as she declares in the dedication of *Paapattara*. Satchidanandan places Joseph’s writing, together with that of a few other literary women like Saraswathi Amma
and Madhavikutty, in a category that corresponds to Showalters’ ‘female’ stage of women’s writing. Writing “in a vein possible only for women, she concentrates on the female self and emanates a profound sense of freedom” (Satchidanandan,’Muditteyangal’45).

If Morrison’s fictional ethos is strictly black American in character, Joseph addresses a society of composite character and multiple influences. Beyond the specific flavour that her native tongue gives to her writing, there is reflected in the life Joseph portrays a broader Indian consciousness, which transcends boundaries.

The variety that is the hallmark of the Indian society also indicates the multiple bases along which Indian woman’s oppression takes shape. Each of Joseph’s stories unravels a new face of repressed womanhood—as wife, daughter, mother, grandmother, working woman, and creative genius; marginalized and excluded in communal, caste and class divisions; bound by age-old customs, conventions and superstitions; subjected to innumerable social prescriptions as well as proscriptions and resulting psychological inhibitions.

Though the centralizing of the feminine is as identifiable a motif in Sarah Joseph’s fiction as in Toni Morrison’s, a greater inability to strike free of the restrictive frames of patriarchy is evinced by a larger number of women in Joseph’s stories. Ann Mary, the hapless bride in “Ann Maryuṭe Kalyāṇam” is the passive spectator-cum-victim of a typically patri-centred Indian bridal where the girl is an insignificant accompaniment to the valuables exchanged. In “Nannatinkamaḷude Vriṣṭam,” Eliza who is tied up in an unconsummated marriage is driven to take refuge in an overflow of religious fervour, her dreams of conjugal happiness being shattered by her husband’s misinformed notions of morality. Vimala, in “Manassile Tī Matram” (“Only the Fire Inside,” KS 19-23) is another wife who is literally fed to death with the routine drudgery at home,
workplace and in the bedroom. She reaches a stage of frozen unconcern to the repressive environment out of which not even the fact of being trapped inside a burning house can rouse her. A similar fate is courted by Kanal Bala, the teenaged cine-artist, full of sparkling hope and promise, in “Avasaanatte Peg” (“The Last Peg,” OS 82-89). As heroine in a real life romance, she has to make a disgraceful exit, heart-broken at the duplicity of her superstar lover, who belatedly remembers that he is old enough to be her father besides being happily married. The feminine dilemma in many of these cases points as much to the rigorous hold that social institutions have upon the female self as to crippling personal inadequacies that prevent woman from breaking free of her bondage.

More frequently in Joseph’s later collections emerges the combating feminine that effectively undermines patriarchal institutions and their repressive tactics. The woman writer in “Ooro Ezhuttukaariyuṭe Ullilum” walks out on her insensitive husband and her home, in a desperate attempt to save her creative energies from going to waste under heaps of unwashed dishes. Leaving behind the disheartening atmosphere of home which sums up to “husband’s power, children’s claims and monotonous chores” (Satchidanandan, “Muditteyyangal˚18), she boldly walks toward the wide horizons of freedom that “aunt Mable’s house” offers. Her home leaving is, in fact, an act of wrenching away from the institutional bonds that demand the sacrifice of her self for the fulfilment of her husband’s intentions and the children’s happiness.

Woman’s resistance within marital bonds is the theme in “Daampatyam” where the outwardly conforming wife fights her battles inside and alone, excluding her good-for-nothing husband from her inner life. “Through symbolic gestures she has formulated a silent language of resistance” (Satchidanandan, “Muditteyyangal˚39) and has her own techniques of venting her frustrations.
She reacts to her grievances and disillusionments by shattering glassware, and alarms her husband by explosive looks and inflammable silences.

In "Prakasiniyude Makkal," resistance takes another form. Here, societal expectations regarding motherhood and the mother’s own natural rights and feelings come into conflict. The heroine, an unmarried mother asserts her will by deciding that her children will remain illegitimate rather than become heirs to their bourgeois father’s illegitimate possessions.

Another face of the subaltern driven to insurgence is seen in “Veḻutta Nirmitikaḻum Karutta Kaṇḍaadīyum” (“The White structures and the Black Mirror,” OS 31-39). The ugly black salesgirl Amminikutty finds herself a misfit in the cosmetic shop where she works and where she is humiliated and harassed for her ugliness. However, her calloused, unmanicured hands come in quite handy when her honour is endangered, their rough grip powerful enough to squeeze out her scheming boss’ lust together with his snobbish airs and his life-breath, all in a single stroke.

In “Puutalayam” (KKK 34-40), the devious ways in which the male chauvinist society interferes with woman’s growth and self-fulfilment are satirized. The protagonist, Gracykutty, is an unsophisticated country-bred girl who emerges out of her unenlightened, earthy existence in a farmhouse into the mesmerising milieu of space research by sheer will. Just when her life’s greatest ambition of a space voyage is imminent, disruptive social forces manifest themselves in the form of the moral prejudices of her parents and neighbours. Their ill will is a psychological weapon that threatens to crush the young astronaut’s morale that has never once cracked under the rigorous training and the tough selection procedure she has undergone. Gracykutty does, however, surmount these discouraging circumstances and set out to fulfil her ambition of diving into the mysteries of infinite space.
These women stand out from the rest of the crowd that has accepted the destiny of passive femininity; they have transcended repressive social and psychological factors by exercising their will and, for that reason, they inspire awe and fear in the male world and disturb the system. "Muditteyyam Urayunnu," which is evocative of the ancient cult of Sakti, is the story of a young woman who disturbs the patriarchate by the strange potential of her long, thick, pitch-black hair. The title of the story refers to the furious, hair-swaying, primal dance rituals in honour of a tribal goddess with whom the heroine identifies herself, her hair becoming the symbol of the indestructible feminine. Lalitha prefers to keep her hair unfurled as it gives her a sense of power, but it enrages her father and brother. They see in it an unleashing of shameless sexuality. Lalitha finds devious ways to circumvent all their efforts to make her tie it up. As a last resort, they give her in marriage to Sanatanan, hoping thereby to put a check to her sexuality and crush her recalcitrant will that appears to draw sustenance from her hair-power.

Lalitha had hoped to escape through marriage the umpteen restrictions on her female body imposed by her father and brother, but encounters in her husband another agent of repression and an even greater tormentor of her feminine self. Actually, Sanatanan is frightened when she unravels herself before him in her burning red sari, her beautiful long hair undone. For she reminds him of the primitive goddess of cosmic power and energy, complete with her red outfit, tinkling waistland and trident. The rich hair she had prided in as the essence of her self becomes a bone of contention between husband and wife: Sanatanan seeking to eliminate her hair-power with the help of priests and sorcerers in a "symbolic castration" (Satchidanandan, Muditteyyangal 19), for it is a question of keeping woman within her limits; and Lalitha jealously guarding it as the "sign of her ‘difference’ and her feminine identity" (19) and
her only advantage over the oppressive male. Eventually, assuming elemental feminine powers, Lalitha identifies with and manifests herself as Bhagavati, the female goddess in her most forbidding and awe-inspiring aspect, which is the one feminine form commanding male respect and worship.

The theme of female empowerment against oppressive environs is associated here with the revival of a tradition about the devastating fury of an avenging female deity. The story also provokes a re-reading of the Indian tradition of veneration of woman as deity, which sharply contrasts with the prevailing situation of female oppression. This tradition is often cited to substantiate the patriarchally encouraged notion concerning the exalted status women have ‘always’ enjoyed in Indian culture. Names are evoked of powerful female deities; stories are cited from epics and legends, of women who were worshipped for being paragons of virtue. Their glorified status and the limitless power they are assumed to have wielded are upheld as if these compensated for the utter powerlessness of women in real life situations. However, as Beauvoir observes, glorification of woman is only a way of denying her reciprocal relations (102). In fact, some of the Indian legends tell of female figures who were persecuted to death and canonized later, with the persecutors themselves turning into devotees, either as penance or from fear of retribution (“Kaṇṇakī,” Visvavijnāna Kosam 570-71). Looking from another angle too, it is not difficult to discern in this glorification a limiting strategy: mention of ‘virtue’ in female as worthy of worship immediately evokes a number of opposite terms such as ‘vice’ and ‘evil’ as deplorable. In a system operating on such dichotomization, this valuing/devaluing acts as an ordering principle that helps to keep womanhood within bounds. Besides, in the glorified or deified aspect, woman is viewed as having overcome her ‘womanly infirmities’ and as distanced from the gendered status assigned by convention. Hence it is
easier for the male to respect or even worship her without fear of compromising his ego. For it is not the female as such but a degendered being that is worshipped.

As in *Tar Baby* and *Song of Solomon*, occasionally in Joseph’s works too the subversive strategy of allowing a male to act as heir and preserver of a female tradition is used. In “Cchaayaapaṭam,” (“The Portrait,” *PT* 79-85), Chitran, the great-grandson, is chosen to be Ammamma’s confidant. Chitran not only receives the legacy of Ammamma’s death-bed revelations but remains the sole witness to her unutterable experiences, winding down through her whispered confidences. Chitran’s Ammamma is representative of the much-abused, long-suffering womenfolk of feudalistic homes in Kerala. These women, who are projected as symbols of the status and prestige of their families, are expected to stand as firm pillars of integrity and virtue while their men pursue a life of self-indulgence, crime, and corruption. It is they who propitiate the gods by their morally and religiously disciplined lives and, through performance of suitable rites and ceremonies, expiate the sins of lust, violence and bloodshed committed by their men.

Ammamma who has conducted herself in the expected ways all her lived days now reviews her life for the benefit of her painter-grandson who wants to portray her in all her grandeur, befitting the great family tradition and Ammamma’s role in it. But the picture she unveils is a disenchanted one, devoid of the usual falsehood about the honour and glory of the family and about herself as the grandmatriarch presiding over the fullness of the clan. It is the untold story of the life of a woman whose childhood dreams of a beautiful “hillock where peacocks danced in the rain, with a limitless sky above and a vast sea of unending waves beneath” (*PT* 83) were hopelessly shattered. As a child-wife, marriage became a daily ordeal of violence and violation for her.
She bore her children before she could realize who she was or what childbearing meant; and was sentenced to home-imprisonment for life while her husband roamed around, quenching his thirsts and hungers in the huts of slave-girls. “When the evening lamp was lit in the great house, it was in my heart that the darkness settled,” she reminisces. And when she had grown accustomed to the darkness of her prison, what she saw was a litter of crying children so that she “could look only down, and never up, nor right nor left” (82).

For Chitran, who begs for a story from his grandmother’s repertory, she chooses one that relates of a moral lapse: about how she double-crossed her faithless husband by finding a lover for herself, who seemed to offer a way out from the confinement of a loveless marriage. But apart from the thrill it gave her of doing the forbidden and getting even with her husband, the affair had proved to be only a partial success; for “still I could not reach the hill top where the peacocks danced” (84). Ammamma’s frustration in marriage is so complete that when her husband died, her only grief, as she confesses to Chitran, was over what she would cry for. And at last, she had shed tears in real earnest just for the reason that she did not have anything to remember from her married life worth crying about.

Infidelity rarely gets focus in Joseph’s stories. Here, however, it appears as a weapon for “undermining the Name-of-the-father,” for it is “not outside the system of marriage, the symbolic, patriarchy, but hollows it out, ruins it, from within” (Jane Gallop, cited in Nelly Furman 71).

It is significant that Ammamma, whose “words had dried up before [she] could learn to speak” (PT 82) finds her voice restored in the last lap of her life. With advancing years, femininity seems to lose much of its gender specificity and acquire a sort of neutrality in sexual terms; the world’s view of woman also mellows so as to accord her more freedom and equality of relations. So in her
old age, Ammamma retrieves what remains of her identity and dignity as woman, commanding respect and admiration as the great-grandmother of the clan. But she must also reconstruct that part of her self that has been obscured by time. By recapturing her true story for Chitran, she at once produces evidence and a witness to the reality of her past existence, before it is entirely buried in oblivion and becomes inaccessible to posterity.

What is communicated to Chitran, who is called upon to corroborate her "untestifiable testimonies" (82), is an altogether conflicting version of woman and mother, of history and tradition. It clashes with his own received notions, and renders his task of portraying Ammamma in her true milieu a difficult one. On the one hand is the popular, conventional picture of the contented grandmatriarch who is a full presence in the great prosperous family. On the other hand, from Ammamma's stories emerges an unfulfilled and defiant woman who has dared to yearn for the forbidden fruit of freedom beyond the bars of her prison, one who disrupts all the favourite male assumptions regarding female behaviour and thought patterns. Her stunning revelations critique a whole set of beliefs and notions about marriage and family. The notion of privilege attached to upper class female existence is also put to question.

To the disillusioned Chitran, Ammamma becomes the metaphor for violated womanhood, combining in her the experiences of all the dishonoured, outraged women of his acquaintance. So, instead of painting the portrait of Ammamma in the background of a full, flourishing clan, Chitran draws absurd feminine forms that "with padlocked eyes, sewn-up lips, and fettered words" (83) complete the picture of family glory. In a frenzy, he paints crushed and mutilated female lips on the walls in red, the colour of blood. Moving around in ritual dance-steps, he flings the blood-red on the ceiling, on the floor
and all over the walls. It is as if Ammamma’s room is transformed into a shrine and Ammamma into ‘Bhagavati’; Chitran becomes the young priest performing the rites to pacify the mother goddess and forestall her anger and retribution.

Chitran manifests himself as Ammamma’s oracle as he emerges from her room, smeared all over with colours red, yellow, black and white. The undecipherable signs and figures that he draws on the doorsill and in the courtyard forewarn the watchdogs of a tradition that strangles womanhood. The history of desecrated femininity as laid bare by Ammamma’s exposé hangs as a curse and a disgrace over the great family’s pomp and splendour. And Chitran, the fourth-generation offspring, feels compelled to make amends for the follies of his forebears; beginning with a symbolic blood-offering, he proceeds to propitiate the offended mother-goddesses.

The presence of a generational community and the transmission of a female legacy that disrupts the mainstream socio-cultural and religious processes figure prominently in Joseph’s *Aalaahaayute Penmakka*. Ammamma, the story-telling grandmatriarch, is also the preserver of the history of the abandoned lot of Kokkancira and its unlucky inhabitants. From Ammamma’s reminiscences, what unwinds is a saga of woman’s courage that leads her through trials to victory over a hostile environment. Life in Kokkancira is dominated by woman, not because men are scarce but because none of them has the initiative or any dominant quality to merit recognition, except Kuttipappen, Annie’s paternal uncle, who unfortunately, is a bed-ridden consumptive. The men of Kokkancira are either idle and inefficient, like Ammamma’s deceased bandmaster-husband, who never bothered about his perpetually pregnant wife or hungry children; or irresponsible and thoughtless, like Annie’s father, Kochappan, who deserted his pregnant wife for no apparent reason. The male residents of the “eight-room” block are quarrelsome and good-for-nothing drunkards. Even the fourteen local
rowdies who frighten women and children by their forbidding exteriors are stupid and cowardly men; when the girl they eve-teased jumps into the river, they cry out in terror because none of them knows swimming. They have chosen their infamous vocation just because they are not equipped for anything better.

Thus Kokkancira's destiny is virtually placed in the hands of its women. Ammamma is the spiritual counsellor of the community. She is equipped with the magical formula of Aalaaha's prayer, the incantation of which drives away evil spirits, blocks natural calamities and epidemics, and controls the elements. Kokkancira's history is recorded in her memory; her word is more reliable and acceptable to the community than official documents and title deeds. Ammamma's own household is a strong female community where women build up and maintain home, give mutual support and succour, and are responsible to each other. It is Ammamma's sheer courage that helps the family to tide over the uncertainty following their eviction from their home in Pattalam Road. Since no help is to be expected from her uncaring husband, Anthony, she puts all her energies into the task of settling herself and her family in the accursed heath of Kokkancira. Reviewing her own performance, she tells Annie, "That was real guts, kid. It's the guts you get when little children cry out in hunger" (15).

Ammamma establishes herself in the respects of Kokkancira as the most wanted person in times of need. She toils in the land like any hardworking male; the bean-plant she has nursed forms a shady bower over their house as a symbol of Ammamma's own charismatic presence. Even when her physical faculties have faded, Ammamma is still as responsible and vigilant as ever. She has faced separation and death boldly, and is not cracked by the flood that threatens to submerge Kokkancira. As everything man has built yields to nature's wrath, she musters up her recondite powers to stall the rampant wind
and rain; and to Annie’s amazement, a rainbow rises over the flood, as Aalaaha’s own reassurance to Ammamma and her clan (148). The wind that upturns the concrete buildings and walls in the vicinity does no more than tip Ammamma’s ramshackle house; like Noah’s Arc, it alone survives the flood.

The strongest ally as well as critic of Ammamma is Kunjurothu, her daughter-in-law and Annie’s Amma (“mother”). After her husband’s desertion, Amma decides to remain tied to the distresses of Ammamma’s household rather than go back to the comforts of her paternal home. She attends to her husband’s sick brother, Kuttipappen, caters to the needs of his sisters and, despite a sharp tongue that engages in verbal battles with Ammamma whose magic scandalizes her religious sense, stands staunchly by the family in its ebbs and tides.

Ammamma’s eldest daughter and Annie’s Valiammai (“big aunt”), Kunjila, is a woman who has been terribly wronged by life but has refused to surrender to the destiny thrust on her young self. Valiammai was married at the tender age of fifteen to Itty, a forty-year old rich man who was dying from some chronic illness and desired to “know” a woman before his death. Itty tried to compensate for his physical disability by loving her with an excess of emotion that only a dying man was capable of, and Valiammai was forever made hostage to it. After one week of her marriage, she returned home a widow. She exuded the smell of frank incense, rosewater and eucalyptus oil, “her left cheek and neck frozen forever” (42), from having sat hours on end with her face pressed to that of her dead husband in accordance with his last wish.

Since her return from her husband’s house, Valiammai remains engulfed in an emptiness until it is relieved by the accidental opening up of a career. When labour starts for her mother with no one to attend to her, Valiammai does not hesitate; despite her own extreme youth and inexperience, she helps
her mother's safe delivery. From then on Valiammai has a busy time delivering babies. It is as if she has placed her thwarted life in the service of the community. Within a short time, she becomes the most sought-for person in the neighbourhood, well-known for her professional expertise. She never declines a call for help, however odd the hour or hostile the weather.

Ammamma’s second daughter, Nonu, who frightens the rowdies who harass her by doing the quite unexpected thing of jumping into the flooding river; later in her married life, reacts to her husband’s harassment by running away with her friendly neighbour, a young blacksmith. Nonu’s younger sister, Cherichi, on the other hand, silently suffers in her marriage with a parson, Reverend David, who takes it upon himself to socialize her into a parson’s wife. In a letter she writes to her mother, Cherichi sums up her marital experience thus: “Being a parson’s wife is like lying on the cross” (92).

Ammamma’s younger daughters, Chiyyamma and Chinnamma, are sprightly young girls who enjoy exercising their freedom in full. Their buoyant laughter that bursts out in unison is a perpetual wonder to Annie, for it does not seem to need much provocation; it rather seems to be the expression of their irrepressible spirit. In the prime of youth, they are, however, not free of care. They work in the button factory all day and, during their leisure, make lace trimmings which bring in some additional income to support the family that includes one invalid brother and another brother’s wife and child. It is the skilled work of Ammamma’s three daughters—Valiammai, Chiyyamma and Chinnamma—and the unskilled domestic labour of her daughter-in-law that sustain the balance of their home economy through thick and thin.

A similar function at the communal level is served by the two Kunjarams, who are distinguished by their skin colour as Black and White. These women run the only two investment schemes in Kokkancira in the beginning,
which ensure some sort of economic future for the poverty-ridden Kokkancerites. Their saving schemes, known as “friends’ schemes,” also provide a forum for the community to gather for noisy but friendly exchanges.

The uneducated, quarrelsome wives of Kokkancira are, nevertheless, all women of character who have firm opinions on every issue. When Kuttipappen proposes to begin a ‘carka’ class that would provide employment for the Kokkancerites and also kindle their national spirit, it is these women who most enthusiastically respond to the call. It gives them a sense of fulfilment and pride over their own capacity to work; they even turn pro-Congress though it means betraying their communist husbands. However, they do not hesitate to abandon the whole project when they realize that it does not bring them any material benefit, that their work is undervalued. No one can persuade them against their own convictions. Similarly, the women of the “eight-room block” unite to confront Emundan Varu who stakes a claim of ownership over the building and proceeds to evict them from their homes. No one knows for sure whether there is any truth in the claim; however, they are assured by Ammamma, the oldest inhabitant of Kokkancira, that no one but they have any right over their life-long occupancy. And when Varu’s muscle-men arrive to evict them, it is the women who fight them off with cudgels and firebrands, while their men stand staggering and stammering by, under the influence of the toddy they have drunk. The women do hold their ground, and would have won too, except that their husbands, still on the booze, pull up stakes, receiving petty sums for compensation.

Annie, the perpetual-child witness of the story of Kokkancira, is a precocious girl who has an intense inner life. Watching, observing, and listening intently. Annie forms strong opinions and conclusions of what happens around her. She has her own judgement on moral and ethical issues. She often
wonders at the illogicity of adult thinking as when people gossip about the love affair between her Valiammai and Kunjan, the compounder. She fails to see how Kunjan’s loving her aunt becomes a crime: “First they say, everyone should love everyone else. Then they say, husband should love wife only and wife should love husband only” (96). Annie arrives at the conclusion that such contradictory, adult definitions of love have no rationale at all, and are therefore fit to be ignored.

Her perceptions about female existence and its tribulations are formulated from her observation of the women in her own family. An excellent listener, she absorbs information from conversation, soliloquies, and even from gestures. Thus the deep sighs that accompany the frequent soliloquizing of Amma and the restless movements of Valiammai on sleepless nights are pregnant with meaning to Annie. Ammamma’s ‘historical’ ejaculations that change in tone and rhythm and become good humoured, indignant, or melancholic in accordance with the situation, the tearful under-breath whispering that invariably takes place between the older women of the house when the marital problems of Cherichi and Nonu are discussed—all together execute a momentous disclosure on female existence. The troubles that attend the unvalued, hard labour of these women fill Annie with a profound sympathy and understanding. By the fact of her bearing witness, Annie too becomes part of this great feminine drama, which relieves her at least partially of the pain and ennui accompanying the girlchild’s growing up.

Annie accidentally becomes eyewitness to the terrible sight of a crudely executed abortion that is staged in her own home. She fights over her initial, child’s inclination to cry out, as she realizes with the woman’s instinct that it is a secret shared among the womenfolk, and is to be kept even from her closest friend Kuttipappen. She feels that she can no longer be the same child;
the others too have been transformed in her perspective by the vague suspicions and fears that lurk in her mind. The episode marks the inner maturing of Annie; from then on secrets begin to be kept buried in her female consciousness.

The passing on of female tradition is a central theme in *Aalaahaayute Penmakkal*. Ammamma, the grandmatriarch, is in possession of the Aalaaha's prayer that according to convention, is a powerful code for binding the elements and evil forces in the name of crucified Christ. This formula is transmitted in the female line in Ammamma's family, in opposition to the codes of established church according to which religious authority and practice are taboo for woman. Ammamma who received it from her mother must pass it on, which she does, not to her own daughters but to the granddaughter, Annie. As Ammamma's constant companion, Annie has proved her eligibility to be Ammamma's direct inheritor. From her grandmother, she has imbibed a deep sense of history, as one among the victims of its obfuscations. She is obsessed with the idea of reclaiming for Kokkancira and its outcast people their legitimate space in history. She misses no opportunity to glean information on the past, which she connects with the present, and preserves in her consciousness for future reference. This, in fact, is her grandmother's bequest to her, together with the Aalaaha's prayer that would mark her out as guide and mentor to posterity, just as her grandmother has been. As Sarah Joseph points out, Annie's state of physical illness itself becomes conducive environment to sharpen her mental, psychic and emotional faculties, to the highest levels needed for the future matriarch and prophetess of Kokkancira (Joseph, personal interview, 5 March, 2000).

As Showalter points out, "The most consistent assumption of feminist reading has been the belief that women's special experience would assume and
determine distinctive forms in art” (Showalter, Jacobus 33). The centralizing of the feminine in its maternal aspect, which is a common trend in the fictions considered, is of a highly subversive import. It questions the patriarchal practice of using woman’s biological difference as a convenient rationale for the disprivilege arbitrarily attached to her. In fact, mother has been treated as the finest exemplification of the ‘other’ and as proof of woman’s ineligibility to equality. It may be seen that the transformation of ‘mother’ into ‘other’ has been effected through a simple perspectival shift. A countershift in perspective, however, reinstates mother back at the centre in the narratives analysed here, with all her privileges and prerogatives restored.

Palmer draws attention to the change in attitude towards motherhood in women’s fiction; how, ceasing to be considered a matrix of oppression, it is presented as a “source of pleasure and ambiguous power” (Palmer 95-96). In the mothers’ stories of Morrison and Joseph, both “the personal and the political facets of motherhood” (96) are given the limelight. The revival of the mother’s perspective in fiction also marks a turning point in feminist stances. The radical feminists’ rejection of maternity as conflicting with the cause of equality has been a reaction to the ways in which woman’s biological difference has been manipulated to her disadvantage. However, this militant feminist phase has been recognized as a “half-life of reaction” (Friedan, Second Stage 43). As Friedan puts it, “part of the conflict that feminists feel about the family . . . is a hangover from the generations when too great a price was paid. . . . The point is, the movement to equality and the personhood of women isn’t finished until motherhood is a fully free choice” (87). Since the 1990s, women writers from America have been striving to tackle the conflict between woman’s personhood and motherhood in new terms. In India, the male perspective too tends to show a change to recognize maternity as
empowering experience that places woman in a unique position; fulfilment of self through motherhood is seen to be an experience divinely reserved for women. "Man, being deprived of this, is haunted by the absence of a fullness that is unobtainable through any activity, whether artistic or intellectual" (Ramanunni 20).

Friedan describes the changes that woman’s outlook on family and maternity has undergone as constituting a thesis-antithesis-synthesis cycle: the “new turn in the cycle that brings us back to a familiar place from a different vantage” is such that takes Ibsen’s Nora, who walked out of home to seek her self, back to where she started, as a new person who is no longer trapped in a doll’s house but is powerfully in charge of the situation (Second Stage 81). Of course, women still resist the socially assigned sex roles; but they realize that what they fight is not family or motherhood as such, but their institutionalized structures that impede upon woman’s independent selfhood and her right to enjoy these as valued experience.