Chapter 6

When the Muted Find Their Voices

The principle of dualism that governs the categories of 'self' and 'other' has exercised a pivotal function in the narratives of domination. Endeavours to defend and retain one's territory have necessitated the articulation of spatiality too in two irreducible modes, namely the centre and the margins. The centre-space invariably belongs to the dominant discourses and voices, while the outer/other space is virtually a non-space as regarded from the vantage of the centre. By being denominated the 'margins,' not only is the status of a space-proper denied to it, but also the very possibility of its having an absolute value in itself is negated. Wherever individuals and groups are thus spatially graded and categorized, oppression tends to be. Caste, class, racial and gender structures have thus come to inscribe separate fenced-in spaces—instanting some at the centre, and relegating others beyond the margins.

There is the linguistic aspect of this segregatory tendency that defends and compounds the social and cultural dimensions of the question. To be in possession of common, mutually intelligible and communicable linguistic signs places the central and marginalized categories on equal footing. This would cause a temporary diffusion of boundaries and erasing of differences; even when reinstated, the disturbed borderline would threaten to retain traces of the transgression. Therefore, it is found expedient to keep the marginalized out of the framework of dominant patterns of signification. The dominant exercise of speech makes meaning, logic, and a space for itself by creating margins of inarticulate confusion and silence. It is to these marginal non-spaces surrounded by silence that the subordinate categories of race and gender are exiled. Since the structures of language articulate power, denial of voice and language means denial of access to power structures.
The story of the evolution of marginal categories has special bearing on the history of the borderline-existence of woman under patriarchal ideology. Manifold structures of mutedness are specified for her under its culture. Language codes formulated for the quintessential human function of communication are rendered inaccessible to her. Signification—making of meaning—is monopolized by the male; to the female is assigned the sterile territory of incoherent nonsense. In the male-oriented system of signs, woman's meanings are distorted and prevaricated; her truth misinterpreted and falsified; and for her rights she must get concurrence from a super male ego. Her voice is ignored, unheard or contradicted. "The contradiction between women's centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of interpretation and explanation has been a dynamic force, causing women to struggle against their condition" (Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy 5).

According to Edward Ardner, men and women may hold two distinct models of the universe. Men articulate the dominant structure in terms of their position in the world while women remain inarticulate within this structure, forming a muted group, whose model of the world exists at deeper levels (qtd. in Greene and Kahn, introduction 10). It is as a convenient 'other' to the male 'subject' that woman exists in the masculine universe, where she is faced with a problem of spatiality. In all conceivable situations, peripheral spaces are assigned to her. The limitedness of her precincts serves to emphasize the expanse of the masculine territory by contrast. The conceptual pair of centre-margin, in its relation to contiguous pairs like speech-silence and presence-absence, defines the relative position of the feminine in the given set-up. Lerner speaks of the "conceptual error" in the subsuming of 'woman' under 'man' and the need for "a radical restructuring of thought and analysis.
which once and for all accepts the fact that humanity consists in equal parts of men and women”: the “experiences, thoughts and insights of both sexes must be represented in every generalization made about human beings” (*The Creation of Patriarchy* 220).

An engagement with the dispossession of the feminine space/speech and alternately with woman’s reclaiming of it is a shared concern in the fictions of Toni Morrison and Sarah Joseph. The magnitude of the disintegration caused to the feminine depends on the degree of non-resistance offered by the victim. In the absence of opposition, the dis-spacing takes on macabre dimensions. In Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola’s experience of being the dispossessed black other is more gruesome than that of her friends Frieda and Claudia, because of her non-resistant acquiescence to it. In their awkward teens, all the three girls are subjected to a lot of limiting by their parents, with the result that in their home environment they are more or less silent observers of what goes on around. Being excluded from the circle of adult blacks on the one hand, and from the wider space belonging predominantly to the whites on the other, whatever space they can possess is an interior one—that of their adolescent girlhood.

Their mothers keep on silencing them and sending them outdoors, reflecting on them those similar experiences they themselves have to suffer in the wider scheme of affairs. Having maintained their own silences in the outer world in a variety of contexts, they compensate by letting steam upon their children, back in their small black spaces. Mrs. McTeer makes long, offensive soliloquies full of indirect invectives upon people and things that have been on her mind, with her children as audience; after these, she invariably bursts out singing. Her children, Frieda and Claudia, being used to her pranks, do not wait for her to finish to escape into their own proud inner world which is the only confirmation of their existence. There they duly reassert their selves.
Pecola does not have resort to any free inner space where such reaffirmation can happen. Even in the adolescent world she shares with Frieda and Claudia, her space is remarkably bounded with silence. She wills herself to disappear whenever there is a squabble, at home or at school. Her mother, Pauline Breedlove, on the other hand, relieves herself of the umpteen disappointments by banging doors and throwing pans in the kitchen. Her loud quarrels in her private world is a way of balancing the voicelessness that she is otherwise subjected to. For her, marriage has been a routine, alternating between silent love-making and violent, speechless fights. Pecola responds to the quarrels between her parents by holding her breath, silently pleading with God. “Please make me disappear” (39).

In a predominantly white set-up, the black female’s presence is not registered. The candystoreman does not even waste the effort of a glance at Pecola: “He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see” (42). There is “total absence of human recognition” in his white gaze. The “vacuum edged with distaste” (42) in the storeman’s eyes compels Pecola into an attitude of apology, about her blackness and about her very existence; for in his world of white affairs a black girl has no space.

Even within her black environment, Pecola’s lack of space is remarkable. The Breedloves live in an “abandoned” store which is “the debris of a realter’s whim” (31), jutting from the non-space corner of two adjoining streets, with scanty inner space for cherished memories to linger. When Pecola comes to stay with the McTeers, she is introduced as “a girl who has no place to go” (17), belonging to a family that has been thrown “outdoors” because her father, Cholly Breedlove, has burnt his own house. As Claudia reflects: “Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition” (18).
In fact, being restricted in space or being evicted is Pecola’s fate everywhere. At school, Pecola is regularly bullied and harassed by her black and white classmates alike. For the black boys, her ugliness provides an outlet for all their self-hatred and hopelessness. They trap her in a congested circle and poke fun at the disgraceful acts of her parents. Louis Junior, the coloured boy who invites her home, holds her at bay and prompts his cat to scratch her face, just for the fun of it. And when his mother finds her, she virtually throws her out. Pecola’s own mother has no maternal space for her either.

The crowning act of trespassing on her personal space is committed by her father who dispossesses her of her virginity and forcefully plants his seeds in her womb; as Michie points out, it is “the ultimate otherness” that rape implies (Michie 64). Just as her mother has evicted her from her affections, the adult population of the town who, paradoxically, holds her responsible for the atrocious crime committed to her, deny her any space in their sympathies.

The only place where Pecola is admitted and cherished is the abode of the “three merry gargoyles” (TBE47): Marie, China, and Poland. Though they themselves have no space in the mainstream society, they have created a whole world for themselves, within which they have ample room to accommodate a lonely black girl disowned by her own parents. They question the hypocritical morals of the God-fearing, law-abiding society that condemns them. They have an alternate social space and a subculture entirely their own. There they enjoy an unlimited freedom that comes from deep inside, like Marie’s laughter that “came like the sound of many rivers, freely, deeply, muddily, heading for the room of an open sea” (45).

If unconventionality provides these whores with a free inner space, it is in a mentally deranged state that Pecola is at last free to seek the space denied to her rational self. “Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like
a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind” (158). Her madness opens for her the totally uninterrupted expanse of the mirror which fulfils her dream of having the bluest-ever eyes, releases her of the burden of her black ugliness and renders her beautiful to herself.

The blacks are reminded of their spacelessness in the white world at every turn, as Helene Wright and her daughter Nel are, on a train journey to New Orleans. From the white coach which they enter by mistake, they are unceremoniously hustled in to the coloured coach by the white conductor, with the curt warning: “We don’t low no mistakes on this train. Now you get your butt on in there” (Sula 21). Under his surly stare, Helene shrinks into a tight space: “Pulling Nel by the arm, she pressed herself and her daughter into the foot space in front of a wooden seat” (21). Helene’s dignified manner and bearing of the well-to-do black fall off like slough as she meets the whiteman’s contempt with a foolishly ingratiating smile which reminds Nel of “a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before” (21). It brings Helene down to the lowest rung in her daughter’s estimation.

In Song of Solomon, Hagar’s loss of self-esteem aggravates the marginality socially assigned to her as black woman. From the warm space of love, Hagar is ousted not by the dominant white but a superegoistic black male. Milkman’s unprovoked rejection of her, after a long spell of intense love, is inexplicable even to Milkman himself except for the lame reason that her love is too available:

It was so free, so abundant, it had lost its fervor... She was the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful
gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it’s there, because it can’t hurt, and because what difference does it make? (91)

Over a period of violent reaction, Hagar stalks Milkman in his haunts with a variety of weapons. Eventually, she grows tired of the exercise and settles down to accept the doormat position she has been reduced to. She is not able to rise above her infatuation to assert the worth of her self that no conceited male can diminish. Like Pecola, she too recedes into the space beyond her mirror wherein her inferiority is confirmed and Milkman’s desertion justified. The disillusionment that the mirror image occasions affects her so deeply that she never recovers from it.

Though a good number of the womenfolk in Morrison’s fiction show a lack of will to overcome their limitedness and assert their self, there are still a noticeable few who undermine the societal and cultural conventions that cramp their intentions, resolves, and choices. With the exception of Pecola, all her female protagonists are seen to demand uninterrupted speech and space in a hostile environment. According to Rigney, there is in Morrison’s text a “revision, an inversion, and, finally, a subversion of traditional value systems that privilege presence over absence and speech over silence” (26). Remarkable is the way in which the perspective of women who do not occupy the thematic or narrative centre nevertheless achieves a centrality beyond question. For instance, Frieda’s “set lips and Mama’s eyes” (TBE 55), her commanding voice, and no less her fast enough fist, arrest the gang of black boys who intimidate and persecute Pecola because she epitomizes their own contemptible black ugliness. Taking the cue from her sister, Claudia reinforces the attack by opening verbal fire upon the boys. The girls are unafraid of the threats of the boys, because in their inner selves they enjoy
that unlimited freedom that gives them the courage to give measure for measure to those who insult them. Junior, the coloured boy who loves to bully other children, hesitates to interfere with black girls because, “They usually travelled in packs, and once when he threw a stone at some of them, they chased, caught and beat him witless” (72). Their solidarity and determination upset his sense of class security and complacency.

A similar incident occurs in *Sula*, where Sula, armed with a paring knife, confronts the four white boys who find entertainment in harassing Nel. The idea of a black girl trying to fight them back with a knife at first delights them and fills their adventurous spirit. But what Sula proceeds to do takes the wind out of their sails:

Sula squatted down in the dirt road and put everything down on the ground: her lunchpail, her reader, her mittens, her slate. Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. . . . The four boys stared open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the cheery blood that ran into the corners of the slate.

Sula raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet. “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you”? (54-55)

The boys are dumbfounded, and hastily move away from this female who is capable of unflinchingly inflicting pain on herself; they are no longer sure of their right to bully black girls.

Willis points out that in Morrison, “self-mutilation is portrayed as a confrontational tactic that catapults the individual out of an oppressive situation”; it “brings about the spontaneous redefinition of the individual, not as an alienated cripple—as would be the case in bourgeois society—but as a new and whole person, occupying a radically different social space” (*Specifying* 104).
It is out of the temerity grown in her free inner space that Claudia questions the rights of the white Shirley Temples and the creamy Maureen Peals to rule and fascinate the world to distraction. She tears up the blue-eyed, golden-haired, rosy-lipped doll that is a special gift to her for Christmas, and is quite unable to understand the servile admiration of the adult world for its “round, moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orange worms hair” (TBE 20).

The merry whores of *The Bluest Eye* react to their outcast status by depriving with a vengeance the righteous, law-abiding male citizens of the town of their assets as well as their pretensions to chastity, thereby problematizing the moral values of the very society that outlawed them. While loving their customers, they also direct their pure, undiluted malice and hatred upon these men as their only contacts with that society:

> [T]hese women hated men, all men without shame, apology, or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use. Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever—all were inadequate and weak, all came under their jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath. They took delight in cheating them. (47-48)

On one occasion they even (wo)manhandle a rich customer, strip him of his valuables, and physically throw him out, just for the fun of seeing one of those patriarchs at the receiving end of dispossession, in a reversal of the tables of power-play. The ideology of male dominance does not apply in their realm where they categorically assert their autonomous selves. Their community of interests enables them to offer a solid front against troublesome customers as well as moralistic intruders from the conventional society.

A similar instance of woman subverting the centre from the margins occurs in Sarah Joseph’s “Veḻutta Nimittikāḷum Karutta Kaṉṇadiyum.”
Amminikutty, the sweeper-cum-salesgirl at Pavamony Iyer’s cosmetic shop is overawed by that dazzling world of beauty and wealth where she plays the hostess and is, at the same time, denied entry. Black, ugly, and poor, she is destined to wait at the third row of sales counters only, from which marginal space she looks on with wonder at the rich and fair clientele.

She finds the precincts of the beauty shop claustrophobic. She is driven frequently to take refuge in the narrow space of the dressing room which, however, opens all to herself the vast possibilities of a Belgian mirror’s wonderland, unhampered by exotic images of pink-and-white-and-soft feminine charms and the complexes these arouse in her. Away from the unsettling terrain of the affluent and the beautiful, she creates a brave new world of fantasy where she is the fair heroine of the handsome model in the Killer jeans poster on the wall. Before his “killing eyes” (OS 37), she subjects herself to critical examination in the mirror, searching for favourable results of the beauty creams and lotions she has been applying on the sly upon her unyielding blackness. For a while, she is able to ignore the obvious fact that the space of the mirror is a deceptive one of false hopes and aspirations and has no power to change the reality of her forbidding self. It is Pavamony Iyer’s attempt to make an invasion into the privacy of her body that reveals her black self’s real worth beyond its uncouthness, in its primordial power and nerve to kill to defend its honour. Rising out of its marginality, her female self assumes centrality through a categorical assertion of its unmitigated worth and respectability.

The native potential of this real self that emerges effectively resolves the conflict between the identity that she seeks in the mirror and the image reflected back to her, resembling the forbidding features of the tribal goddess Vadagurumba. This time Vadagurumba’s resemblance does not
nauseate, but rather empowers her enough to obliterate the male intruder upon her private space. This manifestation of powerful (rather than beautiful) womanhood, she accepts as the real unified self-image restored to her.

In Morrison's *Sula*, a similar engagement with the mirror image results in self-discovery for Nel. She has been diligently trained by Helene, her “custard-colored” mother (22), to grow up into a fine, well-mannered, sophisticated young lady, superior (like Helene herself) to other common blacks. Her mother's obsequiousness before the white man, and the contrastive haughty distance that she maintains with her mulatto whore-mother for the sake of social acceptability, generate in Nel reactionary questions about her own identity. The image of herself reflected in the mirror is so unlike her cute grandmother and her dignified mother, with its black skin, brown eyes, thick lips, and flat nose. This, she decides, is her real identity, and it does not seem to fit in the sheltered space Helene has saved for her: “I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me” (28). It is a momentous and exhilarating discovery for Nel: “Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear” (28). This “new found me-ness” (29) gives her the courage to cultivate Sula’s friendship against her mother’s will. Together, the two girls create their free world of confident, self-sufficient, young womanhood.

Though less overtly assertive than Morrison’s female figures, an intense yearning for elbow-room is evinced by almost all of Joseph’s women. In “Ooro Ezhuttukaariyuthe Ullilum,” the domestic situation where manifold repressions stifle the creativity of woman is brilliantly unfolded. The woman writer who builds up her plots in the restricted space of a corridor has frequent hallucinations about her spacelessness. It is a world of tumultuous silence that she is imprisoned in, where words are tabooed. For lack of external space, she has often to withdraw into the space of her works.
What she wants is "a room of her own" (Woolf 13) where her word-children can be delivered in dignified privacy. It is such a space that is available to her in Aunt Mable’s house, which her husband dismisses as a creation of her fantasy. But, for her, it is more real than anything else, the ideal spot that allows unreined freedom to her soul. Remarkably, there are no grilles, bolts, or restricting walls at Aunt Mable’s house. Its background is an open, limitless seashore, and the windows of her room open to reveal the horizons, with nothing to block her view. In fact, it promises a realm of complete quietude and peace that is indispensable for the spontaneous blooming of the writer’s imagination. It offers freedom from the household chores, the heaps of undergarments to wash, the cooking, dishwashing, and shopping: “Aunt Mable never spreads dirty linen over my thoughts. She never puts a grinding stone on the ideas that take shape in my mind” (Joseph, “Inside Every Woman Writer,” Indian Literature 94).

As Satchidanandanand notes, “The house on the seashore is an interior space for woman to manifest the inner freedom of her self,” and “the fantasy about Aunt Mable is a fanciful metaphor for female solidarity” (“Muditeyyangal” 27). The image has been created out of woman’s longing for communication with other women, with whom she can have emotional as well as intellectual sharing. If not herself a writer, Aunt Mable is evidently the kind of understanding and appreciative audience with whom, as Ellen Moers declares, a woman writer can discuss “the human component” of literature “more easily . . . than she can with the literary man next door” (43).

The marginality of status that she has to put up with in her career is an extremely humiliating experience for her. She is prevented by her woman’s circumstances from participating in literary debates as men do. Her time is divided between home, husband and children. The complete freedom from
care enjoyed by male writers makes her fantasize that they have developed golden wings behind their shoulder-blades which they stretch against the sun and the wind as they air their views in debates. Whenever she tries to join them, they stop, politely remind her of the lateness of time, and offer to escort her home. Sometimes she would invite them home, eagerly looking forward to an elite discussion. But they would sit talking with her husband while she cooks for them, and as soon as dinner is over, they would thank her for the tasty food, and leave. She finds it shameful to be left out from cognitions “in the name of a tender skin and plump body” (Joseph, Indian Literature 99).

According to Friedan, “the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness, in women. There are aspects of the housewife’s role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or ‘I’ without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive” (Feminine Mystique 264). The woman writer, who simultaneously lives the miserable reality of a housewife and mother and the fantasy-life of an independent, successful career woman, is a representative of those many women who, as Friedan says, “swing between extreme versions of one half-life or another” (The Second Stage 45). She is unable to reconcile the demands of family and career; in extreme reaction to the former, she opts for the latter, and walks out on home, husband, and children. At the end of the story, the woman writer has a sense of immense freedom that releases her shrunken self to outgrow its spatio-temporal limits and merge with the elemental powers: “Now I walk with an absolutely free movement of my limbs. My hands touch the horizon and come back. A winged wind stirs free the strands of my hair and the folds of my clothes. My hair unlooses itself, soars and touches the sky, and my skirt whirls round in a wide, wide circle and covers the earth” (Joseph, Indian Literature 100).
The mutinous act of home-leaving on the part of the woman-writer is an open statement of the rebellion that erupts in marginalized femininity. Woman's capabilities that are ignored or understated, and her aspirations that are snubbed, begin to demand recognition and fulfilment. The emergent femininity that breaks free of restrictive frames forms a formidable force that upsets the institutional foundations of patriarchal establishment.

In Many of Joseph's stories, there are women who react to the unending misery and boredom in marriage (which they live through out of cultural habit) by ousting their partners slowly and imperceptibly but irrevocably from their inner worlds. In “Nalaam Nilayile Jaalakam” (“The Window on the Fourth Floor,” OS 9-15), Amminiyedatti, Krishnettan's modest, demure wife, lives in the congested space of their fourth-floor apartment. Her only connection with the external world is provided by the lone window of their bedroom. But she is constrained to close the window as soon as she opens it, because of the unwelcome city-spectacle it offers: endless procession of flies that invade the apartment; innumerable iron rods that rise from eternally unfinished buildings piercing the sky and nauseating waste-heaps. These take away her appetite and sleep. With the window firmly closed against these unsettling sights, Amminiyedatti lives a stranded life, squeezed between the four walls of her bedroom. Having grown unused to sharing her problems with Krishnettan, she develops a habit of squabbling with people at the least provocation, and is depressed and despotic by turns. She grows a rose plant in lieu of her children who have left home, and is determined to make it either bloom or transform by magic into a child. As Krishnettan observes, “She is a crazy bird with an empty lap, whose chicks have all flown off to strangers’ skies” (OS 10).

It is Amminiyedatti's verbal gaps that frighten Krishnettan enough to consult a psychiatrist. As if her quiver has been emptied of words, she stops
communicating with Krishnettan. Her sessions with the psychiatrist and eventually with the gynaecologist open Krishnettan's eyes to the disagreeable truth that, consequent to their physical estrangement, which Krishnettan holds normal in middle-aged couples, he has grown a stranger not only to her body but her thoughts and feelings as well. Krishnettan is shocked to realize that his wife has mercilessly ousted him from her world. He receives a severe blow to his male ego to see that a wide chasm has formed between him and his wife, beyond which she has found a private world of her own where he is denied entry.

Woman's silence that evades interpretation and thus creates an inner space from where the aggressive male is excluded is a regular feature of the works examined here. Speaking about female silence in Morrison, Rigney says: "The central paradox is that the silence of women echoes with reverberation, speaks louder than words" (26). Man finds this enigmatic silence extremely stifling and threatening to his schemes since he has no control over it. In fact, it is a subversion of the silence conventionally assigned to woman as her portion, while man has enjoyed the monopoly of speech.

To avoid the possibility of alternate claims to dominance, everywhere and in all ages, patriarchy has ruthlessly suppressed female voice. Its claims are based on the concept of 'gender'—social construction of biological difference—that inscribes superiority for male and inferiority for the female. This allows room not only for physical dominance but also for psychological and emotional advantage of the male so that all possible avenues of female resistance are closed off. While man dominates speech everywhere, woman remains silent audience. Limits are drawn for her articulation, vocabulary, tone, pitch and modulation; even the subtlest nuances are subjected to severe scrutiny. It is the male taste that decides the agreeability and propriety of her utterances; for man
possesses all the infrastructure with which to subjugate—political power, administration, public relations, media, and so on—and his are all the parameters of judgement.

If the conventional linguistic mode of communication and self-expression is denied, other choices are available to woman. These have a subversive effect on the patriarchal sign system that curtails her linguistic potential. As the inarticulate feminine vacuum becomes a semantically live area producing meaning that undermines all the givens, the whole concept of female territory is subjected to revision; alternate concepts and notions are formulated regarding language itself. Non-verbal, non-linguistic modes are sought for communication, whereby the conception of language is stretched beyond the canonical limits to include cultural and behavioural patterns, silences, pauses and gaps. These facilitate articulation more powerful than the linguistic voice itself.

According to Catharine R. Stimpson, there is in women, "a compulsive attraction to language. It has an overriding, even obsessive power, like divine spirits for the mystic" (157). Since discourse is a means by which the formless ideology is given form, woman's appropriation of language implies ironic possibilities. The ideology and power structures that subjected woman stand exposed and vulnerable before an alternate system of ideas that develops with a corresponding feminine sign system. Supporting power structures and institutions will inevitably follow to legitimize this feminine discourse.

The interminable conflict for space within human discourse between the dominant male order and the repressed feminine has been subjected to analysis by psychoanalysts and thinkers like Lacan and Kristeva. Their theories on the evolution of subjectivity show the intricate patterns in which the feminine mode works within and interrupts the male signifying processes. The human subject
which is discursively constructed and admitted into the male order is seen to be under the continued influence of the feminine (Mother) from the ‘preoedipal’ phase. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is with the subject’s break with the gender-neutral ‘preoedipal’ or ‘imaginary,’ indicating its passage into the male order of the ‘symbolic,’ and through processes of socialisation that it is made conscious of its gender roles and differences and thus of its subjectivity (T. Eagleton 164).

In Lacan’s conception of this kind of a division in discursive space, there is a privileging of the ‘symbolic’ over the ‘imaginary,’ which is, in other words, the dominance of the Father’s Order over the Mother’s. On the other hand, the concept of the ‘semiotic’ that Kristeva proposes in her *Revolution in Poetic Language*, as an alternative to the ‘imaginary,’ is one that upsets the authority of the ‘symbolic’ order and its dominance. Kristeva identifies the ‘symbolic’ as the conventional, male-oriented sign systems and discourse. And the ‘semiotic’ may be described as the continued and not completely repressible presence, within the ‘symbolic,’ of the preoedipal influence of the mother. This constitutes a feminine mode of signification, a disruptive play of forces within language that opposes its stability.

Though Kristeva does not posit the ‘semiotic’ as such as an inherently feminine language, the connection is self-evident. The symbolic-semantic pair corresponds to the male-female, self-other dichotomies. In all patriarchal signifying practices, the feminine order and its signification-modes are repressed, in order to affirm the stability and hegemony of the male sign and its signifieds. On the other hand, the ‘semiotic’ subverts the given meanings and significances of the ‘symbolic,’ operating from within the sign system, and retrieves meanings that stand suspended or excluded in the dominant signification process.
By extension of Kristeva's theory regarding the disruption of linguistic signs and their received meanings by unconscious drives within language, then, it is possible to understand and interpret the social practices of the male and the female. Received social modes and conventions, which are 'signs' in the male 'symbolic' order, are constantly interrupted by unconventional female behaviour and thought-patterns, which belong to the 'semiotic.' The urge for undermining the Order of the Father is innate in the female unconscious. It is through conscious programmes that the patriarchate works on the female psyche to repress and discipline it into the 'symbolic.' In most cases, the disciplining seems efficacious enough to keep the feminine in unproblematic conformity to the Father's Order; however, the disruptive feminine tendencies tend to erupt to upset the neat categories, their well-defined boundaries, and their relative positions in the order.

In brief, the 'semiotic' can include the patterns of signification of the marginalized that interrupt the dominant discourse. The signs of the 'symbolic' and their meanings are recognized as oppressive tools of 'fixing woman by sign, image and meaning' (T. Eagleton 190).

The working of the 'semiotic' is manifested in a wide range of female signification patterns. This includes female violence, craziness, madness and self-imposed silence. In patriarchal signification, silences and gaps are glossed over as insignificant or less significant; but, for woman, these become powerful signs. Since its meanings are not limited by verbal codes, it signifies infinitely, resisting closure.

In the phallocentric order, female silence is taken for granted; often the male cashes in on it, interpreting it as meekness, non-resistance or acquiescence. However, this silence develops a politics of its own, its nature and principle depending on the circumstances that imposed it. Woman has a
definite advantage here. The potential of her silence is infinite: on the one hand, as a sign pregnant with significance, communicating a great quantum of meaning but occupying minimal semiotic time and space; on the other hand, suppressing vital information, thereby confusing and mystifying; it is never fully decipherable. In fact, a politically used silence leaves more space for vagueness, uncertainty and ambiguity—that is, greater power for the user—than speech itself; while it is freer from the perils of overuse, it allows less scope for effective parrying from the receiver’s part. For woman, silence is a meaningful exercise as well as a serviceable mode of communication; unlikely to fall into rhetoric, it indicates greater mastery over the situation and the message.

For instance, in a number of the later stories of Sarah Joseph, silence is used by women as a rejection of and a challenge to the patriarchal signifying systems. For the nameless wife in “Daampatyam” silence is a “symbolic method she resorts to in order to give vent” to her mental tensions and frustrations (PT 88); and the husband is quite helpless and impotent when she is in that mood. In “Cchaayaapaṭam,” Ammamma has lived the best portion of her life in silence misinterpreted as obedient compliance by the patriarchate. It is only on the eve of her long life, when she opens “the bundle of unspeakable stories” (PT 184) that the subversive meaning that her silence had held is revealed. Incidentally, it is possible to see a gradual change in Joseph’s use of silence as a sign. In the stories of Kaadinte Sangiitam and Manassile Tii Maatram, woman’s insufferable misery in marriage and family is sealed in silence that is passive and helpless; but when one comes to Paapattara, silence becomes explosive, formidable and political; it develops into an alternate speech-system solely at the disposal of the muted ‘other,’ with intense potential of its own.
A distinctly subversive 'other speech' is encoded in Morrison's narratives that is manifested in the idiosyncratic patterns of the moral, social and sexual conduct of her women. In *Sula*, the heroine is an aggregate of eccentricities which, for instance, makes her watch with fascination her own mother burn to death, and seek fun in hysterically swinging a child in the air that eventually lands him in the depths of the river. In *Jazz*, bouts of craziness prompt Violet to sit down in the middle of the road for no reason, and to "shut up" at frequent intervals without notice. A similar mental freakishness drives Sethe in *Beloved* to a bloody act of violence, and her daughter Denver to assume a voluntary deaf-muteness for a convenient spell that would enable her to learn the truth of the act and vindicate her mother. In *Paradise*, a brazen unconcern for popular opinion is at evidence in the nuns' act of converting into a convent a house that reflects to minute details the perversely erotic imagination of its original owner; the trend continues in the matter of allowing entry into the "Convent" to any stray woman in need of help, and in the absolutely uninhibited lifestyle of the "Convent women."

To this style of unconventional female behaviour belongs Pilate with her magical rituals, her consultations with the dead ancestors and her engagement in the bootlegging trade that ill-suits a woman. All these instances indicate unwillingness on the part of these women to accept and conform to the passive, uninteresting and unobtrusive identities socially thrust on them.

The signs of a muted discourse are embedded in the slave narrative of *Beloved*. The semiotic babble that takes place between Sethe and Beloved filling 124, "the undecipherable language clamouring around the house" which Stamp Paid imagines to be "the mumbling of the black and angry dead" (244), is virtually the yearnings of the muted, clamouring for voice. Stamp Paid eventually recognizes it as "the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable
thoughts, unspoken” (245). Rigney comments that in *Beloved*, the “preoedipal state encompasses space that is forbidden by the fathers; it is erotic, beyond masculine ‘law’ and order, a wild zone”; “a semiotic jungle in which language itself defies convention and the laws of logic; voices merge and identities are indistinguishable” (17). Out of this preoedipal phase the women “emerge sexually and politically transformed into the symbolic order” (20). Similarly, it is the other speech that Nan, Sethe’s foster-mother, uses in recounting to Sethe her mother’s experiences as galleyslave: This is proud history for Sethe which she has absorbed in her consciousness along with a flux of childhood memories, though the actual words have skipped her: “Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. . . . What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma’am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message—that was and had been there all along” (*Beloved* 77).

The subaltern’s subversion of language serves sometimes the purpose of challenging the dominant system as Sixo’s does, or to establish a parallel order as happens in Baby Suggs’ preaching of the Word to the freed black slaves. The gathering at the clearing headed by Baby Suggs becomes the forum for the blacks—men, women and children—to indulge their natural urges and feelings spontaneously and without inhibitions: to cry, laugh and dance by turns. It marks the ex-slaves’ re-entry into a matriarchal community where the matriarch never imposes codes: “She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glory-bound pure.” Instead, she “told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (107).
Sixo, the wild man, disrupts the dominant sign-system in his use of a strange tongue in emergencies, which is infuriating to the master because of its unintelligibility and his non-mastery over it. Being in possession of a tool that is capable of pausing a threat to the master's order renders Sixo indifferent to the terrors of slavery including death by burning at the stake.

Another extraordinary example of slave discourse is found in the experiences of Paul D and his forty-five fellow slave-prisoners in Alfred, Georgia. They are kept in narrow wooden cages fitted into ditches in a line. A long iron chain looped through their leg-irons holds them all together, synchronizing their movements on the one hand, and on the other deterring them from trying a run, for "[a] man could risk his own life, but not his brother's" (134). Forbidden to speak, they communicate without words; the eyes train themselves to say what needs telling: pleading, reassuring and steadying one another as they chain-dance their way into the woods for their routine work. With their work tool, the sledgehammer, they beat out their hatreds, pains, humiliations, loves, sorrows and deaths. They, in fact, create a language system for their subversive use: "[T]hey sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meaning" (133).

When the continuous rains flood the ditches and their cages with mud, the misery of the prisoners exceeds limits of tolerance. The iron chain that is meant to curb their movements and is the symbol of their shame and helplessness is suddenly transformed into a powerful mode of communication more efficacious even than any linguistic media. The wordless message is passed on, of the urgency of the situation and the need for united action; the decision to risk escape is taken, concurrence is sought and given; the time and method agreed on; everything transmitted along the length of the chain in pulls
and yanks of varied frequency and wave length: "They talked through that chain like Sam Morse. . . " (136). As the ditches cave in, giving way under the torrent, the forty six slaves, bound by their iron leash and helped by rain and darkness, come diving out in unison through the slime under the bars. Thus the chain that denoted the culmination of their enslaved state becomes the formula for a muted and unscripted code of signification that undercuts the master's purposes and plans.

Black writers are intensely conscious of the ways in which the dominant culture monopolizes language and uses it as a tool to perpetuate in literature myths regarding black life. Driven to a defending position, they find themselves at a grave disadvantage for having to depend on the linguistic and literary trappings that belong to the hegemonic white male tradition. This feeling is expressed by Toni Morrison in the introduction to her Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination:

. . . I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive othering of people and language which are by no means marginal. . . . The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains. (xii – xiii)

Rather than a purely linguistic concern, these words reflect an ideological and existential need to subvert the dominant structures of power.

The concern of the muted for recapturing language and thus ensuring a part in signification is even more obviously engaged with in Sarah Joseph's writings. In her interviews and public addresses she has raised the issue of the
inadequacy of ideologically controlled language and meaning to communicate feminine experience. In some of her more recent stories, Joseph is seen to experiment with words. For instance the title of the story “Puutalayam” describes the heroine’s state of mind; the term is not in current use but is evocative of confusion, tension and perplexity. In “Iklooni Mantookkiyil Kuuttayoottam” (KKK 9-17), the exotic place name “Iklooni Mantookki” describes the culturally experimentalist, gender-liberated, progressive, socialist republic in which the action takes place; unconventional and strange proper names such as “lsappollum Manass,” “Incan” and “lisante Mlaasan” bring out the post-modern nature of the characters. These terms, the author confesses in a footnote, have been borrowed from the personal vocabulary of a five-year old boy (who has not yet attained that stage of socialization when ideology has complete hold over his thought processes). In the advanced human community that is termed in the story as Iklooni Mantookki, social, moral, cultural, sexual and gender relations are redefined. Three renowned linguists are engaged in assessing their discourse, rejecting outdated terms and concepts, and retaining only those suitable to their new experiences. They delete from their vocabulary the term “jaaran” which means ‘paramour’ in the masculine gender; in the new state there are no marital relationships, which renders extra-marital sex irrelevant. But lisante Mlaasan, the only female among the linguists, objects to the absence in their language of a corresponding term for a female paramour; for ‘jaaran’ implicates woman as an over-sexed creature while the adulterous male is vindicated, his sexual partner being unmentioned. She argues that first the feminine gender of ‘jaaran’ should be coined so that man’s sexual weakness also is placed firmly on record, and only then should it be deleted as one having lost relevance.
A similar issue is raised in “Kanyakayute Pullingam” (“The Masculine Gender of Maiden,” NA 62-67). The story brings to focus an ideal family that attaches extreme importance to its women’s virtue as its strong base (as evidenced in their devotion to the Holy Virgin) but is suddenly faced with disintegration by the daughter’s loss of virginity. The circumstances leading to this and to the eventual suicide of the girl are only vaguely surmised and not elaborated on in the story, as these only provide the background for the crucial issue raised in the narrative namely the gendering and ideologizing of linguistic signs. An innocent query from the school-going son of the family regarding the feminine gender of “kanyaka” sets in motion a series of ideological and political questions. The term “kanyaka,” which denotes virginity in woman, does not have a corresponding term in the masculine gender. The father’s idle response, that “it may not have a masculine gender form” (Joseph, “The Masculine Gender of Maiden,” Haritham 46), is an unconscious revelation of the male orientation in the process of signification and in the formulation of sexual terminology. Its implication is that the concept of “virgin” need not have anything to do with the male and is not applicable or binding to him. The duplicity of standards of judgement in matters of morality for the male and the female is problematized here.

In Aalaahaayute Penmakkañ, Annie is aware of the difficulties involved in using a language delimited by the meanings intended by the adult/male world. She is especially annoyed with the dishonesty and hypocrisy that the language calls for in its use. Words denoting female body parts, for instance, are not only meaningless and unsuitable, but their public utterance is mysteriously tabooed. It is beyond Annie’s comprehension why words should be created if their use is prohibited. She, for one, can feel comfortable only with a language that she can fully understand and over which she has perfect
command and control. She tries to replace the unimaginative word for ‘female breast’ with a respectable and evocative one of her choice, which happens to be the name of a flower. But she soon realizes the futility of the exercise, since any nice word destined to describe the female parts is likely to be branded and banished from civilized discourse. So Annie retains for herself the copyright of the newly coined words as she decides that “it is not for convincing anyone else but for her own use that she makes words” (21).

J.B. Miller remarks: “There is no easy leaping over the only systems of thought and language that we [women] have inherited. But we are now becoming increasingly aware of the need for new assumptions and new words. We perceive that the close study of women’s experience can lead eventually to a new synthesis which will better describe all experience” (xxi).

Annie’s preoccupation with words and their suggestiveness is best evidenced in her genuine sympathy for her low caste neighbour Koran who changes his typically subaltern name into the more refined “Raman.” He is urged to rename himself because of the racial and cultural connotations that burden his original name that has served as a brand. However, his name-changing only makes him a butt of endless ridicule among his own people; moreover, nobody recognizes him in the new name. Koran’s tragedy does not, however, deter Annie from trying a renaming for her locality that is branded as “Kodiciangaadi” (“the bitches’ market”) on account of its noisily and obscenely quarrelsome women. Annie has had to suffer manifold humiliations for being native of the place, and she believes that a change of name would divest it of its vulgarity and meanness. Later she learns from Kuttipappen that only a fundamental change in its people, especially in the nature and habits of its women, can improve its status. But she knows that it is the noise and the quarrels that have made the existence of those women lively and worthwhile,
given their unbearable circumstances and intolerable menfolk. Annie recognizes their noise as the celebration of the voice of the marginalized; and the name of their place is part of the history of her people from which she could not run away.

The encroachment of dominant meaning systems on woman's thought patterns is a regular feature of the feminine dilemma in Joseph. To resist this, Annie experiments with words. Like a sorceress "she used to call up words and teach them meaning" (AP 29). Those words that evaded her grasp she would treat as stubborn students, and in her imagination she would treat them with the rod until they obediently yielded their own meanings. Others who still remained stubborn she would punish by expulsion from her “class,” and would not re-admit them unless they “fetched their parents” (30). Thus she firmly establishes her dominance over the language she uses.

In a world run by logocentric signification processes, language has always had a crucial role in defining power and powerlessness. According to Inga-Stina Ewbank, “the relative positions . . . of men and women in the world are connected vitally with their relative attitudes to, and uses of, language” (114-15). Dominance over words has earned for the male command over the world itself. Inside this power structure of language the silent woman’s place used to be one of total non-existence. However, the changed concept of language that includes silence as a crucial part of it bespeaks a change in status for women too. Woman’s breaking silence and bursting out into speech signals her bombarding into the world of power through language. Control first over silence and subsequently over speech ensures her entry into the mainstream processes and thereby into positions of subjectivity.

The sensitiveness of the marginalized, especially postcolonial, categories to the question of language proceeds from their recognition of its role as a
major tool that European cultural hegemony has wielded effectively to construct, rationalize and popularize the dominant white ideology. In a way colonization is the story of manipulation of language to ‘enclose the history of the empire’ (Parker and Starkey, 1) and to exclude the story and stifle the voice of the subject. Postcolonial theory addresses the possibility of reclaiming language to unfold the experience of the colonized. As is natural in the case of marginalized groups, races and classes, the language of the black American and Indian women writers is of an intensely political nature. For them it is a reclaiming of the voice denied to them and of the experience repressed in the dominant discourse. As Helene Cixous states, “Writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (Cixous, Warhol and Herndl 337).

Being in possession of an ‘other speech,’ the female ‘other’ is impelled by the need to subvert the favourite assumptions of the dominant ideology that legitimizes the gender dichotomy and the male domination it implies. For the sexual class, constructed and supported by political structures and socio-cultural institutions, is rationalized by a number of other dichotomous concepts such as nature/culture, private/public, tradition/progress and so on. All of these dichotomies belong to the same intellectual framework on which the ideology of gender is built up. The disprivileged element in each pair is invariably associated with femininity and is treated as requiring to be defined by the other term that is identified as masculine.

The gendered significance attached to the private-public dichotomy is recognized as a patriarchal project, as the division turns out to be a universal metaphor for male domination and female subordination. Hester Eisenstein writes:
The association of women with the private sphere and of men with the public had hardened into a truism and an ideology. Men had become associated with what was public: the workplace, politics, religion in its institutional forms, intellectual and cultural life, and in general terms, the exercise of power and authority; women with what was private: the home, children, domestic life, sexuality (or its repression). (Contemporary Feminist Thought 20)

The private-public split serves to further the ideology of gender which, as Michelle Barrett has pointed out, has come to mean not difference but “division, oppression, inequality, interiorized inferiority for women” (qtd. in Greene and Kahn 4). The allocation of the domestic sphere of activity to woman affirms the inferior social status assigned to her through differential treatment during the process of socialization; her feminization becomes complete with this domestication.

An interesting feature of the private-public division is its unempirical nature: not based on actual observation of male-female behaviour, it rather initiates a process by which men and women are made to fit into certain patterns preconceived for them. Social training, education and parental nurturing that inculcate passive, dependent, conformist qualities in woman equip her for the private sphere only; the active or progressive aspects of her self are systematically suppressed; her need to realize her full potential is denied fulfilment.

The stressful situations that the female heroes in Toni Morrison’s fiction live through and the hurdles they scale over in their valiant efforts at survival show how their private sphere of activity itself is rendered burdensome by obnoxious social conditions. However, they often outgrow these domestic roles assigned to them and excel even in conventionally male activities and pursuits.
They take up these roles either voluntarily or out of compulsion. In Song of Solomon, Pilate rejects the concept of a male head for her household, raises her family single-handed, and makes her living from illicit liquor trade out of her own choice. Eva Peace in Sula, is left in the lurch by her promiscuous husband and is forced to resort to an incredibly risky means to feed her hungry children. She gets one leg amputated and pockets a huge amount as insurance money. In Jazz, Violet is the breadwinner while her husband fools around with a young girl. Sethe, in Beloved, performs a fete that is impossible for her fellow men-slaves: big with child, she manages to escape from the talons of slavery; even the strongest of the Sweet Home men is no match to Sethe in her determination and perseverance. And there is no one on the black side of Ohio to question the authority of grandmother Baby Suggs who is engaged in rehabilitating freed and fugitive slaves; even the stern Stamp Paid is an executor of her will. The Convent women in Paradise are a thoroughly self-sufficient group; they need no man’s supervision over their affairs. On the contrary, the proud patriarchs of the exclusive town of Ruby, who despise these women, have frequently to depend on them for the supply of spices and other crops that they produce in abundance. Even the young black girl Frieda, in The Bluest Eye, is a fine specimen of extraordinary courage and competence; she wields commanding power enough to put an end to the white boys’ teasing of Pecola.

In Morrison’s fiction, the subversion of the usual implications of the nature-culture, private-public dichotomies works in a two-fold way. There is a re-evaluation of the underprivileged and supposedly feminine elements in these dichotomies by which these are established to be significant and valuable in themselves; woman’s close relationship with nature and the ‘natural’ functions of motherhood, childrearing, and so on, is not negated but unequivocally established.
Men themselves are placed with strategic effect as promoters of nature’s culture and transmitters of conventionally feminine traditions.

For instance, in *Tar Baby*, the assumption of the subservience of nature to culture and the latter’s correspondence to the masculine element is challenged by the frequent association of the male with nature; it is Son who represents the elemental grandeur of nature against Jadine’s highbrow culture. In fact, this nature itself is shown to have a culture of its own, the richness of which needs to be accepted and accommodated as no less than the sophistication and elegance implied by urban culture. The tension between the two worlds is reflected in the relationship between Son and Jadine. While the high-profile Jadine finds it impossible to leave the city where alone can she live her model’s life, for the unsophisticated Son, any place is as good as any other; he is a natural survivor, whereas she is very sensitive to her environment. The difference in their cultural orientation is mirrored in their responses to situations. To split without looking back, though painful, is easier for Jadine, whose city-bred love is not allowed to go any further than the present moment; her instinctual aversion for the past prevents her from indulging in painful reminiscences, too. On the contrary, Son’s love is more of a deep spiritual experience that demands concessions and sacrifices from him.

In *Jazz* too, a subversion is indicated of the privilege attributed to culture in the nature/culture opposition. Joe Trace, who is the child of a wild woman and is brought up by a woodsman, is more comfortable in the woods than in a town, and would “get nervous if a fence or a rail was anywhere around” (151). Nevertheless, his wild connection has bestowed on him a great accommodativeness that enables him to persevere in any situation, and to retain his mental youthfulness against the aridity of city-life and the stagnation
of old age. He gets renewed in spirit every so often: "You could say I've been a new Negro all my life" (155). It is because of his changeability and the consequent ever-newness in him that he feels right about seeking a new young love since his wife Violet has allowed herself to get old and crazy; for him, it is another experience that renews, opening a new phase in his life.

It is yet another change of phase for Joe when, after his affair with Dorcas misfires, he gets over it enough to re-love a reawakened Violet. At this stage, however, he realizes that the wild in him had been deceived into believing the façade of freedom that the city offered, to do wild things: "It [the city] pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record. . . . Makes you do what it wants. . . . All the while letting you think you're free. . . . You can't get off the track a city lays for you" (144).

The city exerts an undermining influence on Joe Trace; it makes him lonely enough to do unintended things. Back in the country, he was never lonely, even in his motherless childhood. Rejected at childbirth by his half-witted wild mother, Joe was raised in Vesper County, Virginia, close to the woods and cane fields, by Henry LesTroy, called the 'Hunter's Hunter' for his profound knowledge of nature and wild life. From 'Hunter,' Joe inherited his love of the woods, intensified by the awareness of his own mother's anonymous woodsly presence.

LesTroy had taught him to respect the hunter's rule, never to hunt anything tender or female, or human, which is not prey. Yet, after the city's culture claims him, Joe breaks the rule twice. The first is when, because of the loneliness and the shame that the city instilled in him for having a wild woman for mother, he makes a determined hunt for the woman. He never intends to kill but only to disturb the unperturbed wild thing out of its anonymity, or to shock it enough to acknowledge his connection. The second time he hunts
something tender, female, and human, he is not so lucky, as the quarry, Dorcas, gets killed though he had only wanted to make her acknowledge his love. After the death of Dorcas, Joe is disillusioned with both the city and new love.

But the influence of the country lingers to allow him to pass through another metamorphic phase—a rebirth facilitated by the entry of another young love into his and Violet’s lives. Only this time it is in the shape of a daughter-figure that fills the gap left by the child they never had time to have, and which could have quite naturally and perpetually renewed, brightened and lightened both their lives. It is Felice’s unsophisticated, spring-time presence that helps the hopeless couple to sort out their lives messed up by Dorcas’ intrusion. The Joe-Violet-Felice nexus makes up a compact family unit that functions with a determined goal and plan of retrieval and reconstruction, having identified their real goals. It turns out that Joe’s hunt had been for the “home in the rock” (255) that he had missed in childhood because of a crazy mother, and had failed to make in adulthood because the city’s life had strangled his natural self. The natural child in Felice evokes the parent in both Joe and Violet; she becomes nature’s gift to them in the barrenness of the city, reinvoking the dream of home in their old age.

In Morrison’s novels, the rural South represents native black origins while the North and the industrial cities, to which the blacks eagerly gravitate, are equated with white bourgeois culture which is a corruptive influence on them. The immediate effect that the city produces in the blacks is an urge to affect white manners, ethics and morality. As Susan Willis remarks, “Migration to the North signifies more than a confrontation with (and contamination by) the white world. It implies a transition in social class” (84). The material and social aspirations of the blacks inevitably result in a severing of connections
with their roots. In all the novels of Morrison, except Beloved that depicts a world of slavery and slave trade, the clash between the village and the city and the cultural disorientation of urbanized blacks occupy an important space. The irreconcilability of the two poles is exemplified in the split between Jadine and her foster parents in Tar Baby, and between Macon and Pilate in Song of Solomon. It disrupts natural human relations and responses in Jazz, and breaks moral and ethical codes of the black community in The Bluest Eye.

In Song of Solomon, Macon Dead typifies the successful black man of the industrial north who has ascended to the rich bourgeois class of the city, buying plots of land, building houses, renting them out, and minting money. He behaves in as ruthless and exacting a manner towards his tenants as any white capitalist, or even worse, so that Mrs. Bains blurs out: “A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see. A terrible, terrible thing to see” (22). Macon is driven by a colossal urge for material possession and ownership. He passes on to Milkman the prosperous cityman’s philosophy that he pays tribute to, in a pithy piece of advice: “Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (55). The rough paths that he has traversed in his journey to prosperity have left Macon a hard man and a bully, given to pay little respect to human relationships. Neither his wife nor his daughters are allowed to have any share in his success; only his son, as inheritor and perpetuator of his property and name, has any place in his affections.

Macon refuses to acknowledge his queer, unurbane sister Pilate as kin and is ashamed of her old-worldly life-style which he considers as sub standard. However, Pilate commands the respect of Milkman, who finds in her not a pariah, but a refreshingly genuine and original person, and an indomitable force that opposes the belligerent Macon. He is fascinated enough with her to dare to defy his father and make secret visits to her house. Unlike his
urbanized, capitalistic father, there is no greed or stinginess in Pilate; she and her daughter Reba are generous givers. While Macon simulates the white manners and aspires to be assimilated into the dominant system, Pilate is rooted firmly in her African heritage. While she has a profound sense of history and the black tradition, Macon has lost his native good sense and cultural identity somewhere in his quest for wealth.

Another instance of the conflict produced by the contrary influences of the city and the country, the broken marriage of Cholly and Pauline Breedlove shows how a forced union of the two is destined to end up in failure and disaster. Thrown all on a sudden into a crowded city of white people, with the few coloured ones even meaner than the whites, Pauline feels out of her depths. Her loneliness compels her to depend more and more on Cholly who starts resisting it; her country graces have lost their charm for him; for he has “other people and other things to occupy him” (TBE 93). “Money became the focus of their discussions” (94), and since Cholly grows stingy with the money he gives her, Pauline goes out to work. For Pauline, life comes to mean holding on to jobs and fighting Cholly. Her loneliness and disillusionment fill her with a deep-set self-contempt and insecurity. Blaming the disintegration of their marriage entirely on Cholly, she settles down to being ugly and mean: “Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and the children like a cross” (100). Having abandoned Cholly to his depravity, she embarks on instilling respectability in her children which takes effect in them as a fear-complex: “Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (102).

The environment that has governed the personal undoing of Pauline and Cholly has also watched over their respective conduct as parents and fixed their roles in precipitating the familial tragedy. Despite the differences in their
individual attitudes, and the apparent advantage Pauline has won in her social standing as responsible, breadwinning mother over the drunkard-father, both have made sizeable contributions to the unmaking of their children’s psyches. What Pauline has withheld in her self-justificatory mothering—love, kindness, and caring—has helped as much in bringing on the catastrophe, resulting in Pecola’s total destruction, as Cholly’s mindless shirking of parenthood has.

As for Cholly, “[a]bandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crapgame by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him” (126). He celebrates a dangerously unbounded freedom, exercising feelings as they come. Parental relationship is incomprehensible to him since he himself has not been parented. No human value has been instilled in him; nor does he conform to any social or moral code. It is because he is unable, in his completely degenerate and befuddled state of mind, to distinguish the parental emotions of love and protectiveness from his characteristic drunken urges of lust and violence, that he mindlessly offers physical love to his unhappy daughter.

The destruction that Cholly’s irresponsible and “dangerously free” (125) personhood causes is devastating. His son Sammy runs away for good; Pauline’s bitterness concentrates on her daughter whom she refuses even to look at. As for Pecola, there are no simple, kind-hearted countryfolk to rise in her defence; she is crushed under the harsh judgement of her mother and a whole township calloused by the anxiety of existence.

The impact of urbanization upon the psyches of black men and women is such that it reacts strangely with the sense of racial and cultural inferiority deeply imprinted on them through ideology and discourse and established through social codes and arrangements. The result is the production of a hybridized community, as often appears in Morrison’s fiction, which renounces
age-old black values and codes that have strengthened and unified them as a culture. In their eagerness to imitate white attitudes and absorb the dominant customs and conventions, the genuineness of the black tradition with its deep thrust on family and community gets lost.

The conventionally disprivileged element of nature and a rural culture are persistently brought to narrative focus in Joseph’s fiction. As Vandana Shiva points out “Indian culture consists in its having defined the principles of life in nature as the highest form of cultural evolution” (Mies and Shiva 265). In a series of stories in Joseph’s Nilaavariyinnu and Paapattara, there is an engagement with a tradition bound up with nature, the earth and the elements, and the human being’s (especially woman’s) relationship to these. In “Kaatoortirikkku” (“Listen On,” NA 74-79), external nature is part of the rural tradition of a simple, spontaneous way of life, where it is inseparable from and sensitive to human thought, intentions and activities. The mysterious disappearance of the jackfruit tree in Mariam’s courtyard strikes the whole household as a great tragedy, like the death of a loved one. It affects Mariam most intensely as a personal loss. For Mariam, it has been a mother figure—Mother Earth/Nature—kind, sympathetic, benevolent, and willing to make gifts even out of its sacrifice, of which Mariam herself has been a beneficiary. For when the world condemned her as barren woman, she had turned to the mother-tree for solace, having no other women in her house: “Mother, how many children you have! Give one to me!” (NA 77).

The tree which produced in abundance year after year for many successive generations had responded to Mariam’s distressed prayer for a child by refraining from bearing fruit for one year: a forfeiture which Mariam believes to have allowed her miraculously to conceive her long-awaited first-born. Out of its plenty, the tree had made her a gift. Now the total disappearance of the tree, without leaving a trace even of its roots, therefore, strikes her as a
revocation of the favour. She sees it as the result of a severed bond between man and nature, as nature's retaliation to the indignities meted out to the earth and the environment, to woman and mother. For Mariam's pragmatic son, who owes a debt of gratitude to the grandma tree, had been considering the prospects of sacrificing it to possess a brand new television set. And though Mariam's husband Zachariah swears his innocence in the affair, Mariam knows that he had been conspiring and bargaining with the timber dealer over the price of its wood. The wages of ingratitude now visit upon them as raging heat:

The sun now pierces down on Mariam's house. The inmates sweat profusely. They look up at the sky. And fan themselves with the shawls on their shoulders.

"How'll you pass the summer now?" People sympathize with them.

The squat little house with its partially thatched-partially tiled roof now remains forsaken by the one who had affectionately sheltered it beneath her umbrella of green black foliage. (76)

Mariam's aged father-in-law cannot take his eyes off the hollow left in the place of the tree. Along the borderline of his vision he sees his dead ancestors moving in a procession: they seem to accuse him of default and negligence of duty, in depriving them of the only green that gave them shade in the burning desert-heat of their after-life wanderings. As if in self-punishment or expiation, the old man surrenders his own life-breath, and joins the thirsty ranks. A penitent Zachariah wails over the dead body of his father: "I am innocent... True that I meant to sell it off. But I didn't father, I didn't" (79).

The void the tree has left in their lives is far wider than the hollow where it stood, which will never be spanned by loving gazes and kind words any more. An icy silence lies frozen in the household, unthawed by the summer heat.
The tree is a symbol of the remarkable involvement that natural phenomena have in shaping human lives, and of the mutual understanding existing between the two. The greater proximity of women to nature's life and their access to its mysteries are seen to render their sensibilities keen and perceptive to an extent which no amount of sophistication can accomplish for them.

The disappearance of the tree may be seen as the direct result of a breach of faith on the part of man. The maternal aspect of the tree and Mariam's close affinity to it place both woman and nature on an equal plane, where neglect and cruelty to one reflect on the other. The absence of the tree and the silence of the woman communicate a reaction to and warning against injustices to woman, and against forces that prey on nature's abundant sources of energy and vitality and are bound to face retaliation.

In "Nilaavariyunnu" ("The Moonlight Knows" NA 87), Joseph too uses the strategy of relating the male to nature and tradition. Unnikrishnan who wanders in search of the original bountiful fountainhead of water that can cleanse his consciousness and memory of all the mouldy bloodstains of his and his ancestors' sins, finally finds it in the compassionate earth that envelops him up in a soothing, protective quicksand. The mental distress that Unnikrishnan is subject to indicates a mind that is sensitive to human indifference and callousness as unnatural, and wants to correct lapses and re-establish a balanced relationship with nature.

The river that represents nature, the earth and the elements in the story is at once a protective and avenging force. Life on its banks has been completely dependent on the river. For the better part of the year, the river has fed the shore with its silt and quenched the thirst of its plant life. And even when the summer heat emaciated it, its kindness still persisted to flow in a
narrow strip of water, leaving the rest of its expanse for children to play on, and for old men to walk on in the evenings. On many a hot, sleepless summer night, Unnikrishnan has sought the cool sandbed of the river to lie down and converse with the moon-and-star-lit sky, feeling the comfortable arms of Mother Nature enveloping him. Moonlight that played hide-and-seek in the narrow stream has been his companion and confidant, sharing his innermost feelings and urges.

When he leaves for the city, Unnikrishnan misses the river terribly; away from its cleansing stream, everything seems to be stained and impure. He fantasizes a rain of blood that fouls everything in his sleeping and waking hours; he cannot find water enough in the city to wash the stains off his hands. Pining for the purging waters of the river, Unnikrishnan returns home, but the river has completely dried up. In his obsessive-compulsive state of mind, he now loses all connection with reality and wanders frenziedly along the riverbed trying to reinvoke the bounteous gift that has been withdrawn.

The elders of the house are afraid of a possible repetition of the sad fate of ancestors who had been victims of hydromania, a family curse that dragged male members to the bottom of waterbasins. Unnikrishnan now proceeds along the same track: "All on a sudden, like an electric impulse, his tired feet felt the dampness of the river. From the wet sand, the coolness raced up to the crown of his head. . . . The river that gradually seeped through as he removed the sand, transformed him to a child. He stood up and shouted for joy" (NA 84).

He is thrilled by the refreshing cool of life-saving water that can wash off all the stains of a merciless urbanity that negates nature. He realizes that the river's kindness cannot dry up; any one who cared to probe deep enough could discover its hidden well-springs. If, for the onlookers, the situation appears to signal another tragedy ratifying the superstitious tradition about the
family curse of water-death, for Unnikrishnan it is a rebirth by water: “He drank one mouthful of water, like fresh coconut milk, like mother's milk; then another, yet another, and again and again. . . .” (87). He has at last found the inexhaustible fountain-head of earth's kindness that had withdrawn silently to the inner channels in reaction to human ruthlessness, but now swells and springs forth beneath his demanding, yearning, loving fingers. Unnikrishnan's misery and restlessness subside in the enveloping serenity of the water stream; his mind and body are forever purged of their afflictions, lustrated by its consecrated water. Through surrender to and communion with the river-force, Unnikrishnan virtually attains a state of perfect peace and release from confusions and conflicts.

In “Saapaayanam” (“The Course of Curse,” PT 113-120), nature that is centralized is enraged at the atrocities that man commits against it, neglectful of the need to “keep alive the processes that sustain life” (Mies and Shiva 2). The unquenchable human greed for better life prospects leads to ruthless exploitation of nature's resources, regardless of the long-lasting consequences and the appalling situation it exposes future generations to. In retaliation to the insensitiveness of man and his refusal to “interact in harmony” with its “rhythms and practices” (Shiva 265) nature blocks off all fountainheads of its kindness.

It is woman who first senses nature's reactions to the disruption of the balance between human and the environment; for the nature of her feminine experience provokes a parallel with the processes of nature. She recognizes life as a rhythmic current of give-and-take between human and his environs. To interrupt the rhythm of that mutuality proves fatal for the human being; especially for woman, because of her greater affinity with nature, the consequences are of an enduring kind. Thus Bharati, who drills well after well
in the moistureless land in the hope of striking a water-route, is at once culprit and victim of human's unimaginative treatment of the environment. After making astrological calculations, the diviner had tried to convince her of the difficulty of finding water in the area: “Mother [earth] is fed up . . . she is receding into deeper and deeper depths” (PT 116). But Bharati's husband and sons are obsessed with the idea of a well full of water to irrigate their small plot and nourish their flower plants. The yearning that their letters convey is too intense to disregard; so, despite the cynicism and sarcasm of her neighbours over the impossibility of the project, Bharati engages labourers to dig the well of their dreams.

Bharati is conscious of the calamities that attend the disastrous scheme from the very outset. The main workman Vasu's eldest daughter has an abortion. Death accompanying abortions becomes common among the workers. Ammini, Vasu's wife, behaves as if she is possessed by some demon; she struts haughtily around the barren wells and accuses Bharati of pride and arrogance, for aspiring for water in an arid land. The hostility of the neighbours becomes too tangible for Bharati to bear. Having failed to keep her word to her husband and children, she is filled with extreme hopelessness and self-pity: "Like the burning bowels of those wells, my breasts had withered. In the killing heat, the well-springs of my tears too had dried up" (118). Nothing green survives in the vicinity. The earth's life-blood itself seems to have been drained.

But Bharati's husband and children take her failure to locate water as an act of default on her part; still money flows lavishly, and Bharati is left with no option but to continue with the project. By now she has scoured every inch of her own dehydrated plot; and so she explores the neighbourhood, determined to own at any cost a handful of earth with a perennial water-channel in it. Her enquiries lead her to Koman Nair's abandoned plot which has the only well in
that whole arid region that, though derelict, holds water. But Bharati’s joy over
the find is dwindled by the discovery that the well is haunted. All sorts of
superstitions surround it. But Bharati is disinclined to believe them. The women
of the neighbourhood part with the words: “You and we shall go our separate
ways. We have a perception which you don’t have” (119).

For Bharati, the call of water is too strong to resist. But even as she
rushes into Koman Nair’s plot, she smells death. Feathers of small birds in
countless numbers float around her; getting into her eyes, ears and nostrils,
choking her and blocking her vision. As she backs out, she hears the female
ghosts of her neighbour’s stories bellowing from within the well. Bharati needs
no further cue: she escapes before they inflict their wrath on her.

It is only now that she attains the cognition that the simple
countrywomen have possessed in their ignorance. The curse of daughters and
girl children combined with that of the avenging mother earth has come to
haunt the desiccated land, which has been deprived of the milk of nature’s
kindness, to punish human selfishness and greed. Bharati is left with the difficult
task of convincing her husband and sons of nature’s mystery revealed to her as
woman: that expansion is possible for man not by vanquishing nature but by
nourishing it. Mindless modernization and developmental projects would
corrode the natural world that is the source of life.

Ecofeminists hold that “the relationship of exploitative dominance
between man and nature . . . and the exploitative and oppressive relationship
between men and women that prevails in most patriarchal societies” are closely
connected (Mies and Shiva 3). The withered river in ‘Nilaavariyunnu,’ and
the dry earth from where water recedes in ‘Saapaayanam’ are metaphors for
the persecuted feminine which, in Indian thought, is related to the earth,
nature, and the elements. There is also an indication of the deterioration of
fundamental human values that sustain life on earth. This reflects most crucially upon woman in her life giving and nourishing roles. The female ghosts that cry out for revenge and contaminate the water-source with their hairs and nails narrate the story of woman in contemporary Indian social environment, defiled in multifarious ways—dowry-deaths, female foetus-killing, instigated suicides in marriage, mass rapes, and so on. A set-back is indicated: where womanhood is crushed, nature’s balance is upset, to which the elemental forces react by unfurling their furious aspects on the offenders.

The feminine perspective that is foregrounded in ‘Ashoka’ and ‘Taikulam’ unravels how woman’s close association with the environment that makes or mars her being, in turn, gets enriched or impoverished in direct relation to her destinies. In ‘Ashoka’, Sita’s remembered childhood in Mithila presents a joyful picture of elemental harmony. Wherever her fair feet touch, there is perpetual spring:

All the farms were filled with grain, and the rain and sunshine fell richly over the land. Flowers bloomed in plenty and fruits that were whole and had no worms in them, grew and ripened. The streams brimmed over. There were peaceful valleys where the birds sang, their voices full and steady, and the goats grazed happily. (Joseph, “Ashoka,” Katha Prize Stories 139)

Her foster father, Janakan, gratefully and proudly conscious of the prosperity that Sita has brought with her, loves and cherishes this child of the earth: “With joy and wonder, Janakan treasured the earth’s breastmilk for Sita to feed on, and a bed of green grass for her to sleep on” (139).

In contrast, Ayodhya, which ultimately has only tears and a pyre to offer her, is smothered in a smokescreen of mystery. Intrigues and conspiracies stalk the Ayodhyan court. Secrets “that everyone knew and that no one spoke
openly about, would lie heavy in all the corridors of the city" (140). “Curses would creep like shadows over Ayodhya. The news that an arrow of suspicion had been aimed by someone at the wrong target would disturb everyone’s sleep” (140).

Ravana’s uncivilized Lanka, the land of Sita’s exile, however, has made amends for her imprisonment by worshipfully waiting on her, treating her every word as command. The king treats her as his royal guest. Even in the miserable days of war and massacre, the women of Ravana’s court forget their own wounds and losses and attend to Sita’s needs. When the cutting edge of the Aryan King’s suspicion pierces her muted heart, it is the vanquished land of Lanka that supports her, and holds her as in the mother’s lap. Even its inanimate life grieves in her hurt: “Sita leaned her head against the trunk of a shimshipa tree. It seemed as if that living thing too, as her supporter and witness, understood there was something impure in the victor’s command. An isolated branch of the tree extended itself from a region beyond language to comfort the earth mother” (135).

The Lankan’s stigma of being the terrorizing, woman-snatching brute is erased by the compassion the woman herself feels towards him. In her eyes, the gallant protectiveness that he had shown to her instates him in a dignified space, whereas the Aryan’s victory is tarnished by his lapse of misunderstanding and distrusting incorruptible, self-disciplined womanhood, and relegating it to a realm of shame and dishonour.

It is not only the woman, but nature and the elements that have been sinned against, for Sita is the daughter the earth has fed on her breastmilk (139), as well as the earth-mother herself (135). She integrates in her the elements: the earth that can destroy fire, and also the rains that must fall on the
earth to germinate her seeds. The new life that sprouts out of them is not for Ayodhya that disgraced the woman but the land of Lanka that sheltered the woman in disgrace.

Woman and nature are inseparable in “Taikulam.” A sensuous sort of bond unites them. Soorpanakha, the daughter of the wild, lives in consummate harmony with nature’s life. In the vigour and vitality of youth, she is intensely in love with Panchavati, the garden on the bank of Godavari. The jungle is her natural abode; her appetites and cravings are inextricably related to its sights, sounds and scents.

In Panchavati, woman and nature are subject to the same laws. Thus desire in woman is considered inevitable and natural; to deny it is an offence to nature. Woman’s body is sacred because of its participation in the mystery of creation; her mothering and nurturing roles elevate her to a position demanding utmost respect and awe; more than anything, woman is mother. In the ‘Taikulam’ (matriarchal tribe) of Lanka, the ‘tayar’ (venerable matriarch) wields more power than even the king, it is she who takes the decision to avenge the atrocious crime committed against Surpanakha and Ayomukhi. More than the humiliation of their being rejected, the Taikulam is shocked beyond description by the fact that the Aryan has chopped off their breasts as sinful parts, which according to the jungle codes, is sacrilege. Great value is attached to woman’s breasts for the nourishment that they give to generations of the tribe’s young. For Surpanakha and Ayomukhi, the loss is more terrible than death; it is the roots of the race and blood that have been severed.

The other loss that the two women have incurred is equally distressing, that of the olfactory sense, which has rendered them strangers in their wild environment. No longer able to catch and respond to the fragrances of the jungle, they cease to be excited by the changing seasons.
The picture of the transformation that the jungle has undergone with the advent of the urbane strangers is put in sharp contrast to its original serenity. The abode of harmony that it was is now changed into a bloody battlefield resounding with clinking weapons, trumpet-calls and war cries. Armed strangers stalk the ‘Dandakavana’ where war and vengeance were unknown. The natives have virtually been ousted from their idyllic environment where the earth, plants, animals and humans used to exist together in perfect congeniality. The daughters of the jungle have been alienated from their favourite haunts, their freedom of speech, movement, and activity restricted in their own territory. The losses incurred are too high for them: of innocence and naivete characteristic of the jungle, of an artless trust in life.

Most of the women who assume prominent roles in Joseph’s stories maintain a strong rapport with their natural environs. In many of these, nature is divested of the usual disprivilege attached to it in its association with woman; on the contrary, the primacy of nature over man-made culture is highlighted. A similar deconstruction is implied for the terms of other allied dichotomies too, which specify appropriate activity and territory for male and female respectively.

The private-public divide at its most oppressive is portrayed in Joseph’s “Ooro Ezhuttukaariyute Ullilum.” The woman writer in the story suffers from schizophrenia, consequent to the mental stress that she is subjected to as writer and woman. She is consumed with the “frightening sense of being trapped in a conspiracy of male domination” that characterizes woman under patriarchy (Palmer 69). Her creativity and genius have been disregarded for the simple reason of her gender. Domestic chores consume the whole of her time. She is discouraged from taking part in serious, academic or literary discussions and meetings of writers. Her originality of thought gets frozen under her husband’s
hostility that prevents her from indulging her taste even in the choice of themes beyond the hackneyed ones of love and separation. She is permitted to write only devotional songs and poems in the Radha-Krishna love tradition. But the male writers and critics are not interested in love: “They screamed that when the world was hungry, love was an extra expenditure” (Joseph, “Inside Every Woman Writer,” Indian Literature 95). Her husband Purushothaman (the name means “the perfect male”) symbolizes the male order that is constantly engaged in limiting woman’s time and space, and in devaluing and discrediting her capacities. Her day-to-day existence is a continuum of frustration that clamours for relief, a tumultuous silence that frantically seeks words. To borrow Helene Cixous’ words, she represents women “driven from [writing] as violently as from their bodies—for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (Cixous, Warhol and Herndl 334). She is unable to break the “panchaloha ring” of convention that she wears on her ankle which has sunk into her flesh; it has even “laid eggs in my flesh, giving birth to a wilderness of little rings” (Joseph, Indian Literature 98).

The writer’s delusions about aunt Mable’s house and the platonic relationship with Jayadevan mean not a mere retreat from social life. In fact, aunt Mable’s house and “the open seascape” behind it (95) represent the infinite horizons of art and ideas, devoid of prejudices and parochialism, which would ensure her access to that boundless freedom of the artist and the intimate “friendship of unconditional joy” (99) that can develop between man and woman. But her aspirations are not fulfilled, and she virtually remains unhinged, racked by the need to break free of the limiting domestic circumstances that silence her.

Side by side with this portrait of an artist as woman is placed another: the poetess, Nileena Mathai, who has succeeded in making her way to the top
in the literary world in “Orezhuttukaari Svayam Vimarsanam Nadattunnu” (“A Woman writer Criticizes Herself,” *KKK* 24-28). The crisis she faces is not much different; despite her apparent social advantage of recognition and fame, her inner, artistic self is curiously dissatisfied, which compels her to make a review of her literary career. In her struggle for survival in the male domain of letters, she has had to strike a compromise between the ideal and the expedient. She is forced to keep her real self and her artist’s conscience in abeyance; her responses to social and political issues are formulated in strict conformity with the interests of the Establishment that condescended to make her a celebrity. She is obliged to take evasive attitudes, saying that to “represent truth without taking sides” is the function of a writer (*KKK* 26). When the country passes through the historic moment of an Emergency, her aesthetic remains unaffected and detached; rather than risk her career in unpolttic involvements in the name of humaneness or social commitment, Nileena Mathai gets bedridden, suspending all her activities, literary or otherwise. When her poetic voice is demanded to be raised in support of the tribal revolt that is suppressed by the Establishment, she chooses to remain silent and ignorant, for she is destined to choose the politically correct stances only.

Another story of Joseph’s in which woman who seeks entry into the public realm is subjected to diverse repressions is “Puutalayam.” The young protagonist Gracykutty has to tide over umpteen obstacles to fulfil her aspirations for space travel. As the eldest of a large family, she has grown up into an extremely capable and hardworking woman. But the community applies double standards in their notions of propriety regarding woman’s place and in their evaluation of her work. Gracykutty is accustomed to doing all sorts of ‘unwomanly’ jobs; gender is no hindrance to her joining her father’s labour force as the only farm hand. But when she wishes to soar greater heights to
explore the mysteries of outer space, the reactions are stereotypically conventional and narrow-minded. However, Gracykutty adamantly sticks to her decision.

The temerity with which people stick to age-old assumptions and prejudices regarding woman’s space and proper sphere of activity is brought to ironic focus in the story. Woman’s involvement in a ‘public’ enterprise is viewed with mistrust and cynicism; the only function she is recognized to have competence in is the biological and reproductive. The situation in “Puotalayam” shows how woman’s efforts at self-actualization in areas that have conventionally been monopolized by the male are undermined by the ridiculous prejudices and orthodox outlook of the community. Gracykutty’s entry into the field of space research is regarded with resentment by the community. Harsh criticisms about the impropriety of her unfeminine choice kill her joy of accomplishment; her intellectual, perceptive and rational powers do not merit any recognition though these equal those of her male colleagues.

The duplicity of the society’s criteria of judgement is revealed again in the fact that no question of unsuitability is raised about the hard physical labour that she does at her father’s farm. There is even a tendency to devalue such work as falling within the ‘domestic’ when the woman does it for no wages, whereas it transforms itself into productive ‘public’ work when done by the male. The patriarchal community’s interests in the matter are plain: they would accommodate her in the farm labour force that would save her father trouble and money; but to allow her to peep into the forbidden mysteries of space is more than their pride can tolerate.

Discussion of various oppositions such as nature/culture, private/public and so on serves to exemplify the more fundamental male/female divide in Joseph’s narratives. The grave discrepancies between the dominant concepts
regarding male, female roles and the actual contribution of each category in the social process are subjected to study in “Avan” (“He,” OS 73-77). The attitudes of the society have an augmenting effect upon the inferior female subjectivities that the dominant order has conceived out of a misinterpretation of woman’s physiological difference. The protagonist in “Avan,” Saudamini, is afflicted with an uncertain sexuality; though outwardly she lives the life of a woman, she is destined to despair of her elusive and dubious self that would not allow her a natural outlet of emotions. The physiological processes natural to woman are absent in her; she hides her dual nature behind an inordinately silent exterior that forbids intimacies. Nevertheless, she works like a male; the sole breadwinner for the whole family, she pays meticulous attention to the needs of everyone. But instead of acknowledging her invaluable services, Saudamini’s mother laments over her great misfortune of having no son. The hard work that Saudamini puts in to support the family is underrated just because she does it in the capacity of a mere woman. “Only so little is possible for a woman,” says mother (73).

As woman, Saudamini’s activities are subject to manifold restrictions; the community watches her movements with vulture’s eyes; men who come to bathe in the river whistle at her. Inhibitions and taboos surround her existence. Yet it is a curious assortment of tasks, demanding an application and efficiency beyond her womanly limitations, that falls to her portion. Though physically as capable as any man, severe social codes and constant reminders from the community regarding her inferior sex have a disorienting effect on her; her thought strains, marked by an unsureness and hesitancy, reflect the contradictory forces working on her, from within and without. She is torn between instinct and habit; the alternatives she has to choose between are equally confusing: “To be my [masculine] self; flap and sharpen my wings and
make a steep climb, or be the daughter who keeps the wings closed, to crawl on the ground” (74). When she swims across the flooded river at midnight to fetch the midwife for delivering her sister’s baby, the midwife rebukes her for her unwomanly behaviour: “Cross the river at this time of the night as no man would? Are you woman, devil, or ghost?” (75). It is precisely this confusion about her real identity that makes her lock up all her feelings and reactions in a self-imposed silence that befits her feminine aspect.

The sexual transformation that takes place in her has more social implications than biological; not a mere transposition of sexual terms but a transmutation, it is experienced by Saudamini as a closing up of the infinite distance from ‘woman’ to ‘man.’ The reclamation of masculine identity inevitably places ‘him’ in the mainstream of social life. The effect is immediate and miraculous, in the subject himself as well as in the environment. His verbal incapability vanishes and he acquires an authenticity of utterance; his movements grow free, nonchalant, and confident. “Home is no more a prison cell” (73); like a bird whose wings are untied, he can fly out into the vastness of the sky. Now “Freedom is something that can be sipped up to the heart’s content, like air.” A reassuring thought recurs to him, “I am now lord of the skies” (73). He can now sit beside his father on the front verandah; no one would rebuke him for swinging his legs. The attitudinal change in everyone around him is almost tangible. His father, who never cared for his family, declares that he is going to take rest since his son would earn the daily bread for all of them. Mother reminds him of his role as protector of the family. His sisters are proud of his manly presence; the thought of having a responsible brother makes them feel bold. ‘He’ alone is aware that nothing has basically changed except the prejudice in their gaze that has taken on a new colour.

The apparently gender-free pairs of nature/culture and private/public often prefigure and serve as metaphors for the male-female power relations.
It is in the gender divide that the disparity between the two poles reaches its culmination so as to facilitate the creation of central and marginal categories, based not so much on biology as on an ideology. It makes use of nature-culture, private-public and other similar dichotomies and systematically works them out into an oppressive sexual politics. According to Michelle Rosaldo, the private-public duality has a direct bearing on the nature-culture opposition as both indicate male-female relations: the assignment of the domestic environment to woman relates her to nature, while man’s public interests attribute to him a certain cultural value (Rosaldo, cited in Eisenstein 21). A hierarchical power structure is thus maintained between the man-public-culture and woman-domestic-nature poles.

As Palmer observes, the interaction between the private and public realms of experience is invariably brought to focus in explorations of patriarchal power relations (Palmer 69). Because of the interrelatedness of gender categories with nature-culture, private-public dichotomies, a subversion of the patriarchal definitions that support these dichotomies would entail a redefinition of the male-female relationship too, and a problematization of the absolute value and irrevocable status attributed to either of its poles. For instance, a good number of women in Morrison’s fiction are breadwinners and protectors of their families while their men are seen to be ineffectual and irresponsible. This makes a new kind of pairing possible, between strong, brave women and weak, timid men, with Eva-BoyBoy, Nel-Jude, Violet-Joe, and Pauline-Cholly as examples. Even in rare cases in Morrison where men remain reliable and stable characters like Paul D, women look upon them as partners to share their joys and troubles with, as Sethe does, and not as masters and definers of their destiny.