Chapter 1

Problematizing Absolute Otherness

One of the basic precepts of feminist philosophy that provides a common axis for various female subcultures is the conviction regarding a shared history of otherness. A commonality of female sensibility and perception is recognized, that obliterates boundaries: of nation, race, language, religion, and culture. This has opened up manifold avenues for communication between widely separated women’s groups such as the Afro-American and the Indian, across their geographical and cultural frontiers. An identity of issues and interests is revealed, that facilitates mutual enlightening, strengthening and reassuring.

At the same time, over and above the assumptions of uniaxiality of female experience, women have begun to recognize critical differences that underscore the specificity of multiple female identities. The idea of a collective feminine is identified as a patriarchally informed, universalizing concept aimed at trivializing specific identities. The generic use of the term ‘woman’ is found inadequate to represent a huge chunk of humanity, which is divided and subdivided on diverse bases, with a surprisingly varied range of marginal experience. This awareness has given rise to an identity politics that asserts the validity of cultural differences and hence of the diversity of feminist perspectives. In “Feminist Practices: Identity, Difference, Power,” Nickie Charles writes:

Dissatisfaction with universal explanations and a recognition of the different ways of being female encourage feminists to study gender relations as they existed rather than as they were theorised to exist. This has led to a much greater understanding of the forms taken by gender divisions and their relation to other systems of social relations. (Charles and Hughes-Freeland 10)
Debates around the issue of deviant practices have brought about fragmentation of mainstream feminism, causing the emergence of new racial and cultural identities like the African and the Afro-American feminisms. Even obscure female groups in remote corners of the world, who are not directly involved in discussions of feminist issues, have been influenced by the feminist strain of thought and have come to recognize and assert their autonomy and difference.

Critical opinions vary on this question of difference. According to Kate Soper, for instance, the post structuralist/post modernist theoretical positions that favour “extreme particularism” and “hyper-individualism” are bound to deconstruct the feminist politics itself that is based on a “common cause” and a collective identity (M. Eagleton, Feminist Literary Theory 364). There are others who hold that between the humanist view of a unified feminine and the anti-humanist/post modernist commitment to the concepts of difference and construction of identities, feminism has to take an intermediate position. For instance, there is “an alternative conception of the subject as constructed through relationship,” as Patricia Waugh points out. She draws attention to how much of contemporary feminist fiction has “accommodated humanist beliefs in individual agency” with modifications suggesting the possibility “to experience oneself as a strong and coherent agent in the world, at the same time as understanding the extent to which identity and gender are socially constructed and represented” (M. Eagleton, Feminist Literary Theory 361).

The work of the emerging women writers of the Third World and ethnic minorities illuminates the obscured issue of otherness. Otherness, in this context, refers to the ‘difference’ that becomes the basis for these categories’ being treated as inferior. By extension, the term applies to the marginality that they experience as a result of this othering process operative in
manifold situations. If woman is othered on account of her sexual difference from man, internal divisions of race and culture marginalize women further. This has necessitated a revisionary re-reading of the overtly white feminist tradition itself. The Black American women writers, for instance, speak not only from the common female predicament of being othered on the basis of gender, but also from their experience of rejection from the mainstream on account of skin colour and ethnicity. They concentrate on racism and misogyny not only in social arrangements and situations, but in literary tradition and practice as well.

As with the Black American, the gender marginality that the coloured Indian woman experiences also is of a kind that too heavily outweighs any similar experience encountered by her white American or European counterpart. And the writer who represents this quarter of femininity, especially if she writes in a regional Indian language, has constantly to counteract anonymity and invisibility, a sense of 'not being there' not only to the male world but to a dominant section of womankind too. For both the Afro-American and the Indian women writers, who share the historical injustice of their perspective being persistently overlooked, literary activity is a means to reinscribe history. They are concerned as much with the question of 'other womanness' as with that of the 'otherness' of woman. The definition of the coloured, casteless, indigent female as 'absolute other' gets problematized in their work.

In fact, it is the shared interest of divesting the female other of its negative implications that brings writers of dissimilar environments like Toni Morrison, the Afro-American Nobel Laureate woman novelist, and Sarah Joseph, the feminist writer of fiction from Kerala, on a common plane, and validates a comparative investigation of their strategies and approaches to the issue of otherness in their fictional works.
Though Toni Morrison and Sarah Joseph bear the similarity of belonging to marginalized racial groups, the critical differences in their socio-cultural background which have enormous significance in their writers’ make-up cannot be overlooked. Morrison’s geographical and linguistic position of dominance, for instance, gives her greater access to the literary mainstream. This, in fact, has played a part in the wide-ranging readership she has earned, and has brought along recognition in the form of the 1978 National Book Critics’ Circle Award for fiction, the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and the crowning 1993 Nobel Prize for literature. Committed to the documentation of the life and experience of black people in white America, Morrison’s fictional world is the black’s, predominantly the black woman’s, right from her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, that portrays the psychological ramifications of the racial/sexual politics upon a teen-aged black girl’s self. The pattern continues through *Sula*, a record of the beauty and pain of female bonding; *Song of Solomon*, that tells the story of the excavation and reclaiming, by a young black, of his cultural legacy; *Tar Baby*, that traces a city-bred black woman’s search for an identity away from her roots and the resulting barrenness and self-alienation; *Beloved*, an extraordinary story of a slave mother’s love and sacrifice; *Jazz*, which is a celebration of the new black power and the reaction it provokes; and *Paradise*, a document of the internal class tensions and colour gradations and woman’s quest for super power that threaten to break a black community apart.

Morrison’s critical work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, examines the prejudices that have for long colonized American literature and literary criticism. Her interviews too give insights into ignored racial, gender, and literary issues. These non-fiction works that serve to explain and rationalise her techniques and strategies provide the conceptual framework for her fiction.
Morrison’s fiction has been the locus of hectic critical and research activity. Exhaustive studies have been made on a wide variety of themes and issues relating to the form and content of Morrison’s works, ranging between the historical and the political, the communal and the personal, the symbolic and the supernatural. One of Morrison’s major preoccupations that has been variously explored is the quest for identity and cultural roots. For instance, Patrick Bryce Bjork’s *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place Within the Community* discusses the dialectics in Morrison texts between the individual and tradition, and considers the black’s existence as an experience within the community, full of surprising contradictions and tensions. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems’ *Toni Morrison* is another work that focuses on identity; it analyses the thrust that Morrison gives to the authenticity of the self-willed, self-responsible individual’s “existential act of self-creation” (Samuels and Hudson-Weems x). A historical interpretation of Morrison’s narratives is offered by Susan Willis in her “Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison,” which views her work as an engagement with history, metaphorically rendered. Doreatha Drummond Mbalia in her book, *Toni Morrison’s Developing Class Consciousness*, analyses the evolutionary patterns in Morrison’s fiction and addresses the problematic of class contradictions within the framework of race and gender. Another work that focuses on metaphor is Jones and Vinson’s *The World of Toni Morrison*, a collection of essays, which examines Morrison’s use of literary techniques such as imagery, ambivalence, grotesque, irony, and the supernatural. The use of myth in Morrison has also been explored; for instance, Terry Otten’s “The Crime of Innocence in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*” traces the mythic motif of the loss of innocence and related themes in Morrison’s novels; according to Otten, the biblical fall-motif adds universality to her works.
Of the many critical works on Morrison addressing the issue of identity, a few raise the question of the denial of self to the racially and sexually marginalized category of black woman. In Barbara Hill Rigney's *The Voices of Toni Morrison*, Morrison's texts are viewed as a celebration of the black female as one possessing "privileged insights" and having access to some "special knowledges" while offering a resistance to notions of "artistic tribalism" and the "cult of otherness" (2).

Of the innumerable articles on Morrison's individual texts dealing with a variety of issues, a selected few that approach the configuration of 'self' and 'other' from different angles may be mentioned. Deborah E. McDowell's "'The Self and the Other': Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text" posits a black self that undercuts common assumptions about it as "always already unified, coherent, stable and known" (78). McDowell shows how Morrison undermines notions of centrality and unity by positing the self as "multiple, fluid, relational and in a perpetual state of becoming" (81).

Barbara Schapiro's "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" conceives of the self's relation to the 'other' as dependent: the self exists for the other; it is the other's responsiveness and recognition that assure the cohesiveness and reality of the self.

A similar reading of the self-other relation is made in Jennifer L. Holden-Kirwan's "Looking into the Self that is No Self: An Examination of Subjectivity in *Beloved*," a study in the problem of annihilation of subjectivity beyond reclamation under the system of slavery, which results in misidentification/misrecognition between the sisters and between the mother and the daughter in *Beloved*. Holden-Kirwan points out that each needs to ratify her subjectivity in the other's gaze and be recognized by the other "in order to become subjects of the symbolic order" (422).
Peggy Ochoa’s formulations in “Morrison’s Beloved: Allegorically Othering White Christianity” are remarkable in their subversive orientation. Ochoa regards the “othered” space as inscribing hidden powers in the form of “other-speech,” a minority discourse that through allegorical or subversive language undermines the dominant discourse.

It may be pointed out that only random studies have been done on the otherness theme in Morrison, and only in essays on individual works; hardly any book-length critique has been made on the subject, especially in the comparative mode, involving the entirety of Morrison’s fiction and that of an Indian writer in a regional language.

The present work, “When the Muted Find Their Voices: The Problematic of Othering in Toni Morrison and Sarah Joseph,” which identifies both as marginalized writers of the Third World, focuses on the gendered structure of dichotomous concepts that posit woman as an inferior ‘other’ and concomitant formulas. Subversive configurations in the two writers’ works are examined in this light. For instance, there is a rejection of the exclusionary notion of an ‘absolute other’ and a certification of ‘otherness’ as the difference that constitutes the identity of the ‘other.’ There is also a preoccupation with the redefinition of femininity, re-evaluation of woman’s work, and reclamation of speech, presence, and space for her. The project claims novelty and relevance in that it places in the limelight an Indian (particularly non-Indo-Anglian) woman writer’s work written in a regional Indian language and, by bringing it into a comparative frame together with an eminent Nobel Laureate’s work, places it at par with the international mainstream literature, thus making a cross-cultural dialogue possible. The rationale and justification of the project reside in the conviction that women’s literature, diversified as it is, is accommodative of multiple female voices, and articulates the experience not
only of the rich, the powerful, and the exceptional women but of “the poor, the anonymous and the illiterate” (Greene and Kahn 13) as often encountered in the works of Morrison and Joseph.

Sarah Joseph, with whom Morrison is paired here, is an exceptionally powerful voice among contemporary writers of women’s fiction in Malayalam. She is a feminist activist and a central figure in current literary and academic debates in Kerala. Joseph’s published works include six collections of short stories: *Manassile Tii Maatram* (“Only the Fire Inside”); *Kaadințe Sangītam* (“The Symphony of the Forest”); *Paapatara* (“The Land of Sin”); *Nilaavariyunnu* (“The Moonlight Knows”); *Odvulatte Suuryakaanti* (“The Last Sunflower”) and *Kaaditu Kaṇṭaayo Kaanta* (“Do You See These Woods, Sweetheart”). Her other works are a book of two novelettes: *Nanmatinmakalute Vriksam* (“The Tree of Good and Evil”); one novel: *Aalaahaayute Peṇmakka! (“The Daughters of God the Father”); a collection of essays: *Bhagavad Gitayute Adukkaayile Ezhuttukaar Veevikkunнатu* (“What the Writers Cook in the Cookhouse of Bhagavad Githa”); and two journal articles: “Nammtuṭe Adukkaḷ Tiriccu Pidikkuka” (“Let’s Reclaim Our Kitchen”) and “Penvazhiracanayute Meyyum Uyirum” (“The Body and Soul of Feminist Writing”). The two stories in *Nanmatinmakalute Vriksam*, one the title story and the other “Viśudha Ranguun Puṇyavalan” (“Saint Rangoon”), are both stinging social satires bringing to ridicule the institution of religion that serves to snuff out the latent good in the human being. In *Aalaahaayute Peṇmakka!,* a vibrant story is woven out of the whimsicalities of history in creating subaltern categories that are perpetually circumvented/excluded when it comes to the allocation of power. The narrative depicts how women as a subaltern group subvert the power structures that deny them space by transforming themselves into power generating and
transmitting communities. The short stories that capture moments in woman’s marginal existence portray her in all her varied moods, ranging between abject self-negation and aggressive self-assertion.

Introducing the revised edition of Joseph’s stories written between the 1970s and the 90s, V.R. Sudheesh periodizes her writing into three phases, which may be described as prefeminist, feminist, and post feminist (roughly corresponding to Showalter’s ‘feminine,’ ‘feminist’ and ‘female’). He observes that there is “an evolution in her literary career, from woman who is circumscribed in the frames of the system to woman who battles with [the dominant structures of] power” (16-17). As Joseph herself says:

Early stories are a training site. . . . As the person who tells the story grows and transforms, the story within him too undergoes growth and transformation. This change and growth have happened to my stories too: in structure, in narrative mode, in ideology, in the vision of life and so on. So to make a journey through a writer’s stories becomes a journey through his life.

(Joseph, preface, KS, rev. ed., n.pag.)

According to Joseph, the fundamental uncertainties and fears accompanying life’s phenomena such as love, disease, and death had germinated in her artist’s consciousness as themes for her early stories, written at a time when women’s movements were not alive in the Malayalam literary circles. Those stories are woven around man and woman who are both victims in the oppressive family situation where love is a superfluity, and desire impotently craves for fulfilment; they are about individuals who are rendered defenceless within the various institutions of power.

The later stories are more female-centred, and depict woman as passing through the crucial experiences of wife and mother, battling against restrictive
environment and seeking to upset the very foundations of social institutions. As Joseph reflects, there is a cause and effect relation between her early and later stories; in the helpless women of the former may be found the reasons for the militant woman that emerges in the latter (Joseph, preface, KS, n.pag.).

Critical works on Sarah Joseph comprise mainly reviews and articles in journals and newspapers, television features, and interviews. A clear statement of Joseph's feminist commitment is found in the interview entitled "Pati Aakaaśattinum Pati Maṇṭinum" ("For Half of the Sky and Half of the Earth"). "Muditteyyangaḻi" ("Hair Goddesses"), article by eminent poet-critic Satchidanandandan, with which Joseph's Paapattara is prefaced, is an authentic and in-depth study on her fiction in the light of the feminist aesthetics. V.R. Sudheesh's "Sarah Joseph, Feminist Allaatta Kaalattu" ("Sarah Joseph, When She Was Not a Feminist"), which forms an introduction to the revised edition of Kaadinte Saṅgiitam is a critical journey through Joseph’s fiction, tracing a feminist’s evolution in her writings. In her book Ulkazhcakal ("Insights"), Jancy James makes an in-depth reading of Joseph’s novel Aalaahaayuve Peñmakkaḻ as the saga of marginalized woman that is interwoven with the history of a land. An eco-feminist reading of Joseph’s stories is made by G.Madhusudanan in Kathayum Paristitiyum ("Fiction and the Environment") in which he identifies a gradual development in her eco-feminist vision. A connection is also read between this and the subaltern perspective strongly evident in the more recent stories.

The thesis put forward here takes off from the recognition of a common thread in the experience of the Indian and Afro-American women as subaltern categories. It proceeds from a conviction of their legitimate claim to subjectivity and an awareness of the vulnerability of the deterministic categorization of these as 'other,' denoting an irreversibly absolute position of inferiority.
An analysis of the man-woman/black-white dialectic in the context of diverse environments and life situations shows the insubstantiality of the dominant theoretical formulations in this regard. This opens up the possibility of subverting the concept of the absolute and irreconcilable other, and legitimizes the other's claim to a subjectivity of its own.

The women in Morrison's and Joseph's fiction show convergences with respect to their experience of alterity and their resistance to it, as well as critical divergences in details which render a comparative investigation interesting and fruitful. Howsoever distanced in cultural, communal, political and social parameters and environments, the structures of domination they resist are identical so that common subversive strategies are also identifiable. Their works, when viewed from the framework of racial/gender marginality, have a common relevance. The underlying current in both their worlds is an engagement with the question of female subjectivity under erasure, and with the search for an authentic, unitary self against the forces of fragmentation and alienation that threaten to undermine woman's integrity. The concern for redefining the female other, by bringing to the fore its positive potential, is seen to be a common strain that demands a deconstruction of the dominant concept of the male as absolute human subject and the subsidiary assumptions that validate it.

Preliminary to a comparative reading of the treatment of otherness in the works of Toni Morrison and Sarah Joseph, the prevailing theoretical formulations of 'subject' and 'other,' and their implications in the experience of the non-white, female subcultures that these writers represent, need to be analysed.

Human subjectivity has been much theorised on in various philosophies, ancient and modern, religious and secular, western and oriental. In all postulations
of subjectivity, the category of the other is evoked as its linguistic as well as metaphysical correlative. In eastern thought systems like the ‘Advaita,’ however, the notion of irreconcilable contrast between the ‘subject’ and the ‘other’ is rather missing: the Eternal and the human being are not two, but are merged in oneness. Even in ‘Dvaita’ which posits a concept of duality, the two elements are linked in an ultimate identify and togetherness, and dominance of one over the other is absent (The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy).

The human other, in fact, is one that is privileged to enjoy communion with the divine ‘Self,’ in advanced stages of mystical experience. The human being’s efforts to know his relation to a higher reality leads him not to further separateness from it, but to a closing up of difference, and ultimately to an identification with that reality (Dasgupta 1: 439-42).

In western metaphysics and its dichotomous conceptualization of reality, one element in each oppositional pair predominates and makes meaning in suppression of the other. The ‘other,’ forming a duality with the ‘subject’/‘self,’ is nevertheless subsumed under it without any apparent logic. This sublated element of the ‘other’ has acquired great relevance in feminist and cultural theories because of its implications in the experience of the female and other marginalized categories. To quote Deborah E. McDowell, “the opposition of ‘self’ to ‘other’, and all those analogous to it, relate hierarchically and reproduce the more fundamental opposition between male and female” (79).

The subsidiary position of the ‘other’ is a basic concept in all western theories wherein subjectivity is posited as the essential human function. All major theorisings on the subject show how the category of ‘other’ is socio-historically constructed as a gender-specific item, defining female difference as negative and inferior. The term ‘human’/‘man’ having lost its generic sense at some historical point, ‘human subjectivity’ has come to acquire a gendered significance.
The 'subject' is interpreted as the origin and source of meaning: the knowing agent that implies the 'object' that is to be known and controlled, the thinking or causal agent responsible for the individual's actions. This human subject, in seeking to assert its identity and dominance, needs an 'other,' which it is not and from which it can distinguish itself. In accordance with the patriarchal sexist ideology, the subject position is reserved for the male and, since male sexuality implies that of the female, the counter-position of otherness is automatically ascribed to the female. In other words, subjectivity and otherness are predicated as two absolute, permanent positions, irreversibly attached to the male and female respectively.

By implication, these positions signify relations of domination and subordination. In all hypotheses of subjectivity, therefore, the hegemonic status of the subject (and the corresponding marginality of the other) is a common feature. Though evidently the two categories are mutually implicative and expiatory, and hence inseparable, the subject signifies not only in opposition to the other, but also by its exclusion and denial. The patriarchal bias in theoretical formulations has invested the male principle of subjectivity with unqualified superiority, while the female principle of otherness is relegated to a position of abject inferiority. As Jean Baker Miller theorises, "[T]he close study of an oppressed group reveals that a dominant group inevitably describes a subordinate group falsely in terms derived from its own systems of thought. These same false categories guide the dominant group's explanations about itself" (xix).

The gendered interpretation of otherness is subjected to revision in feminist studies. The permanent and irrevocable assignation of the female other to an inferior realm is resisted as irrational. The gender element that colours the self/other pair is identified as a patriarchal construct. In The Second Sex, Beauvoir says:
In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality—that of the Self and the Other. This duality was not originally attached to the division of the sexes; it was not dependent upon any empirical facts. . . . The feminine element was at first no more involved in such pairs as Varuna-Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, and Day-Night than it was in the contrasts between Good and Evil, lucky and unlucky auspices, right and left, God and Lucifer. (16-17)

It stands to reason that like the other contrastive pairs that the human subject conceived of in the task of sorting out the phenomena, the self-other duality was originally a gender-free concept. If, from the male subject’s point of view, woman was ascribed the position of ‘other,’ it only meant that she was one of the items that the male subject found difficult to understand and interpret, and hence easier to exclude from his consciousness. About the story of woman’s acquiring the position of ‘other,’ Beauvoir writes: “At first she is not of sufficient importance to incarnate the Other, all by herself. . . . When woman’s role enlarges, she comes to represent almost in its entirety the region of the Other” (101). The mystery and inexplicability of her biology, her special powers for conception and childbearing, her very separateness, which filled him with awe and wonder, prompted man to exalt and venerate her as his immediate other. For she was his opposite as well as his ally, separate yet strangely identical, the perfect other that man could wish for. She opposed him without the hostility and impersonality of nature and at the same time, did not seem to require the reciprocity that a too closely identical fellow being, say another man, demanded (172).

This view of an absolute female other that does not have reciprocal claims, howsoever it may have helped the human being in his pursuit of identity,
is hardly acceptable to feminists. According to Julia Kristeva, “all identities are unstable” (M. Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory* 351). They are “constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled.” It means that neither the ‘subject’ nor the ‘other’ can be treated as absolute categories. Speaking of the role of language in constituting subjectivity, Catherine Belsey points out how “dialogue, the fundamental condition of language, implies a reversible polarity between ‘I’ and ‘you’” (M. Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory* 358). These linguistic categories are posed in undeniable reciprocity, with the accompanying possibility of reversal of status. The self and the other thus earn their value only in relation to one another.

Beauvoir observes that life abounds in situations of counterposing of self and other. To explain this, she cites the Hegalian theory that in each consciousness there is hostility towards every other consciousness; but the other consciousness also sets up its own hostile other from its point of view and thus establishes a reciprocal claim (17).

However, this reciprocity gradually gets blurred; historical events like wars and conquests through ages have aided in establishing a domination-subordination relation between categories that were originally independent and autonomous. The stronger, that is, the ones in possession of the institutions of power, have often found it easy to subjugate the weaker. Inversely, however, history bears witness that subject categories and classes can acquire power and impose upon the oppressors too. This indicates the volatile nature of power, it is never permanently attached to any category. But the relations of power prevailing between man and woman appear as if eternally-ordained, woman accepting the subordinate status and otherness as natural conditions, their source undisputed. According to Beauvoir:
No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. (18)

Woman submits to male sovereignty unconditionally, and never poses the threat of a revolt (as the proletariat or the slave) that can result in a dialectical inversion. She “seems to be the inessential who never goes back . . . to be the absolute Other, without reciprocity” (Beauvoir 173). The male has the legends and myths of creation to support this conviction regarding woman’s otherness. History, religion, and social institutions appear to have conspired together to confirm woman’s subordination.

It may be seen that the otherness that the male has conceived for woman is one that actually defines and sums up her difference. With woman’s biological, sexual, and functional differences, she is seen to embody everything that man found incomprehensible, unpredictable, and even magical. To accept this difference is to admit the possibility of an equally valid autonomy in the ‘other.’ Therefore, instead of naming it as difference, it is interpreted as ‘otherness’ that is inferior, negative, and non-reciprocal. To maintain/admit to reciprocal relations with the female ‘other’ is considered unwise on account of the possibility of a reversal of positions; it is safer even to make a deity out of her, thereby placing her unequivocally in subordinate relation to his own self, as his deity who brings him prosperity, good fortune and so on (Beauvoir 105). Even when she is deified at the metaphysical realm, socially she is to be maintained as a permanently inferior other. It turns out that worship of female deities is just another form of othering.
The traditional prejudice against woman, exemplified in myths, legends and popular stories, and manifested in the wide acceptance of the notion of her inferiority as evolved by a patriarchal society and culture, has received some sort of legitimacy and ratification through psychological theories. Sigmund Freud’s theories have sought to establish that woman is lacking (not that she is differend vis-à-vis man, in certain physiological aspects, “which leaves ineradicable traces on her development and character formation” (Freud, qtd. in Friedan, *Feminine Mystique* 102-03).

Together with this theory of woman’s inherent physiological ‘deficiency,’ Freud has proposed concomitant notions of her mental, intellectual and psychological passivity, unchangeability, and incapacity for development, all of which show a deeply ingrained influence of the patriarchal ideology. In all these theories, the socio-cultural factors, practices and conventions down through the ages that have conditioned woman into her present position of inferior ‘other’ are overlooked.

Freud’s biological interpretation of woman’s otherness has been challenged by feminists who point out that Freud’s theories have been formulated in an environment of extreme social, moral and sexual repressions that denied woman the basic human need and right to grow. As Betty Friedan points out, the society and culture that constructed woman’s inferiority have changed and so has woman’s position in it. In these modern times “when women’s equal intelligence has been proved by science, when their equal capacity in every sphere except sheer muscular strength has been demonstrated, a theory explicitly based on woman’s natural inferiority would seem as ridiculous as it is hypocritical” (*Feminine Mystique* 106).

Freud’s theoretical contribution to the concept of the female ‘other’ has been momentous. His psychoanalysis has reinforced the old prejudices
regarding the feminine. In Friedan’s opinion, Freud’s concept of superego has introduced “a new tyranny of the ‘shoulds,’ which chains women to an old image, prohibits choice and growth, and denies them individual identity” (*Feminine Mystique* 92).

Jacques Lacan, who reinterprets Freudian concepts in the light of post structuralist theories of discourse, gives a linguistic explanation of the formation of the human subject and the other. According to Freud, the child in the ‘preoedipal’ stage does not distinguish himself as a unified subject ‘desiring’ for a stable object; instead, between the subject and object there is a “ceaseless closed exchange” (Terry Eagleton 164). Lacan calls this stage ‘imaginary,’ one in which the child does not have a centre of identity; on the other hand, there is a merging of the identities of the child and the mother between whom there exists a symbiotic bond. According to Lacan, the entry on the scene of the father, who represents law, marks the point of the child’s socialization, his recognition of sexual difference, as well as his transition from the ‘imaginary’ to the ‘symbolic’ order of signification processes. Here the ‘fullness’ of the ‘preoedipal’ is disrupted. As the child identifies his self, he identifies the other that is not himself. The child’s recognition of social relations and his discovery of language that happen simultaneously follow the same rules: he learns that in both cases, one signifies only by excluding the other; one is present only through the absence of the other.

In feminist reinterpretation of otherness, Lacan’s distinction between ‘Other’ and ‘other’ and its post colonial implications become relevant. The ‘Other’ stands for the ‘Symbolic Other’ (the mother or father) in whose gaze the subject, that is the human child, seeks to exist, and whose Otherness locates the subject in the Symbolic Order (Ashcroft et al., *Key Concepts* 170). This ‘Other,’ according to Boons-Grafe, is “a transcendent or absolute pole of address summoned each time
the subject speaks to another subject” (qtd. in Ashcroft et al., *Key Concepts* 170). The ‘other,’ on the other hand, is the mirror image that resembles the self but is separate enough to become focus of ‘anticipated mastery.’

In post colonial application, the ‘Other’ refers to the imperial centre or discourse while the ‘other’ indicates the colonized subjects who are marginalized by imperial discourse. This postulation of the ‘other’ and of the various ways in which colonial discourse creates its ‘others’ are relevant to feminist discourse in so far as women are a colonized category, subject to the hegemony of the male order and denied access to the centres of power.

It has been observed that the distinction between self and other (subject/object) applied to colonial discourse creates an opposition between the East and the West. The East is defined as primitive, lacking in the sociological and anthropological features that indicate refinement as per the western standards by which the western subject is posited as the universal norm. This sovereign subject state is “produced by a linguistic/discursive strategy in which the denial of dependence on the ‘other’ guarantees an illusion of autonomy and freedom” (Yegenoglu 6). Introducing the hegemonic relationship that the West has to the East, Edward W. Said remarks how it connotes the subject/other opposition: “The Orient is . . . the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1).

It may be noted that the western subject claims an exclusive identity, denotative of a privileged gender, ethnic and cultural status. Peggy Ochoa points out that the American ideal of ‘subject’ in particular is “historically characterised as Wasp—White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant” (2). Like the Black and the Oriental, the female is denied access to this hegemonic subjectivity.
In order to affirm its hegemonic position, the western subject is posited as a unitary category, ignoring the many differences of class, ethnicity and so on. The ‘others’ produced by the discourses of power are also attributed a homogeneity without respect for individual traits which are as varied as the human content involved is. These marginalized ‘others’ are assigned a collective, subordinate non-identity in order to authenticate the superior, privileged subjectivity of the dominant category.

The denial and denigration of individuality through homogenizing, universalizing processes are recognised as marginalizing strategies and hence resisted by the othered categories. They stake claims to an identity that transcends the marginality of otherness. The self-identification that they endeavour to accomplish is also a mode of self-differentiation; for the difference that sets them apart as ‘other’ is equally valid and valuable. In short, otherness itself gets rewritten as a self-certifying formulation with a subjectivity of its own.

The apparent unresolvability of the dialectic of self/other indicates a theoretical and ideological blindness in its conceptualization. The consciousness that assumes the subject position has a natural tendency to negate reciprocal relations with the object; for it is in distancing itself from the ‘other’ that its nearness with the ‘self’ is achieved, and it is in proportion to the difference established from the ‘other’ that the sovereignty of the ‘self’ is asserted. This, then, has led to the denial of the equal claims of the ‘other’ to posit itself in the subjective position, and of the equal validity of alternate points of view.

In the patriarchal construction of subjectivity, the ‘other’ is repressed and underplayed, its dialectical relation with the ‘subject’ negated, in order to affirm the latter’s autonomy. The male invariably assumes the position of ‘self’ as the universal norm with a positive value, and the female gets automatically
relegated to the contrastive insignificance of the 'other,' a deviation from the norm, which, by virtue of its difference, is negative in value.

However, the female can assume centrality and autonomy, relegating the male to marginality, since the binary logic implies the possibility of an inversion of positions for the elements. This disrupts the whole argument that sustains the hegemony of the male subject. A subversion of the male subject releases the female other from the cultural, sociological, anthropological and symbolic interpretations and connotations of negativity. It also underscores the fact that consciousness is not a fixed, permanent position, but is in a constant state of flux, oscillating between the poles of subjectivity and objectivity, accordingly as the perspectival focus is shifted. As Beauvoir says, when “each individual freely recognises the other, each regarding himself and the other simultaneously as object and as subject in a reciprocal manner” (172), the conflict between the 'self' and the 'other' will be automatically resolved.

Both the 'self' and the 'other' inasmuch as they refer to the male-female relations of power, are socially and culturally constructed. The negativity, ambiguity and contradiction ascribed to the female, being projections of male imagination, are not, therefore, the essential or absolute qualities of woman or her difference.

The matrices on which otherness is constructed and subjectivity is made inaccessible for the Indian and Afro-American women are more or less analogous. However, the social and psychological pressures that urge their responses to otherness are considerably different, the roots of which are embedded in their respective history and culture. These historical, ethnic and cultural differences also inform the various subversive strategies employed in their efforts at transcendence.
The exploration that is made here of these themes of likenesses and variations in female stances, with reference to the works of Morrison and Joseph, involves a convergence of the methodology of literary comparatistics and the theoretical framework of feminism. It is significant that recent changes and experiments in comparative research have come to bear remarkably upon feminist and cultural studies (and vice versa) to open up fruitful areas for academic investigation. In these disciplines, which have their origins in an environment of marginalization, the need to rewrite a history of otherness has brought prominently to the fore the determinant of 'difference,' which constitutes cultural, national, racial, linguistic and sexual identities.

This concept of 'difference,' counterposed to 'universality,' relates gender to race, nationality and culture wherein it has necessitated radical changes in outlook. Recognition and appreciation of crucial differences serve to remove the bias against marginalized groups.

The ethnic bias in the Eurocentric model of comparative literature has persuaded especially the Third World nations of the need for establishing alternate models with African, Indian, Latin American or other cultural orientations. An urge to define national, cultural and linguistic identities is manifest in cross-cultural and feminist subcultural studies. These seek to bring the matrix of difference into comparative discourse. The new shift in focus has not only led to an awareness regarding the specificity of national literatures and the existence of alternate literary traditions, but also serves to promote connections and convergences in form and content that override difference.

In fact, the new interest in the influence of different socio-cultural and linguistic conditions on literary activity is not a determinedly parochial or segregationist trend, and by no means does it reduce the importance of historical
movements and forces in the common course of literature and humanity at large. It may even be argued that the revival of the repressed national and regional literatures brings one closer to Goethe’s ‘world view’ (Wellek and Warren 48) in the sense that it makes other unexplored traditions and cultures accessible, which leads to an enrichment and broadening of sensibility and taste. Cross-culturality has come to be recognized as “the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation” (Ashcroft, qtd. in Bassnett 75-76).

The paradigm-shift in comparative theory goes parallel with a similar change in perspective within the feminist theory. Between the early call for gender equality and renunciation of patriarchy and a more recent stance of accommodation with the system, feminism has passed through various phases of development—political, cultural and academic. In the last three decades, there has been a proliferation of political ideologies within the movement as radical, new left, socialist and so on. Interaction with the methods and assumptions of other critical disciplines has also had its inevitable effect on feminist theory. Post modernist/post structuralist influence has manifested itself in western feminist thought in remarkable ways, giving rise to multifarious schools with conflicting assumptions and stances, especially regarding female experience and identity, resulting in as many ways of practising feminism as there are women’s groups.

Current academic debates have problematized the genre of a distinctive women’s literature, with many women writers themselves rejecting it on the grounds that it implies something subliterary in standards. However, the distinction has been necessitated by the fact that the mainstream tradition of writing is based on a masculine area of experience and uses a male idiom to convey male formulations on life and the world, viewed and judged by patriarchal norms.
The area of experience specific to women—female patterns of living, thinking and perceiving—has remained mostly unexplored. Being outside the gamut of masculine perception, being different, this sphere has come to be considered insignificant and not worthy subjectmatter for valuable literature.

The irrationality of the exclusion of experience that is different from that of the male from mainstream literary tradition is questioned by women writers. They look for possibilities of a new aesthetic and a new literary canon, which is not determined by the male order and can transform the conventional concept of the feminine and its repression on the basis of difference.

The diversification within feminism has caused the original catchword of 'equality,' meaning 'sameness' with a dominant model, to undergo dialectical investigation and to be either replaced or appended with a demand for recognition of 'difference.' In its evolutionary process feminism has also changed its attitude to the concept of difference. No longer is the feminist under compulsion to evade the issue of biological difference: the paradigm-shift problematizes the construction of gender and related assumptions, which have their roots in the negative conception of woman's difference as a sign of her inferiority. The difference itself is upheld as a positive value and basis for an authentic identity.

This preoccupation with the concept of difference is strongly marked in the various female subcultures such as African, Afro-American, and Indian, which demand acknowledgement of their cultural specificity and the difference in their political orientation. For them too, 'difference' has undergone a semantic shift; from a negative description indicating 'otherness' that served to alienate them from the mainstream, now it has come to signify the hallmark of positive identity. The Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s, which has had an important bearing upon the western women's movement, has contributed in
particular to the theoretical formulation of ‘difference’; the strong racial awareness it raised eventually led to a split in American feminism.

Gerardine Meaney calls attention to how eminent feminist critics and theorists tend to evade the fact that “while as women we are all dispossessed some women are more dispossessed than others,” and how their theories are limited by the “assumption of the identity of women rather than their difference and specificity” (9). As Marjorie Pryse points out, “black women novelists challenge the authenticity and accuracy of an American history that failed to record their voices and a literary history—written by black men as well as white—that has compounded the error of that neglect” (Pryse and Spillers 4). For so long has literature produced by black American writers suffered dismissal and erasure that it prompts Toni Morrison to say that “the arbiters of critical power in American literature seem to take pleasure in, indeed relish, their ignorance of African-American texts” (P/D 13). By exploring the exclusively black, female experience and patterns of living from within, black feminist writers not only rewrite the indifference and partiality of history and tradition but also open up new vistas of human experience hitherto unknown to the world of letters.

An obfuscation of woman’s experience and accomplishments has been consistently at work in Indian history too. This is significant when considered against the fact that in all ages in Indian history there have been women who distinguished themselves in various fields from politics to religion to literature, and proved their brilliance and acumen. History glosses over their achievements, never giving them the spotlight as far as possible; at best, their role is underplayed, their work underrated. The part played by Indian women’s organizations in the Indian National Movement, as Patricia Kaplan points out, has been conveniently blurred in recorded accounts of the freedom
movement (105). Through strategies like romanticization and glorification of submissive, meek, modest, self-effacing woman in myth, legend and fiction, the dominant order has succeeded in establishing a popular image of Indian femininity, agreeable to its vested interest of keeping her within manageable limits. In the Indian society that is divided on diverse bases, producing layers of superior-inferior categories, woman always has had a subaltern existence, her experience being identical with that of the lower castes, tribes, and classes (Satchidanandan, “Muditteyyangal” 35). The subversive possibilities of feminist thought have influenced Indian women to resist negative descriptions, definitions and conventions that for ages have indicated subordination for them. They seek to reconstruct the world to accommodate the feminine as valuable, and to rediscover their identity in this transformed environment. A new concept of Indian femininity devoid of its conventional implications is articulated in their works.

As Third World groups, the Afro-Americans and the Indians have a number of shared experiences and attitudes, apart from the deeply implanted distrust of history, and memories of historical grievances that have left gaps to fill in both cases. The post colonial psychological compulsions and pressures under which the Latin American or African writer engages in literary activity are to an extent shared by the Indian and African-American writers too. The political and cultural bondage that imprinted deep scars on the psyches of these peoples, not very easy to wear off, has also left remnants of the domination–subordination ideology on their consciousness. So deeply inscribed are the unconscious structures of colonial thinking that the process of decolonization has to be as deliberate as the original process of colonizing had been.
It is true that the political phenomenon of colonization by a conquering people has not been experienced by the black American in exactly the same way as the Indian. For the African-Americans, the aggressor is one with whom they share claims to a common geographical entity, its heritage and its history; colonization happened for them as racial aggression, which still continues to manifest as cultural othering and segregation. Their post colonial sensibility is strongly shaped by resistance to hegemonic, integrationist as well as segregationist forces.

For the Afro-Americans, colonialism has been an almost permanent feature of their existence, since the former master-race still remains as an overwhelming, ever-marginalizing, physical presence, interfering with their culture. They find themselves in a double bind, left with no alternative but to cohabit with the aggressor and use a language he has colonized. Afro-American writers, thus destined to write from within the Anglo-American cultural and linguistic mainstream while remaining an inconsequential part of it, are faced with the need to transform the colonizer’s language to suit their particular needs. They give it appropriate nuances and inflections to inscribe their race and colour as well as to establish a literary canon and culture of their own.

One important factor that differentiates Black America from post colonial India is the latter’s mixed-race experience, which is as marked as its multilinguality. It is remarkable that despite the traumatic times of slavery and exploitation, the American blacks have retained their native cultural essence; they have meticulously resisted cultural hybridization. Afro-American literature offers a perception from the inside of this sense of native culture, demythifying the white views and notions in this regard. In contrast, as already seen, the current Indian socio-politico-cultural environment has been shaped by the rather prolonged colonial experience that has persisted till the first half of the
twentieth century as a regular feature of Indian life. Its inevitable outcome of slavery, racism or its equivalent of casteism, and classism has become part and parcel of the Indian destiny. It has been pointed out that the cultural hybridity that invasions, immigrations and diasporic movements have resulted in has rendered the concept of an indigenous culture problematic. In fact, the composite culture itself has become the positive identity of the Indian.

In Afro-American women writers, the engagement with history and race is more marked than in their Indian counterparts. For them, history has been doubly unjust in denying them presence not only as blacks but as women too. Therefore, in their writings, the themes of oppression and dispossession have as much to do with gender as with race.

In a general way, it is true that Indian woman does not labour under self-denigrating racial and cultural assumptions as severely as the black American woman does, though in the global situation, she suffers racial disprivilege as much as the other. But what she experiences in a more intense and personal way is the multi-layered oppression within the national context, where tradition, conventional codes and practices divide femininity into groups and subgroups of varying degrees of inferiority. If the second marginalizing force in the domination-subordination structure for the black woman is racial in character (the first being gender), a similar force in Indian woman's existence is caste. Just as the white-black separation has strong resonances in the black female's gender marginality, the caste system, which originally formed the base of Indian society and still has strong roots in the Indian mind and culture, determines the extent of marginality for various sections of Indian womanhood. As a result, the upper caste and the lower caste women inhabit vastly different worlds as the white and the black women do.

Class tensions contribute much to the unbearability of existence of both the Afro-American and the Indian woman, adding an extra amount of
repression for the lower classes. Though marginality is a common feature of female existence, the worst affected, as always, are the poor. These class divisions tend to obliterate the feeling of solidarity that a shared history and tradition could give to these disprivileged groups.

The closely analogous, if not identical, aspects of Afro-American and Indian women’s existence on the one hand and of the political projects of black and feminist aesthetics on the other provide a sound take-off for a comparative exploration of the fictions of Toni Morrison and Sarah Joseph. A common female experience transcending differences has to be recognized before the apparent incompatibilities in their fictional ethos are brought under analysis. This also places in the right perspective the incommensurabilities in their statures as writers, the linguistic media they use, the socio-cultural environments they represent, and the aspects of female alterity that they subject to analysis in their writing. Though immediate circumstances and external agents of othering may vary for the Indian and Afro-American women, these have their common source in the deep structures of patriarchy, which explains the broad similarities in their experience and in the effects that othering has produced on them.

There is valuable literature in every language, the criterion of value being changeable in accordance with the ideology and politics of various reading groups and individuals. Of course, it may be an arduous task to find common interests between literatures of two diverse cultures, since discourses are largely historically determined, each cultural entity having a history of its own from which its discourse acquires its distinctive features. Nevertheless, there have been universal movements that have affected humanity at large or large sections thereof, like races or classes, and have shaped conditions of existence and thereby determined the nature of ideological superstructures. Economic and political causes have influenced and inspired similar responses in
men and women of different environments. If capitalism necessitated Marxism, patriarchy has inevitably urged the advent of the feminist ideology with more or less universal effect, though not to the same degree or at the same moment everywhere. Feminist studies on the structures of oppression and women's resistance encoded in fiction serve as a link between various female subcultures and discourses.

In combining the comparative perspective with that of feminism in the ensuing discussion on the works of Toni Morrison and Sarah Joseph, internal feminist issues relating to culture, nationality, and ethnicity are sought to be brought to light. The approach helps to explore similarities and differences in women's experience in different communities and examine different female practices and their implications. It is hoped that an awareness of interracial, international female issues may be roused, spearheading the political and cultural dimension of the woman-question. At the same time, regional traditions are sought to be highlighted, and provincial feminist issues are centralized, so that the experience of the anonymous or less known female groups and their practices find articulation, without which her-story would remain partial and incomplete.

In the following chapters, an attempt is made to work out the themes and motifs of female otherness and difference as exemplified in the fictions of Toni Morrison and Sarah Joseph. For the sake of compactness and precision, intensive reading is restricted to selected works of both authors which best illuminate the feminist themes and currents analysed.

Chapter Two, "The Feminine in Process" investigates how the female 'other' evolves as a socio-cultural concept constructed and sustained in the patriarchal ideology. In male-dominated societies, the process of socialization is actually that of feminization for the girlchild; out of this process, the universally
oppressed category of the ‘feminine’ with its negative connotations is formed. The matrices on which otherness is constructed as an absolute position that has no access to subjectivity are analysed in the light of the experience of the black and the coloured categories depicted in Morrison’s and Joseph’s narratives.

Chapter Three, “Institution Versus Experience,” focuses on the patriarchal institutions of marriage and motherhood as the fountainheads of gender oppression. Analysis is made of the themes of marriage and maternity in the works of Morrison and Joseph; how the institutionalization of woman’s biological and reproductive functions deprives her of her valuable and exclusive experience as woman and mother is critically examined.

The creation of alterity in racial, cultural, class and caste axes is discussed in Chapter Four, entitled “Redefining the Margins.” How in the fiction of the writers under reference the subaltern categories seek to upset the dominant-subordinate power relations and rewrite their marginal destinies, using strategies such as formation of solidarity groups within which they experience power and self-affirmation, comes under discussion.

Woman, as preserver of life, history, and tradition, is brought to critical focus in Chapter Five, “Reviving (M)other’s Order.” The empowering and nurturing aspects of the feminine, especially in its maternal form, devoid of its negativistic descriptions, revived and brought to the centre of discourse, are subjected to analysis.

How language has perpetuated the ideology of gender by creating the subaltern consciousness in the female is discussed in Chapter Six, “When the Muted Find their Voices.” In dichotomous configurations like speech/silence and centre/margins, speech is constructed as male dominion while silence is assigned to the female; the central and livable space is reserved for man
whereas woman is driven to the suffocating spacelessness of the margins. How the marginalized other resists these enervating circumstances is examined here. A deconstruction is seen to be at work, of the binary oppositions conventionally used to corroborate woman's marginality. The subaltern categories break the silences imposed on them and retrieve their voice by formulating a subversive signification system of their own, converting silence itself into a signifier.

The concluding chapter concentrates on the universality and cross-culturality of the themes of oppression, the critical similitudes in the social institutions that serve as tools of oppression, and the commonality of interests between the two female subcultures, validating the juxtaposition of the two writers. A connection is sought to be established between the differences in the treatment of feminist themes in Morrison and Joseph and their respective historico-cultural environments. The necessity is recognized for a shift in feminist focus so as to accommodate the subaltern woman's voice too. A resolution to the issue of the marginalized 'other' is offered in the redefinition of 'otherness' as 'difference.'