Chapter 3

Institution Versus Experience

If the othering of woman works by social construction of gender, which means subjection to a psychological process of feminization that poses her biological difference as disabling, the absoluteness of her subordinate status is perpetuated with the help of social and cultural codes. After the girlchild is initiated into a conforming femininity, her continued compliance is ensured through participation in the social institutions of marriage, motherhood and family. These institutions are integral parts of the patriarchal machinery that cuts woman down to size. Religious and cultural conventions and customs have built up an irresistible ideology around these institutions and about woman's decisive and sustaining yet subordinate role therein. This ideology confines femininity in its childbearing and rearing roles, and thereby not only ensures woman's subordination but also denies her any commitment outside home and mothering (Friedan, *Feminine Mystique* 38). Through the ages, what was mere custom has become the rule and its violation has come to be considered downright offensive. Marriage and family have assumed dimensions of law-making bodies that direct the social behaviour almost exclusively of women; they act as a gendered social machinery that turns out subdued and vanquished feminine.

Many of the thinkers who have theorised on the institutionalization of man-woman relationship in marriage agree upon the gender oppression it entails. Friedrich Engels' materialistic explanation of the origin of family throws light on the economic motive behind the politics of woman's subordination. According to him, it is the acquisition of private property that brought in the system of patriarchy with its domination-subordination model. The need to
protect property invented slavery, and the need to ensure legitimacy of heirs to that property necessitated subjection of woman in marriage: "In order to guarantee the fidelity of the wife, that is, the paternity of the children, the woman is placed in the man's absolute power..." (58). Engels looks upon monogamous marriage as "the subjection of one sex by the other" (65) in which he sees also the beginnings of class oppression (66). Engels' views on the relationship between marriage and woman's oppression are significant to feminist theorists though opinions vary as to the origin of that oppression. Gerda Lerner suggests that appropriation of woman's sexual and reproductive capacity by the male in the form of racist and sexist enslavement began prior to the advent of private property and class society, but that its degradation into a commodity has resulted in the foundation of private property (Creation of Patriarchy 213). Lerner gives a historical explanation to woman's oppression and argues that its beginnings coincide with the enslavement of conquered women. It is this enslavement that is continued under patriarchy.

The patriarchal institution of marriage as dealt with in the fictions of Toni Morrison and Sarah Joseph reveals in clear terms its bourgeois nature: it is extremely limiting for the female and not so much for the male; often it has diagonally opposite moral, ethical and behavioural criteria for man and woman. If it is "a privilege to the male," to woman it "marks a decline in female status and autonomy" (Collier and Rosaldo, Ortner and Whitehead 284). If it completes the loss of self in woman, it increases the self-esteem of man; what she has lost by way of selfhood proves to be his gain. In Morrison's Sula, Jude Greene thinks of marriage as a means to boost up his impaired self-respect, as a compensation for all the humiliating experiences of a blackman's life:

So it was rage, rage and determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed
some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized,
but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very
deeply. . . . The two of them together would make one Jude. (82-83)

Of course, Jude has meant to be good to her, "he would shelter her, love her,
grow old with her" (83). But long years wear out the edges of his love, leaving
it a dull routine. Since "rights are unequally distributed and frequently turn into
duties" for women (Irigaray 4), Nel does not feel free even to think about her
drab existence. She is engrossed with home and children, whereas Jude has no
compunctions to cheat her with her only friend, thus depriving her at once of
love and friendship: "To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about
it because it was Sula that he had left her for" (Sula 110) is too hard for Nel
to contain.

The inequality in the behaviour patterns and reactions socially permissible
to partners in marriage repeatedly gets focalized in Morrison's fiction. In Jazz, Joe
Trace and Violet had been full of love when they "train-danced on into the
City" (50); together they had enjoyed its 'perfect' life and, for convenience, had
delayed having babies though both loved children. When Violet is forty and no
more hoping to have babies but only dreaming them, Joe attaches himself to a
young girl who could be the daughter his wife has been dreaming about, leaving
Violet to shudder in her cold bed. The community does not think Joe's 'affair' very
unalusual, and even forgives him for killing his girl for her failure to respond to his
love exactly as he demanded. The same community that accuses Violet of driving
Joe into the streets, however, has no concern or sympathy for the deceived wife,
but derides her for seeking revenge by herself taking a lover. The double standards
of the society are implicit in Alice Manfred's admonition to Violet to try to retrieve
what is left of her marriage and forget revenge: "You got anything left to you to
love, anything at all, do it" (139); the advice to woman always is not to fight, but
"make it" somehow.
The mechanical nature of man-woman relationship in marriage and the infidelity it generates can undermine even a woman as strong as Violet. Marriage turns out to be an inadequate substitute for the fantasies that she and Joe had separately entertained in their youth. As Violet reflects later, “he was trying to catch a girl he was yet to see, but his heart knew all about, and me, holding on to him but wishing he was the golden boy I never saw either. Which means from the beginning I was a substitute and so was he” (120).

Speaking about the retarding effects of oppression in marriage and family, Mitchell points out how it "produces a tendency to small-mindedness, petty jealousy, irrational emotionality and random violence, dependency, competitive selfishness and possessiveness, passivity, a lack of vision and conservatism" (162). Violet is tormented by the thought that her husband might have shared with his new love the little secrets, jokes and love-acts that he had shared with her in their young married days: “Did he ask her to warm with her own body his spot in the bed on cold winter nights before he slid in? Or did he do it for her?” (117). She is full of righteous indignation that while Joe was snuggling up with the girl, she was out somewhere in the cold city, working hard to make both ends meet: “Wherever it was, it was cold and I was cold and nobody had got into the bed sheets early to warm up a spot for me or reached around my shoulders to pull the quilt up under my neck” (118). It is the hurt that compels her to do violence to the dead body of the intruder in her marriage.

Though not the militant type, Alice Manfred too is gripped with an urge to commit some act of violence, a craving for no less than the blood of the woman whom her husband had chosen over her. Her favourite dream for months, after her husband’s desertion, is one in which she sees herself running her horse over her sworn enemy over and over again, back and forth, “until there was nothing left but tormented road dirt signalling where the hussy
had been” (109). Alice’s rage subsides and the dream stops only with the unexpected death of the faithless husband; with the removal of the source of her unhappiness from the scene, revenge seems pointless.

According to Samuels and Hudson-Weems, for the “community of abandoned women” in Morrison, their abandonment becomes the impetus to “rebound through assertiveness and self-reliance” and establish their territory (46). Women in Morrison novels who have survived marriage find their post-marital status more fulfilling and less burdensome to their individual selves. Outside the ritualism of marriage they get a better chance to prove their mettle, as Eva Peace does after her “sad and disgruntled marriage” with BoyBoy who “liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third” (Sula 32). Though what she is left with after BoyBoy’s desertion is three “youngins and three beets to my name” (69), Eva never seeks the support of any man to raise her family. From a helpless girl who has “no idea of what or how to feel” (32), she grows into a resourceful woman who finds devious ways to earn enough money to feed her hungry children. Taking a ‘personal’ risk and losing a limb, she gets a huge sum as insurance money which enables her to build up her empire on Carpenter’s Road where she reigns as materfamilias, basking in the attentions of her menfriends, lodgers and wards.

In Pilate’s household too, men are welcome, as suitors of her daughter and granddaughter, but they are recipients rather than bestowers of favours. If any of them prove troublesome, they would be promptly thrown out, and would never dare to return. Once Pilate gets hold of one of Reba’s lovers who illtreats her, and jabs a knife into him just deep enough to frighten his wits out, for trying “to act mean to my little girl” (SOS 94).

Almost every one of Morrison’s novels offers situations that invite commentary on the institutional aspects of marriage and its disruptive influence
on the individual. No one seems to be happily married in her novels; those who stay in wedlock are seen to have to forfeit their freedom, self-respect, and confidence. In *Song of Solomon*, Ruth’s marriage at the age of sixteen to Macon Dead had been one of convenience for the latter on account of her father’s wealth. Macon’s hatred for his proud, arrogant father-in-law inevitably reflects on the daughter too: he interprets her loyalty to her father as a fixation. Ruth’s marriage virtually comes to an end at the age of twenty when her husband stops sleeping with her, suspecting her to have had incestuous relations with her father. Conversely, she accuses him to have killed her father, “the only person who ever really cared whether I lived or died” (124). Despite their active hatred for each other, they continue under the same roof for different reasons: Macon for her money, and Ruth for the children who, however, do not need her. Ruth is hit with such a great need for somebody interested in her that she begins visiting her father’s tomb at Fairfield. “To talk to somebody who wanted to listen and not laugh at me. Somebody I could trust. Somebody who trusted me. . . . I didn’t care if that somebody was under the ground” (125). Macon uses even underhand methods to weaken her, turning her own children against her; he tells tales to their son Milkman about his mother’s infidelity and succeeds in ostracizing her completely.

The trans-class, trans-cultural nature of marital disharmony is brought to focus in *Tar Baby* in which the white couple, Valerian Street and Margaret, hold on to the shreds of a ruined marriage out of habit. Suspicious of life subsequent to a previous unhappy marriage and divorce, Valerian had found in the teenaged beauty of Maine a breath of fresh air. For Margaret, marriage comes as a welcome change from her drab environment. But in Valerian’s millionaire’s mansion, she becomes a stranger who cannot adjust with the manners and life-style of the affluent class. Valerian too begins to find her a
misfit in his social circles; his jeers and jaunts only help to deepen her inferiority and make her painfully awkward and absent-minded. Valerian’s obvious contempt for her lack of breeding is an open wound for her that widens the gap in their emotional life. Margaret reacts first by hurting her baby for being his son, and then, as he grows up, by smothering him with a belated affection, leaving her husband totally out. Like Macon Dead in Song of Solomon, Valerian tries the strategy of alienating the son from the mother. But he resorts to the more refined method of befriending Michael in his loneliness and trying to compensate for the love that the mother had denied to him, only to find that he is doggedly loyal to his mother.

A marriage that has reached the lowest point of deterioration is featured in The Bluest Eye where the Breedloves, breeding only hatred, have struck an equation between marriage and violence. The days and nights of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove are marked with unfailingly regular and deadly quarrels which act as a “ceremonial close” (36) to Cholly’s routine drunken bouts:

Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their love making. Tacitly they had agreed not to kill each other. . . . They did not talk, groan, or curse during these beatings. There was only the muted sound of falling things, and flesh on unsurprised flesh. (37-38)

In their untiring zeal for enacting this ritual of violence and thus satisfying their animal inclinations, both the Breedloves are unconcerned with the reactions of their two children or with the imminent disruption of the family. The hatred each entertains for the other is so complete that each wants to see the other unredeemably damned. Spite for Cholly gives purpose to Pauline’s life and relieves its intolerable monotony. As for Cholly, he “poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could
leave himself intact" (37). Their marriage has become a rusted custom from which neither hopes for or wants release; for each needs the other’s sinfulness as an explanation and a justification for his/her worthlessness. Thus their marriage steadily moves to disaster, as does their family. Their children react differently to their parents’ battles: the sullen Sammy by running away from home at frequent intervals, and the helpless Pecola by practicing endurance. The girl often wonders about love in marriage; from her parents’ practice, she comes to the conclusion that conjugal love is no more than “[c]hoking sounds and silence” (49).

Absence of emotional involvement renders relationships with the other sex less complicated and psychologically more liberating for the young heroine in Sula. Love is bold and exhilarating, and life constantly offers novelties to both Sula and Nel in their adolescent years. As they do not care for society’s approval or disapproval but make and follow their own rules, “they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (55). Their sexual experiments have the thrill of adventure; being as yet unencumbered by the strait-jacketing framework of marriage, they are loud in their contempt for the wives who use claws and nails to protect their vulnerable men from young adventuresses.

The transformation that comes over Nel, once the institutions of marriage and family get their hold on her, is astonishing. She loses her zest for exploration of an independent and harmonious self. She too joins the common crowd of conventional, morally upright wives indistinguishable from one another in their obsessive passion to possess and be possessed.

Male faithlessness in marriage figures as a regular feature of woman’s oppression in Morrison’s texts. In Marxian analysis, the origin of adultery and prostitution is traced back to the institutions of marriage and family (Engels 66-67).
A similar view is expressed by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: "When the bourgeois family was established and rigorous monogamy became the rule a man had to look for pleasure outside home" (134). But this extramarital bliss is more or less a male monopoly; the married woman is "deliberately sacrificed to private property" (132). The prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye*, the easy women of *Jazz*, and Sula, too, with her free sex habits, enjoy an infinitely greater amount of social and economic freedom than the godfearing and virtuous Pauline, Violet or Nel who remain oppressed and deceived in marriage. Life, for the latter, is bondage in laborious and monotonous domestic tasks; their work is hardly regarded as productive or valuable, and they have no economic power even though they earn their living and support their family; they are not free even to exercise the civil rights they possess. They do not enjoy any better social dignity than the prostitutes themselves either; for "the woman who is most fully integrated in society has the fewest privileges" (Beauvoir 132).

There is sharp social criticism in the very portrayal of the prostitutes in Morrison's novels who find their profession an attractive alternative to enslavement in marriage. As Samuels and Hudson-Weems opine, "In the discourse, what is significant is not the values or questions of morality associated with their lives as 'fancy women.' They are self-employed people who control their business; they are independent and self-reliant," in contrast to the other subject women (20). Non-conformity bestows upon them immense autonomy to exercise their individuality, immune from social interferences. The threat of social segregation does not bother them because they have founded a self-sufficient community of their own where they are accountable to none. Nevertheless, their moral lapses do not deprive them of an inborn dignity of character. Though they do not respect societal codes, they have their own ethics and scruples. If they do not feel any qualms to violate biased social
laws that seek to lock woman in abject surrender, they are not mentally calloused enough to break the humane laws of love, justice and fairplay.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is the recipient of the love and generosity of the three whores, Marie, China and Poland. The one called ‘Maginot Line,’ whom mothers and grandmothers detest and “church women never allowed their eyes to rest on” (64), has a tender heart that melts for the unloved, ugly, black children and is sensitive to their misery. Claudia observes how her eyes light up with a full smile “not like the pinched and holding back smile of other grown-ups” (83). Similarly, of Violet’s hair-doing clients, only the fancy women sympathise with her in her difficult times, and trust their heads to her hands after her bouts of craziness. “They were good to me when nobody else was. Me and Joe eat because of them,” says Violet. “Anytime I come close to borrowing or need extra, I can work all day any day on their heads” (*Jazz* 106). Violet vehemently defends them when Alice Manfred condemns them; as woman, she identifies herself with them regardless of their tabooed profession.

As McDowell points out in her study on *Sula*, “goodness” is defined for women as “sexual faithfulness, self abnegation, and the idealization of marriage and motherhood” (84). The severe restraints that the social institutions of marriage and motherhood impose on woman’s identity and growth reflect the patriarchal notions and preconceptions about virtue, and about woman’s sexuality as irrepressible and dangerous. Sexuality in marriage is sanctified and proper because it is within the bounds of the societal codes of morality. Since marriage is a patriarchally sanctioned institution, extra-marital sexual conduct such as prostitution and adultery are seen to subvert the patriarchal power structure itself and hence stigmatized. Though branding and exclusion act as fairly effective checks on deviant sexuality, suppression often results in compulsive promiscuity, as Beauvoir argues. Sometimes the situation gets
completely out of hand so that prostitution has to be legitimized to prevent
disruption of society through licentiousness (Beauvoir 134). In the black
communities that Morrison depicts in The Bluest Eye, Sula and Jazz, for
instance, professional prostitution, promiscuous sexuality and other forms of
sexual depravity appear as usual and even inevitable social phenomena. These
provoke a revisionary reading of conventional morality and ethics, the codes of
which are severely discriminatory towards women.

The apparent impartiality with which Morrison frequently mentions
female promiscuity and prostitution prompts one to read a feminist theme of
foregrounding of female sexuality that undermines the persistent efforts of the
dominant ideology to suppress it. Theorists suggest that the early instances
of gender resistance might have been in the nature of aberrant or deviant
behavioural patterns such as madness, hysteria, violence and so on
(Ravindran 47-48). Such psychological reflexes are seen to be manifestations of
inner conflict proceeding from dissatisfaction with the insensitive environment.
Though not in the nature of conscious strategy, these have served as effective
ways to survive oppression. The unconventional sexual behaviour typical of the
resistant women of Morrison's novels may be analysed in this light, as a
defence mechanism against restrictive mores; they use their sexuality as a
means for self-affirmation. In fact, the highly sexualized women in Morrison are
the most individualized ones too. The very names of Pecola's whore-
neighbours savour of revolution and emancipation, befitting their
temperaments. A ghastly profession is transformed by these women into a
means for celebrating their liberated selves; it enables them to make their
presence felt, which conformity would never have achieved.

According to McDowell, in Morrison's fiction, marriage is "the death of
female self and imagination" (82). She observes that in Sula, Nel's "sexuality is
harnessed to duty and virtue in a simple cause/effect relationship,” and because it is “enacted only within the institutions that sanction sexuality for women—marriage and family—she does not own it” (82). The ethical judgement and moral yardsticks of the society govern and guide it. In contrast, “Sula assumed responsibility for her own pleasure” and “it is not attached to . . . social definitions of female sexuality and conventions of duty” (83), but to her own will. Thus, while conformity to societal values of virtue in marriage and motherhood stunts Nel’s growth, non-conformity liberates Sula.

Though marriage is designed as a curb on sexuality, it usually overdoes its purpose; for “while being supposed to socialize eroticism, it succeeds only in killing it” (Beauvoir 219). Since woman in marital bond cannot fulfil man’s expectation of her being “at once servant and enchantress” (221), she loses her magic while other women still hold that attraction for him. It is one of the paradoxes in the socialization of man-woman relationship that while marriage kills eroticism within its bounds, it engenders lewdness outside it. Nel enslaved in marriage loses her hold on Jude while Sula, being free, enthralls him, just as habit engenders contempt in Joe for Violet even as he fails to resist the seductive Dorcas’ charms. Thus in intra-marital relations sex fades out while it thrives in extra-marital or unmarried relationships.

With the Peace women in Sula, who are all unattached, sex ceases to be a weapon of oppression permanently wielded by the male. All of them are highly independent in this score; they do not find anything obscene or shameful in it. For them all men are available; so they “selected from among them with a care only for their tastes” (119). Sex becomes an act of volition on their part, in which they exercise power and control thought. Sula combines in her “Eva’s arrogance and Hannah’s self-indulgence” and “lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to
please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (118). Sex is an experiment for her, and she finds it not beautiful but rather comic and ironic, "feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power" (123) in a position of surrender. Nevertheless, she allows her men the satisfaction of thinking themselves perfect partners since, as a habit, she "helped others define themselves" (95). Thus for Sula, sex is a political act where the choice is hers. As the Bottomites suspect, there is nothing to hinder her from choosing a white man for sexual partner if she is so inclined. Whether actual or imagined, in her black female's power to do that, the conventional racial and gender power relations are subverted; the arbitrariness of such relations and the hollowness of patriarchal myths built around these are emphasized.

Because of Sula's refusal to abide by the conventions of sexual behaviour that the male ideology has coined, she is regarded as a negative specimen of the feminine by the fastidiously moralistic people of Bottom. They equate her with evil and attribute their mishaps to her return to town. However, Sula is either unaware or unmindful of what others think. She holds her life and the manner in which she wants to live it as strictly her own business. In her sexual escapades, she considers only her own needs and feelings; as she admits to Nel, she throws in whoever comes handy to fill up her empty spaces and throws them out when they fail to do so (144). Though others name it selfishness, from Sula's perspective it is honest assertion of a self that declines to rust on the treadmill of convention, and it is no graver fault than the diversely devious methods of self-seeking practiced by her married neighbours. Her moral laxity and the haughty neglect of communal codes of conduct inscribe a critique on the dominant culture, that operates through multiple moral and ethical standards for different groups with the effect that woman's immorality is more immoral than man's and the laws of natural justice are made more stiff for her.
The moral pretentiousness of the Bottom community becomes evident in the curious fluctuations that their virtue undergoes in reaction to Sula's immorality. In the final analysis, Sula comes out better than any of them. Her nonconformity has conviction in it whereas the others' mechanical conformity to custom, by which they have lost their innate goodness, has none. They perversely emulate the white morals and manners in their rejection of Sula. Her sickbed is unvisited; her funeral is virtually unattended and only watched out of curiosity by a passive group of blacks. Nel, Sula's girlhood companion and confidante, herself comes out narrow-minded, selfish and unforgiving in comparison with Sula. It takes Nel a good amount of reflection to realize that Sula had erred only as much or as little as she had. Ironically, the Bottomites who were in a hurry to forget Sula find it next to impossible; Sula dead proves to be a powerful presence that continues to disrupt their institutionalized values by the seeds of the strange ennui she has succeeded in sowing in them. This blots out the smugness they had exhibited when Sula was alive and served as a foil. Nel, for one, is prompted after her last conversation with Sula to revise her opinions and see at last that Sula was right about them all.

Another example of the fear complex generated by female sexuality (as unsupervised by male) is seen in the attitude of the orthodox community of Ruby, in *Paradise*, towards the “Convent women,” so called because they are occupants of an isolated stone building which used to be a convent. An assorted collection, they have come from different places, are of different age groups, tastes, interests and temperaments, but are held together under the same roof by a common factor, of loneliness. To use Showalter's expression, "a sisterly solidarity, a bond of shared experience, loyalty and compassion" (Jacobus 29) unites them. They are a self-sufficient community in all respects,
doing their own farming and the marketing of their products. These women who decline male help are viewed with suspicion and fear by the Ruby people, though they get a regular supply of pepper and other things from the Convent. Even the women of Ruby, many of whom have received the services of the Convent women one way or other, consider their presence at a social function inauspicious; they are either jealous of the latter's freedom or afraid of contradicting their men. What goes on at the Convent nobody has any real knowledge about, except hearsay that naturally surrounds an all-female set-up and speculations on its uncanniness. Still the Ruby people consider the house and its inhabitants to have a corruptive influence upon their young. The good Christians of Ruby are so alarmed that they convene an emergency meeting to discuss ways to prevent the evil that the Convent women bred:

Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence.
Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year's day. Trips to Demby for V.D. shots common . . . the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent.
And in the Convent were those women. (Paradise 11)

To the male community of Ruby, these women are harpies who subvert by their very presence the original purpose and associations of the Convent: members of some mysterious cult, they are evil, sexually depraved creatures who have replaced the nuns and their disciplined, ascetic, asexual habits. But to the unhappy souls who seek shelter there from time to time, who are all deceived, ill-treated, forsaken or hunted women, it is a world of serenity and restfulness: the mother's territory that reassures, and erases memories of the threatening and frightful experiences of the world outside. Billie Cato, a former inmate, who guides the forlorn Pallas to the Convent, describes it thus:
This is a place where you can stay for a while. No questions. I did it once and they were nice to me. ... Don't see many girls like them out here. ... You can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They'll take care of you or leave you alone—whichever way you want it. (175-76)

For Pallas, struck dumb by shame and pain at being double-crossed by her lover and her mother, the Convent and its women have an immediate and amazing effect, bringing in "images of a grandmother rocking peacefully, of arms, a lap, a singing voice" (177) that are infinitely soothing. The whole house is a haven "permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters" where she regains her lost voice; her "unbridled, authentic self" (177) is also returned to her.

A consensual attitude of contempt and separatism is evinced by Morrison's black community towards the "fallen" women who deviate from the prevailing mode of sexual and moral behaviour. This stems from the fact that what these women actually denounce is one of the mainstays of patriarchy, namely, the monogamous, heterosexual marriage and the sexual conformity it imposes. A craving for autonomy is evident in this marriage-resistance which is characteristic of many of Morrison's strong women, and which often erupts in unconventional sexuality. According to studies made by A.H. Maslow, there is a strong link between sexuality and the level of dominance and strength of self in women (cited in Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* 278). He also theorises that for self-actualizing people, love is spontaneous and self-expressive, motivated not by need, to make up a deficiency in the self, but is more of a gift (281-82). In the case of the non-conformists in Morrison such as Eva, Hannah, Sula and Pilate, this proves to be true, and they are seen to have accomplished self-actualization to a far greater extent than the conforming Nel and Ruth.
Nel’s easy acquiescence to the repressive structures of marriage disillusions her friend Sula, after both of them have shared a thoroughly fulfilling girlhood bond that had provided them with the nearest thing to a fullness of self. Sula waives marriage because it threatens her autonomy. Jadine refuses to be the cultural type that Son in his obsessive feeling for race insists on her becoming; nor can she be the black girl that appeals to the fancy of her white European friend who proposes marriage to her. The person inside her black skin is more important to her so that “sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside—not American—not black—just me” (TBY 45).

Pilate who forsakes marriage has found it an unnecessary burden; outside marriage, she manages her own and her family’s affairs better than any man. Having been released from the marital bond early in their youth (though not out of their choice), Eva and Alice Manfred too find it good riddance and prove the dispensibility of marriage by living fruitful lives afterwards. As for those who remain within the framework out of powerlessness to resist, like Pauline Breedlove, Ruth Forster and Violet, they find it the site of meaningless conflict that denies growth and fulfilment. It is also remarkable that the only enduring relationships are unconventional arrangements like that of Sethe and Paul D, Ondine and Sydney, and Corinthians and Porter.

A major influence on and source of power for woman’s self is her instinct that spurs her immediate responses and reactions. Too often, however, in social relations, especially in marriage and family, she has to submit this instinctual power to be modified, shaped and conditioned by another equally significant influence, namely tradition. The manner and the extent of this influence upon the women of the Afro-American and the Indian communities are vastly varied, though both have a strong rootedness in tradition. The ‘American’ part of the former’s experience releases her from too many
constraints in the name of convention and tradition, while the Indian woman is burdened with a relatively bigger amount of boundenness to these as social factors.

This manifests in the Indian woman's fear of scandal or ostracism, need for popular support and social survival, an injected sense of virtue and morality, and a concern for family as solely her responsibility. While her instinct craves for independence and autonomy, custom demands curtailment of her freedoms. Moments of conflict between the two are numerous in the Indian socio-cultural environment, since ethical and moral regulations pose formidable obstacles to woman's self-realization and opportunities to counteract these are hardly available. This conflict receives special narrative focus in Joseph's treatment of the characteristically Indian theme of tension within marriage. Her early stories are peopled with "panic-stricken" women (Sudheesh 17) who are inescapably locked in the constrictive space of marriage. Juxtaposed with the Morrison women who resist marriage or break out of its manacles and acquire power outside its framework, the wives in Joseph's stories are seen to be constantly under duress, bound to strict codes by custom. Relief through separation or divorce is too risky because of the social stigma it entails. For instance, the protagonists in "Dinaantam" (KS 46-55) and "Vanadurga" (OS 78-81), both divorced women, are remarkably unexhilarated by the freedom that is suddenly at their disposal; instead they feel a void, inevitably left by the space that a ritualistic conformity to custom had filled.

Each of Joseph's marriage stories reveals some aspect of marital disillusionment and disharmony, exposing the institution as a stumbling block to woman's self-affirmation; a veritable burial-ground of woman's imagination, her aspirations, and hopes as an individual.
In “Daampatyam” ("Marriage," PT 86-92), the gargantuan incompatibility of the partners that makes marriage unendurable is brought to sharp focus. The wife in the story is an exquisite woman, self-assured and disciplined, whereas the husband is, in his own judgement, an uncouth, disorderly fellow with squalid personal habits. His innumerable failures and shortcomings as man and husband, vis-à-vis her superior mental and physical attributes, weigh down on his consciousness and erupt as a massive inferiority complex which prevents him from having a meaningful relationship with her. It is a marriage in which love is an absent element; instead there is only lust on his part, met with repulsion on hers.

His conduct as breadwinner of the family is despicable enough to justify his complexes, for he seems thoroughly incapable of making a decent living, which does not bother him, either. Being of an easygoing nature, he is more adept in evading his responsibilities than fulfilling them. His wife’s alluring beauty at once delights him to distraction and distresses him because of the gulf that yawns between them. Evidently, for him she is an enticing body, rather than an individual. Though he is consumed with desire for her, and is fully aware of what renders him unacceptable to her, he sticks on to his abominable habits with an obstinacy that matches his sense of inferiority.

The irony of the situation resides in the unresolvable dilemma of the fact that the husband and the wife inhabit entirely different spheres with no possibility of co-existing in any way. According to Jean Baker Miller, conflict in male-female relationship arises when woman refuses to accept man's conception about herself (14). The husband is incapable of offering intellectual or emotional companionship to his wife. He cannot think beyond the purely earthy concerns of the body to understand his wife’s female self. He does not even recognize that she is a different person with a will of her own. The wife's
reaction to his total incapacity and insensitivity to her inner need varies from an unrelieved silence to bouts of violent rage in which she smashes up kitchen utensils and hits herself on the head with any tool that comes handy. She would not allow him to stop her hurting herself, either: “It’s my own life, my sufferings I’m smashing up. What is it to you? What stake have you in it?” (PT 88). Reminded of his inadequacy, he would withdraw into his cowardly self: “I have no right to, nor will I try to, hinder her from any symbolic method that she resorts to in order to release her tensions” (88). The deeper psychological structures that prompt her behaviour are left unanalysed.

Though he has failed her in every way, it does not prevent him from seeking fulfilment for his desire. His efforts at exercising his husband’s rights of possession over her body she opposes with her equally valid woman’s right of choice. Life’s hardships have strengthened her enough to assert her self and to resist objectionable environments.

The marriage depicted in the story typifies the conventional Indian marriage in which unequal and even unwilling partners are forcibly bound together by blind social rules that demand conformity and compliance, disregarding the human content involved. The mutual love, respect and trust that should sustain human bonds are often absent from the institution of marriage, which makes man-woman relationship degenerate into a mechanical affair. A major share of the burden is borne by the woman, deprived as she is of the resources that are exclusively at the male’s disposal, and the loopholes that the social codes make available to him to escape their rigidity.

Though the wife’s perspective is not foregrounded in the narration, the image that emerges from beneath the husband’s thought-strands is of a woman with a deep inner life, unfortunately tied to a man who has no regard for that. He thinks, feels, and reacts with his body, and has nothing but his desire to
offer her, which, he presumes, will sustain their marriage. Repulsed with his flagrant lust, she tries to maintain her self-respect, using anger and silence as her defence. It is the rigidness of the institution of marriage and the social stigma attached to the female partner in a broken marriage that hold her to the miserable bondage. However, within its limits, she makes efforts to re-establish her rights over her own bodily space and retain its integrity.

A subversive intent may be read in the reversal of received notions, as in the point-blank portrayal of male inferiority in marriage. The false notions and conclusions that the male entertains about the feminine, regardless of the deeper demands of her inner self, are also problematized.

In Joseph’s “Scooter” (*PT* 93-99), the institutionalization of male-female relationship in marriage for furthering the interests of the society is problematized through an allegorical presentation of a marriage on the rocks. The husband, wife and child are travellers set on a long journey: “The beginning of the journey was naturally interesting, full of hopeful dreams about the beautiful territories they were headed for” (93). But before long, their scooter has a breakdown; the passengers get down and the husband makes inexpert attempts to set it right. As time passes, the husband becomes impatient while the wife, who keeps shifting the child’s weight from one shoulder to the other, gets tired and bored. Their incompatibility surfaces in mutual hatred: “In the noon-heat their eyes locked and flashed fire” (94). The diminished utility of the scooter reminds the husband of his wife who has grown unattractively thin and dry. This interval in the journey gives him time to reconsider his relations with her and realize that his interest in her as partner is also diminishing. Equally unkind thoughts cross the wife’s mind too, as she curses his selfishness in the sexual act that has burdened her with unwanted maternity.
However, when the scooter is set on the road again with the help of friends, both husband and wife are relieved and forget their earlier differences. They even soften their mutual feelings and retrieve their hopes, which fill their hearts with "the cool freshness of blue hills, green lakes, and soft mist" (94). But as the scooter manoeuvres a steep climb, the engine fails again. This occasions a repetition of the former situation: the husband engaged in futile efforts to revive it using his inadequate resources, and the wife seeking to shift the burden of the child to its father's shoulders. Both actively engage their minds in blaming, criticizing, and hating each other, each secretly exulting in the inconvenience caused to the other.

Because of the violence with which the husband and wife deride each other and revel in their mutual deception, she loses grip of the child, and he of the scooter. Leaving the crying child on the road, she takes hold of the scooter and he tries to snatch it off her hold: "Between the two, who, in their overwhelming hatred, were straining it in opposite directions, the scooter could not move an inch forward or backward, and crunched on the tarred road" (97). However, the impasse is broken by the intervention of a young priest who takes the crying child up and places it in the mother's hands; he pushes the scooter effortlessly to the top of the hill, tightens its loose screws, and gives the reins back to the husband.

The family resumes the journey; once again the air is relaxed between them, and hope sprouts anew. Everything goes smooth until all on a sudden, the fuel tank starts leaking. It makes a filthy trail on the road, emanating a foul smell that nauseates the passengers as well as the passers-by and attracting stray dogs who come sniffing after the scooter. The husband stops the engine to examine it, but wherever he touches it, the decomposed, stinking parts come off. Horrified, he abandons the decayed engine on the road; the dogs set on it as if upon a carcass.
But now, the community takes charge of the situation. Looking for the source of the stench, people come upon the scooter and the couple. Though both husband and wife disown it, the people force the dilapidated vehicle upon their heads. Crying, cursing, and sick with disgust, they are obliged to carry off their stinking burden.

In "Scooter" too, the institution of marriage is critiqued from the Indian perspective. The story delineates in picturesque detail marriage that begins well but gets disintegrated by degrees. It heads steadily to disaster despite the efforts of the partners to save it. In the early stages of marital conflict, community and religion play the rescuing role; and then it goes beyond repair and becomes a liability to the community. Each crisis inflicts a fresh blow that affects its integrity and alienates the partners further. Each critical juncture provides them with an opportunity to see each other in a deromanticized light, divested of the imaginary halo of ideal partner. As romance fades, accruing incompatibilities are brought to limelight, and marriage becomes an irreparable ruin. The wife's efforts to take charge of the scooter indicates woman's craving for recognition of her capabilities. But the priest's act of affirming her domestic role of childcare reflects the community's rejection of "the needs of women, equally real and basic to the human condition, for mastery, power, assertiveness . . . and control" (Friedan, Second Stage 92).

Even when the circumstances force the partners to split, they are forcibly held to the ruins by invisible social forces. The societal structure that is supported by such institutions can ill afford a rupture in the fabric as it would upset its very foundations. Therefore the partners in marriage on the verge of a break are compelled to cling to the threadbare shreds of their wrecked relationship, despite the emotional and psychological issues involved.
The end of a bourgeois marriage and the diverse reactions of the divorced couple form the plot of Joseph's "Dinaantam" ("The End of the Day," KS 46-55). The woman, though strong-willed and economically independent enough to cope with the situation, still feels the presence of the invisible shackles of patriarchy that hold her down; an enormous sense of void fills her which manifests as physical as well as mental fatigue. Her state of mind reflects traces of the effect that internalization of social and cultural codes regarding woman's dependent status have indelibly left on the female psyche. "Within the familial ideology, the role of wife not only embodies a distinct set of tasks and responsibilities, but also becomes a source of identity" (Friedan, Second Stage 221). The major crisis the wife in the story is going to face is the fact that the male-dominant society does not take kindly to a divorced woman and is not willing to acknowledge her self-sufficiency. Her ex-husband Jayadevan too is not free from patriarchal prejudices; he now treats her with unwonted chivalry and sympathy as if her world has virtually come to an end and her survival after the divorce is doubtful. He has even presumed to arrange her post-divorce affairs in advance for her—with the landlord, with the domestic help, and so on—evidently less out of an earnest desire to help her than to prove that she cannot do without his help. He gives her solicitous instructions and pieces of advice, and fully expects her to acknowledge his generosity and kindness, but she refuses to give him that satisfaction. She is only struck by his audacity in planning her divorced life for her and his unwillingness to accept her individuality enough to leave her alone.

The difference in the patriarchal training that Jayadevan has received is very well reflected in the confidence with which he has approached the issue of divorce. Never for a moment does he imagine himself to be affected by the separation. He appears to be dejected only because his wife has taken the
whole affair as a matter of course, and has not expressed any regrets. It hurts his male pride and vanity: "He stood very close to her and asked softly: 'Are you unhappy?' She thought the question an intolerably boring one. He had asked it a thousand times since the previous day. The truth was that she was neither happy nor unhappy. She replied lazily: 'I don't feel anything'" (KS 47).

The nonchalant response disappoints Jayadevan inordinately; he has been socialized to consider woman to be under obligation to serve his intentions. The realization that he is not indispensable nonplusses him. Having always had done things to his satisfaction, he seems to have lost in this final round. It is as if she has had enough of acting in her marriage, doing and saying things against her will. Now there is no more need for that, and she resorts to silence as her best mode of defence as well as offence. She wants for once to be her bare self, devoid of those hypocrisies that marriage demanded. She refuses to respond with a politeness that she does not feel, to the empty words of concern of his friends, or to the self-complacent sympathy, bordered with scorn, offered by her neighbours. She simply does not care for the falseness of smiling when she does not feel like it (50). What she feels is a complete sense of freedom from such social obligations and from the burdens that marriage had imposed on her. This refreshes her so much that at the end of the hectic day, she is worried about nothing more than a sheer "physical fatigue" (55). Having sustained the initial shock of having to face a divorce without adequate reasons thereto, she is in no mood to respond any more to male caprices; furthermore, she finds herself at last free to take stock of her marital and social situation and sort out the problem for herself.

There is a remarkable difference in the attitude of the society towards the female partner in an aborted marriage. While the male has the society staunchly behind him, as indicated by Jayadevan's circle of friends who stand
by him in his crisis, woman's friendlessness in the situation is absolute. Though man and woman have shared responsibility whether a marriage works or not, the blame of failure invariably falls on the woman: "[I]f women assume that their own needs have equal validity and proceed to explore and state them openly, they will be seen as creating conflict and must bear the psychological burden of rejecting men's images of 'true womanhood'" (J.B. Miller 17). It is notable that there has not been so grave or unresolvable a crisis between Jayadevan and his wife to merit divorce, except for Jayadevan's conceit that prompts him to take up his wife's challenge with undue seriousness. Probably he has expected a last-ditch attempt at reconciliation on her part, as the one to be the more affected by a divorce. She accomplishes a decisive though small victory over the patronizing Jayadevan by revealing a confident and adequate self that is quite capable of managing her affairs without the assistance of a self-important male. Significantly, it is only outside the boundaries of marriage that she can afford to recognize her individual self with its capabilities as well as limitations, and assert her exclusive rights to control her own life.

A subversion of the traditional reading of matrimony and maternity, and of woman's expected role and image in connection with these institutions is found in Joseph's "Snehakaaraṇyāṅgāḷāl" ("Out of Love and Compassion," NA 51-55). Here the daughter who narrates the story becomes the inheritor and partaker of the mother-woman's unbearable marital experiences. She becomes witness also to the spilling over of the violent and even murderous thoughts and feelings nourished by her mother towards her now-invalid father. Nobody has ever suspected such vehement sentiments to have nestled in the meek, kind, and servilely dutiful mother's heart. Never complaining, ever-obliging, mother's compliance in everything has been so unquestionably taken for granted that it comes as a shock to the daughter when Amma's
outward calm that had seemed perpetual erupts like a volcano. The unexpected outburst brings to light an unsuspected side of her mother's life and self—as a woman driven to rebellion by the awareness of the price she has paid with her own life for the well-being of the family. It dredges up in the daughter's consciousness unremembered incidents from her childhood that suddenly put her mother's experience as woman and wife, as well as her own as daughter-woman, in a different perspective. Crucial moments in her mother's life, to which she herself has been innocent witness, flash across her mind—like Amma putting her wedding photo to flames. She reminisces how the blue flames thrilled her child's mind, but the thrill is short-lived: "I fell into gloom on seeing the twisted smile on Amma's face in that blue light. Like an orphaned child, I slept sitting on the doorsill, holding the half-burned photograph in my hand" (NA 53). Though the significance of the gesture is lost on the child, her mother's silent suffering somehow transmits itself into the child's unconscious, while her half-formed notions of marriage and family receive a violent jolt.

The emotional depths of the mother-woman's existence remains unfathomed even by the daughter-woman. The earliest impression on the daughter's memory about mother is the total silence that attended Amma like a halo and passed itself on to her, a numb, frightened child crouching in a corner beneath a leaking roof. It is only much later, after her own marriage, that the daughter tries to analyse "the psychology of a house without bedrooms" (53), as she remembers the frozen floor of a narrow dark corridor near the dining room where Amma and she used to sleep on a cold bed. The blank look in her mother's eyes used to haunt her sleep; whenever she started awake to look for her mother, Amma could be seen standing close to the open window, unheeded of the flashes of lightning and the rain that splashed in: "For me, in those days, it was on my mother's face that rains rained" (53). However, the
daughter never wonders about or reflects on mother's experience and life, and though Amma's silences produce strange responses in her, these are not recognized at the moment as anything of significance.

Another facet of mother's existence that everyone including the daughter takes for granted is her presence as a silent, unrecognized workforce. As Rich observes, "Patriarchy depends on the mother to act as a conservative influence, imprinting future adults with patriarchal values"; it converts motherhood into "an energy for the renewal of male power" (61). The unobtrusive figure of Amma who went about attending to the umpteen domestic chores never sought for nor received any appreciative glance or word. Nevertheless, the daughter realizes in retrospect that Amma always exuded an air of calm efficiency and thoroughness. The home and premises, as the daughter remembers, had been brilliantly neat and tidy. Nothing was ever out of place; the walls were beautifully decoured and the floor spotlessly clean, even during father's sickness. The sickbed too shone like everything else that received the touch of Amma's caring hands. Outside, in the well-kept garden, singing birds settled on the plants and trees. Amma's self-effacing presence seemed to transform the whole place into a tranquil abode, full of fragrance and a welcoming cool shade, while her own personal environment remained a dark void of neglect.

The needs and demands of the members of the family take a heavy toll on Amma's time and energy. The illness that has paralyzed Acchan thrusts on her the role of nurse and ministering angel, apart from that of servant. She has no choice in the matter though, ironically, the figure of Acchan, that emerges between the thought-strands of Amma and the daughter as a ruthless, self-centred autocrat, has been the target of Amma's silent resentment and ire. Within the constrictive space allotted to her in marriage, Amma has no right
even to exercise her own will. As a virtual non-entity remaining on the margins of the social and familial power structures, she is too inconsequential to dare to voice what she feels. Still, surprisingly, she has retained that inner freedom of resistant thought, if only to begrudge her formidable husband his immense power and autonomy, and to keep her own counsel. But life is unfair to her; her resistance is broken by the sudden illness and helplessness of her husband that have curious effects on her ingrained moral and ethical sense. She is being carried along in a current of events and situations beyond her will and control that constantly demand self-negation from her part.

It strikes Amma as one of life's cruellest ironies that one who as a child had found sensuous exultation in the rain, the wind, and the elemental scents of the woods and valued it over the most enthralling of childish attractions, is now shut up within the boundaries of home. She now views the external world of sunshine, rain, and lightning as trapped within the limited frame of a window. But Amma's resistance does not exceed occasional flaring-ups, which do not strike the daughter as signalling any maladjustment that requires serious consideration.

However, the conflict between the attitudes that she has developed through social indoctrination and the instinctive responses and reactions that she is capable of as an independent individual makes a showdown inevitable. Amma has come to the end of her tether. Acchan's exacting disability is the last straw that breaks the façade of her calm, forming a crack on the dam-wall of her patience. Her inner conflict and resistance are externalized in little, unexpectedly uncharacteristic acts of violence: like tearing up the newspaper without any apparent provocation; or throwing the framed wedding photo at her daughter, making a wound on her brow. Afterwards she grows remorseful and tends to the wound. The daughter is terribly upset at her mother's
eccentric behaviour, but even more so is Amma, who decides then and there that the duality of her psychic operations calls for immediate professional help, and goes on her own to consult a psychiatrist. The pent-up rebellion and resentment are released in a powerful verbal outflow as she breaks her silence before the psychiatrist.

It is the self-revealing notes Amma has written to the psychiatrist that give the daughter a clue to her mother's inner life and the complex workings of her mind. Those notes give Amma a totally different profile, that of a woman "transgressing the boundaries of womanhood" (Jacobus, Reading Woman 28), and undercut the daughter's preconceptions regarding marriage, family, wifehood and motherhood. For the first time, she is compelled to regard Amma apart from the stereotyped roles of wife and mother—as a woman and a person with strong emotions on her own personal behalf. Without reservations, Amma has communicated (in the notes) her feelings of nausea, contempt, impatience and anger towards her husband who is lying weak and naked in sickbed. These are feelings that the world considers anathema in woman and wife, and the daughter finds impossible for her mother to feel. Yet the daughter desists from judging her harshly; she is more hurt because she has failed to understand Amma. The mother she knows is one who hastens to close windows and doors against the spattering rain that might dampen Acchan's sickbed, gently wipes his head with a dry towel, and wraps him up in a soft woollen blanket. But the writer of the notes is a perfect stranger to her; the voice there is not her mother's but a stranger-woman's. That woman is one who has been silenced, humiliated and subdued into a non-entity by an imperious male. Still she has retained sparks of defiance and resistance as her own right. But then, after the best part of her life has been virtually wasted in mute suffering, she is suddenly burdened with an invalid husband who is
broken in body and mind. No longer in a position to hurt her, he is literally at her mercy. Her finer feelings do not allow her to be mean to one completely dependent on her. Her anger and hatred are to be buried alive.

It is the psychological trauma resulting from reaction to this terrible injustice to her self that gets expression in her notes. That part of Amma’s self that has been invisible even to the daughter is reconstructed here; the reading of the notes helps the daughter to fill the gaps that have baffled her in her previous efforts to read Amma’s life. Recognizing the sheer reality of her mother’s female experience, as in confrontation with the social forces at work through the institutions of marriage, maternity and family, completes the maturing of her own woman’s self.

As it is seen, the socio-cultural process of making woman out of the girlchild is, in effect, a process of adapting her to the expectations of the patriarchal ideology. A programme of appropriation of woman’s biological capacities subsequently backs this up. The instinctive maternal in her together with her time, energies and resources are ideologically manipulated and exploited. The dominant ideology, supported by Freudian psychoanalysis and social anthropology, concentrates on the one universal distinction between male and female, relating to reproductive functions, especially maternity, as having crucial effects in the determination of woman’s social status. Thus it is shown that anatomy is destiny and that woman is prevented by her biological limitations from positive activity and achievement. This denigration of maternity suits the proprietary interests of the patriarchal centres of power: motherhood is identified as a useful source of manpower and is turned into a subordinate structure supporting the system, without even granting it the social and economic value due in this regard. The seminal part that woman has in the creation, nurturance, and protection of life is thus tactically underplayed and
her maternal rights and claims are discredited. Instead, it is made obligatory for her to give birth and thereby partake in the social process in a subordinate role. The self-effacing, all-sacrificing love and care of the mother is demanded for the prospective citizens of the state. Thus the joy of the maternal experience is denied to the mother. Once the nurturing is over, the child becomes social property and the mother loses hold on it; the self-fulfilment she has sought in the experience of maternity is paralyzed. No social recognition is accorded to her work to compensate her loss either.

Reaction against this contradiction in woman's experience that renders motherhood incompatible with her empowerment had resulted in resistance to motherhood as the root cause of oppression, in the first stage of the feminist protest. As Hester Eisenstein points out, "the right not to become a mother was central to feminist analysis" in the early phases (Contemporary Feminist Thought 70). However, the question of the relationship between woman and maternity had been reopened by the experience-institution debate initiated by Adrienne Rich: "I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to their powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (13).

This division of the concept has made it possible to recognize maternity, that is the experience, as a power-generating source for women. While all the "connecting fibres" of the "invisible institution" of motherhood (Rich 276) are exemplified in Joseph's maternity stories, it is the empowering aspect of the maternal that is focused on in Morrison's narratives. Her black "neighbourhoods" are essentially matriarchal in nature and structure. In the slave community of Beloved, it is the mothers who have the mastery in
critical situations. They evince the initiative to brave hardships, the capacity to withstand duress and pain, the competence to triumph over tricky circumstances, and a determination that is lacking in the men. Baby Suggs is bent on collecting her scattered family together; she has the foresight to retain her husband’s family name (despite her master’s insistence on changing it) so that if and when a reunion is possible it would be easier for him to find her. Though her efforts to find her children who had all been sold away come to nothing, she holds on to the one remaining son and his family as her precious possessions through thick and thin.

The interference of the patriarchal ideology in mother’s empowering experience is also exemplified in Morrison’s mothers. Sethe’s slave mother has little time even to suckle her own child, busy as she is, working in the white master’s fields from morning till night and feeding white babies in her leisure. In Sethe’s memory, she is forever a vague figure, distinguished only by a cloth hat instead of a straw one, “pointed out as one among the many backs turned away from her, stooping in a watery field” (Beloved 38).

It is from Nan, her wet nurse, that Sethe learns of a major portion of her mother’s slave-experiences. Her unending labour in bondage had deprived Sethe not only of her love, but also of one of the principal privileges and rights of a black woman’s experience, namely direct access to her history, free from misrepresentation or prevarication, as told by a story-telling mother.

Apart from the encroachment upon the mother’s time and resources, the ever-tightening hold that patriarchy has on woman is evident in the severity with which her neglect of the maternal duty is taken to task. Sethe, who kills her child (Beloved); Joe Trace’s wild mother, who abandons her young son to fend for himself (Jazz); Mavis, whose oversight results in the death of her twin babies by suffocation in a closed car (Paradise); Margaret, who finds sadistic pleasure in
hurting her baby (Tar Baby); Sula, who refuses to have children (Sula); and even Violet, who fails to have one for want of time (Jazz)—all have had to pay their price in the form of criticism, rejection, and social ostracism.

The emotional aspect of motherhood as a deeply personal experience of woman is persistently neglected in the patriarchal theorising on it. Devaluation of the mother’s experience as insignificant and its mystification as something incomprehensible are both reductive positions. Woman is expropriated of the satisfaction due to her in this most basic of her emotional experiences by the sublimation that it is made to undergo; much of the real value that motherhood holds for her self is dimmed by its mystification. Rich observes: “The power of mother has two aspects: the biological potential or capacity to bear and nourish human life, and the magical power invested in woman by men, whether in the form of Goddess-worship or the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women” (13). The conflict between what mother is and what she is demanded to become not only creates tension but disrupts woman’s psychical processes.

If mother’s love, suffering and sacrifice are stock themes in feminist fiction, a resistance to the mystification and trivialization of these experiences also may be noticed in the stories under consideration here. For instance, in The Bluest Eye, Pauline Breedlove describes how she sets out to savour the experience of maternity: “. . . I felt good, and wasn’t thinking on the carrying, just the baby itself. I used to talk to it whilst it be still in the womb. Like good friends we was. . . . On up till the end I felted good about that baby” (TBE 98). Pauline goes to hospital to have an “easeful” delivery: “The pains was coming, but not too bad. A little old doctor come to examine me. . . . When he got to me he said now these here women you don’t have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses” (99). The doctor’s comment dampens her excitement in waiting for a unique experience; it also
angers her for its blatant racism, the way in which her black woman’s body and its natural processes are demeaned:

The pains wasn’t as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women. . . . What'd they think? That just cause I knewed how to have a baby with no fuss that my behind wasn’t pulling and aching like theirs? (99)

Though Pauline is furious at being compared to a horse, she has the grace to recognize that even a horse in foal has its feelings though it cannot express them, and that it too has its mother’s dignity that should be respected. It is the white doctor’s presumption in claiming knowledge of things he is crassly ignorant of—animal nature, black female body—that Pauline levels her attack at.

Even before her baby is born, Pauline has “conjured up a mind’s eye view of it” (99) so that when it comes, it is a dear, familiar thing, precious to her in spite of its ugliness. Later on, however, Pauline is seen to succumb to the hold of the dominant ideology and give up resistance. She turns out to be a perfect foster mother to her master’s white baby, denying herself the experience of the natural mother, and her own children their rightful portion of mother’s care. Pauline’s hatred for Cholly reflects in her attitude to his children too, and she convinces herself that they are the prime reason for her misery.

Racial superiority does not help Margaret, the white mother in Tar Baby, to escape the denigration of her woman’s and mother’s experiences. Her resistance is to the reduction of her mother’s love into an obligation imposed on her by the father’s order, represented by her rich industrialist husband Valerian. Margaret develops a perverse motherlove that takes pleasure in hurting her baby. This is triggered on by a number of interconnected factors:
Valerian's being "the centre of everything" (281), his great proprietorial interest in Michael as his only heir, her own insignificance in the household, and the fact that the child is the only thing over which she has power and which is her own to hurt. As she admits, "out of the doing of it came the reason" (238). She is "outraged by that infant needfulness," by "its implicit and explicit demand for her best and constant self" and its "prodigious appetite for security" (238), all of which are reminiscent of its bullying father. Margaret is unable to analyse her own feelings and behaviour, at this juncture. Ondine, who has been critically observing Margaret's love-hate dilemma from the beginning, makes an extremely insightful observation when she comments that she hurt Valerian's baby while loving her own (281). Margaret is aware that she is looked upon as a neglectful mother, that her love that has underlain all her conscious or unconscious motivations is unknown to the world. Still she is relieved to think "[t]hat she was not one of those women in the National Enquirer. That she was never an overprotective or designing parent with unfulfilled dreams" (58).

Margaret's hurting the baby is a more or less self-flagellatory measure, similar to the customary reaction of repressed women in a number of Sarah Joseph's stories: like the wife in "Daampatyam" who breaks crockery, and Amma in Aalaahaayute Pennmakkal who strikes her head against anything hard when tried beyond forbearance. For Margaret, it is more painful than hurting herself; she even tries locking herself in to prevent it. However, the need for this mode of self-expression is gone as the child grows up and she is able to enjoy her son's company as an individual, free of obligatory ties and codes of mothering. Having "cut the cord decisively," she finds him interesting, smart and nice; he too responds in a similar way, thinking her special, not as mother, but as a person. Unlike the baby who wanted everything out of her and made
her feel incompetent to fulfill its demands, this grown son puts her at her ease:

“There was no competition with him, no winning, no preening, no need to be anybody but who she was...” (58).

Except for the maternity-resistance of Sula, rejection of motherhood in extreme reaction to society’s manipulation of the maternal is rare in Morrison’s fiction. Pauline and Margaret are mothers who reject the institution of maternity but cherish the experience. Sethe’s mother rejects the seeds of life forced on her by the white men on the slave-ship, but cherishes Sethe whom she is emotionally attached to, for Sethe is born out of her union with a black man whom she loved. It is the patriarchal notion of motherhood that Eva and Hannah (Sula) resist; they never allow their maternal obligations to override their individual’s rights, while Helene Wright, being law-abiding, is constrained to adapt her instinct to the dominant concept of motherhood. Pilate and Reba (SOS) fully enjoy their maternal experience as they live outside the boundaries of society and hence are unaffected by its decadent views on mother’s role, whereas the conforming Ruth Forster is denied that enjoyment and freedom and is left too powerless to rebel.

Of all the resistant mothers in Morrison, Sethe is the one who most persistently perseveres in retaining her mother’s private experience to herself. Like Pilate, she would brook no trespassing in her mother’s dominion, and is even willing to kill her own child to prove her autonomy and to forestall the dominant order from staking claims on what is hers.

The institutionalization of the maternal experience through the “celebration of mother-care as a social act” (Mitchell 118), that inevitably results in conflict in the mother’s existence, is brilliantly rendered in a sequence of maternity stories in Sarah Joseph’s Paapattara. Using the frames of mythology and history, Joseph evokes in “Balidaanam” and “Caavuniłam”
the pain and sacrifice demanded of motherhood in all ages and cultures, under diverse religious and ethical codes. The suffering of the mothers at Calvary and Kurukshetra re-enacted in these stories correspond strikingly with the experiences of the mothers of the contemporary world portrayed in “Paatalappadikal,” “Paapattara,” and “PrakaSiniyude Makkal.” Satchidanandan observes that the mothers in these stories are representative of motherhood that is “politicized”; their sacrifice and grief are capitalized on for the triumph of revolution (“Muditteyyangal” 35). They are destined to be driven by external forces to sacrifice their love to the demands of the dominant ideologies. The stories critique the dominant practice of concealing the poignant reality of mother in the contemporary milieu by projecting an idealized concept of motherhood that supports and sustains the political, religious and cultural interests of the system. The triumphant outcome of war and revolution, or an ultimate victory of good over evil and death, is not powerful enough either to erase the grief of the mother or to compensate for the price that she has paid as scapegoat in these transcendent enterprises of the male. In “Balidaanam” and “Caavunilam,” which rework the motif of maternal sacrifice from The Bible and The Mahabharata respectively, the mother is divested of saintly, heroic or glorious attributes, and is subject to grief and torment as any ordinary woman in real life situations of duress.

“Balidaanam” (“Sacrifice,” PT69-73) reconstructs the story of Calvary from the mother’s perspective; the focus here is on Mary’s sacrifice. The story instances how the mother’s heart-rending grief at the loss of her only son through a predetermined crucifixion has been glossed over and trivialized, through a process of sublimation that creates an aura of glory to envelop the very real, down-to-earth agony of her experiences. The night of the Passion of Christ is of equally piercing pain for the mother; throughout that night of anguish, Mary is conscious of her
mission as the mother of the Saviour and of the inevitability of her son's and her
own suffering. Neither Jesus nor Mary can waver in their acceptance of their
destinies, for their decision is not of a personal effect but has wider, universal
implications. The hopeless grief of the mothers of Herodia appeals to Mary for
mercy as their infants' "innocent blood forms a river around the altar-stone"
(*PT* 70): the sacrifice forced on those unsuspecting mothers would be pointless
unless completed by her own willing sacrifice. The oppressed, exploited,
overworked and undernourished youth of the earth; womanhood that is violated in
palaces of the rich; hopeless, defenceless old age—all line up before Mary's eyes
begging for her acquiescence.

But the sacrifice demanded and the agony of decision are beyond the
mother's powers of endurance. "In front of the church, the stone block for the
offering flashes in the intermittent lightning. . . . As she looks on, the bulging
eyes of the sacrificial animal become one with those of her son that are bright
and wide like two oceans of light" (*PT* 71).

At the close of a night of endless suffering, Mary has given up her
resistance and accepted the inevitable. The mother's will has to yield to the
Supreme will; she must give up her son for the sake of "the sick, the grief-
stricken and the insulted" of the earth, though his reward is a death by
crucifixion. But he has known his destiny and courted it because it is his
Father's will, while the mother's sharing in her son's knowledge generates a
suffering far more agonizing than the crucifixion itself, for it has no end.
What awaits the mother is sleepless nights: "Mothers cannot sleep. They have
to keep vigil" (73).

It is an unquestioning assent to the sacrifice of her only son that is
demanded of Mary. Neither her grief nor that of the mothers of Herodia has
been foregrounded in the patriarchal accounts which ratify the loss of these
mothers as predestination and divine will. No promise of Resurrection or Ascension can assuage the devastating grief of Mary; for the one who is crucified is her son, while the resurrected one will be claimed by the Father. Despite her habit of acquiescence, her mother’s instincts spur her to resistance which, though silent, is powerful enough to break the son’s resolve and undermine the whole predetermined scheme. But Mary is bound by the wordless promise that her son’s beseeching eyes have elicited from her. Thus the mother’s need and her rights are sacrificed, and her heart is rent, to fulfil the Father’s wish and His command.

A collage of history, myth and fantasy, Joseph’s “Caavunilam” (“The Land of Death,” PT 64-68) evokes the image of the mother of Kurukshetra witnessing the scene of the holocaust with unblinded eyes. The mother in the story is the archetypal mother whose sons are mankind itself, divided into opposing camps by destructive ideologies and driven to battles and thence to death. She is now searching for a space free of blood to deliver her last baby. While brothers of the same womb fought like sworn enemies, having outgrown the mother’s word and the lessons of peace and non-violence she had brought them up on, the mother had hidden in the woods away from the whirring arrows to protect the baby who must take birth to continue life and the clan. In the piercing pain of labour, the mother craves for a drop of water to wet her tongue, but the mouthful of soil that she chews yields only the bitter moisture of her sons’ blood. All she can see is an expanse of blood-soaked, barren land without a single shoot of green. Crawling and worming out of the thorns, she makes a valiant effort to locate a patch of pure, unblooded earth. But, exhausted as she is, by hunger, thirst and grief, there is little energy left in her even for labour; she collapses in the middle of the battlefield where she delivers her baby.
With the first mouthful of mother’s milk, the mother gives the baby a taste of the earth that is soaked in its brothers’ blood. This incident, which is evocative of one in *Beloved* where Denver is charmed and protected from evil for having tasted her sister’s blood together with the mother’s milk, seems to have a magical effect on the baby. It grows even as the mother looks on, strong and invincible. The mother gives it a tiny seed to sow in the dead earth, for “inside the earth is green life and sustenance” (67). Soon the bloody land is permeated with the fragrance of breast milk. The seed of life that the mother has replanted will soon blossom and bear fruit, “nourished in the mother’s milk and protected by the baby’s laughter” (68). Mother assures the child that “the dead earth will lose its bitterness and fill with grass and trees” (68) and that he will regain his people and his wealth. But even as she dreams this dream for her surviving child, she knows with the mother’s insight that history will repeat itself in wars and fratricides so that mothers’ lives will never be free of care.

Apart from its ecofeminist insights, the concluding part of the narrative shows a reworking of yet another mythical motif from the feminine point of view. The ‘tree of life’ that faces extinction is here revived through the mother’s agency, which is placed in direct opposition to the original complicity of woman in tampering with it in the garden of Eden. Again, it is the mother who gives promises and assurances, and keeps constant vigil against the forces that threaten to obliterate life. For it is she who holds in her great love the nucleus of life that will repeople the earth, overriding death and destruction.

In “Paataalappadikal” ("Stairway to Hell," *PT*’74-78) too, a subversion of mythified, sublimated motherhood is in evidence. The narrative glues together a number of broken images of motherhood from contemporary social situations. These are brought within the frame of a meta narrative of a Mothers’ Festival that the city is celebrating. As the culmination of the celebrations,
there is a procession along the richly decorated high roads of the city, with a live model of venerable motherhood placed on a pedestal in an open carriage at the head of the procession. The organizers had diligently searched for a charming and grand model of old age from the nobility itself, but have to satisfy themselves with one from the hungry and starving crowd who yields to their promptings, tempted by the promise of a steaming bowl of rice. Thus, "In a beautifully adorned chariot, on a golden throne, with her palms folded in greeting, sits symbolized old age, with white clothes to hide the wrinkled body and chains of black beads to cover the broken heart" (74).

The irony developed in the incongruous picture of a destitute mother who is chosen as the mascot of the gala festival of motherhood is further accentuated by the introduction of some more live specimens of motherhood in misery. As the procession moves on, one of these is seen to stand by the side of the road waiting for a break in the procession to cut across. She has her three children with her: one in her arms, another holding to her sari’s edge, and the last in her womb. She has been to the rich Brahmin landlord’s house for her charwoman’s work, and is now carrying on her head a jackfruit that she received in lieu of wages for the day’s work. As they wait on in the piercing heat of the sun, the jackfruit grows ripe and a crow tries to peck on it. The eldest son Sidharthan gets annoyed at this encroachment upon their only meal for the day and starts crying. His younger brother Asokan too follows suit, mainly because his position on his mother’s arm gets increasingly uncomfortable as mother has to support the jackfruit with her other hand; besides, he is disturbed by the kicks of the youngest brother Mohandas who, out of hunger, executes a somersault within the mother’s starving stomach. As for the mother, the thought of her children’s helplessness alone prevents her from falling; mustering all her strength to fight giddiness, she stares at the procession in honour of motherhood.
In another part of the city, meanwhile, a tragedy is on. It has happened to come to the notice of the city administration that a cobra living in a hole at the base of a large neem tree has been eating eggs from a dove's nest on one of its high branches. It is decided that the cobra that upsets the environmental balance must be obliterated; orders are issued and promptly executed to the effect that the city's waste be dumped over the snake's hole and set fire to. As the flames rise up, a woman-labourer from the nearby construction site rushes to the spot "like a stone fallen from the heights" (75), shrieking for help, for she had left her sleeping child in a cloth crib hung from one of the lower branches of the tree. The hysterical mother jumps into the flames "across the inactivity of the onlookers" (75) and emerges with the charred body of her baby held close to her own burning bosom. She is promptly arrested on a charge of attempted suicide. This specimen of motherhood too is led across the procession of mother-worship.

The Mayor curtsies before the old woman in the chariot "whom he sees as a symbol of universal motherhood" and declares in emotional tones that it is most suitable to venerate the mother "who transforms her own life-blood into life-giving elixir for her baby by the sheer power of her love" (75). Meanwhile, other mothers of diverse descriptions appear by the roadside as listeners and spectators. These mothers, with their starving, disease-stricken, battered bodies and demented minds, belie the Mayor's glib, hollow words. Their children have been victims of an unjust system, and they themselves have been denied their right of the exquisite joy of the maternal.

The centre of attraction of the mother's festival, the ideal mother's model on the pedestal, herself is going through a most distressful time: "Breathless, tired, palms folded, eyes closed, she sat, helpless old age personified" (77). She is struck by the ironic contrast between her reality and
the sham she is compelled to delineate. The ecstasy of the crowd that pays respects to the noble, self-fulfilled motherhood put on show fills the old woman with such a terrible sense of shame and self-pity that even the thought of the promised bowl of rice makes her sick. The eulogies of the mayor and his henchmen fall flat on her ears. "She sits like a thorn on the golden throne, fearing and hating everything in sight" (77). For uppermost on her consciousness is the tragedy that has overtaken her and her son’s lives. For the offence of being poor and hungry, her son had to pay the immense price of his own life; and his mother is perpetually deprived of peace and happiness.

As the procession reaches its climactic point, the mother’s unbearable memories also have come to a dead end. The delicate balance of her mind has been strained to the point of giving way. In a hallucination, she sees not only her son but young men in multitudes arising from their premature graves and climbing up the stairways of the underworld, exposing the bruises on their battered bodies, their shrouds billowing behind them (78). In that moment, the old woman completely identifies herself with the universal mother she enacts, but in a manner entirely unforeseen by the organizers of the Mother’s Festival and transcending their selfish, narrow-minded intentions. She stands up on the pedestal, spreads her withered arms like an ancient mother bird, and beckons to her children in an eternal cry: "Come, my children, come" (78).

"Paata|appadikal" is an exceptionally poignant portrayal of the conflict that develops between the mother’s love as experience and as an obligatory social attitude. The social and political forces that presume to take up the cause of motherhood dispossess the mother of her natural rights and claims. The mother’s cult that is made the focal point of the narrative is nothing but a fashionable trend that has no correlation with the real mother’s plight, and yields an ironic significance because of the antithetical connotations of the
images used. The strain of irony that permeates the story is particularly incisive in the choice of names. The sons mentioned in the narrative are conceived as subversions of the great Indians whose names they bear; they represent the current Indian reality that snuffs out the light from a probable Buddha, Asoka, Gandhi or Vivekananda. Neither the mothers nor the children have any profounder existential issue to contemplate than sheer hunger.

Mother’s resistance to the external forces that encroach upon the exclusiveness of her experience and seek to institutionalize it is the theme of another one of the maternity stories in Paapattara, namely “Prakaśiniyude Makkal” (“Prakaśini’s Children,” PT 106-112), in which too the fantastic and the real blend. Here the maternal emerges as “a powerful disruption of the linear history from which women have been excluded” (Meaney 78). Man-woman relationship is delineated in the story as one generated in the genuine instinct of love and is seen to degenerate into a matter of convenience and self-interest under diverse influences. Prakaśini, the heroine, has wanted to conceive her dreamchildren, Sidharthan and Syamala, in the serene atmosphere of the green meadows. In a dream-sequence, Prakaśini and her lover (who is a nameless ‘he’) are about to begin their love life on a bed of young grass on the hillside. But even as they settle down, “fire-mushrooms” begin to grow and explode in the valley, emitting smoke and poisonous gas. As they run for their lives, she blames him for his share in sowing the seeds of those destructive mushrooms; but he defends himself on the plea that he had intended them as nourishing food for Prakaśini during maternity and childbirth.

His statement, however, reveals only a selfish interest in the well-being of the mother of his heirs. The empire-building that he is engaged in, and his unwholesome and even self-destructive competition in monopolizing land and resources, as signalled by his planting of fire-mushrooms, trigger the egoistic
need to have heirs to own and continue his empire. Evidently, Prakasini is only a medium to produce those heirs who would realize his transcendental dreams.

After much futile wandering in search of a plot of grass that Prakasini is intent on finding as conducive environment for their love, they find shelter at last on a bed of ashes in the fire-eaten valley. It is in an atmosphere of terror that they make love. In the morning she finds that he has left. Overwhelmed with love for him, she wanders looking for his tracks.

When she finds him at last, he has acquired endless wealth. Their love is now no more a pure and free experience but is entangled in considerations of possessions, and is vitiated by the man’s selfish motives that the woman resists. From now on in the narrative, the father’s vested interests and the mother’s natural rights are thrown into conflict with one another. Class tensions too are in evidence: if earlier, the lover was penniless with nothing but his love to offer her, now he has air-conditioned rooms and soft beds to love her in, which entitle him to power and dominance. But Prakasini has not changed. She begs: “Give me a place to lie down. A little space with green grass. A little bit of the blue sky. A small stream” (Joseph, “Prakasini’s Children,” Katha 109). He, on the other hand, is enthusiastic about his fields, palaces, art collections, servants, horses, laboratories and armouries to which he needs an heir. “I will hand over my infinite riches to him. . . . I’ll teach him how to look after them and keep them,” he says (109). His ambitious, capitalistic schemes run contrary to her proletarian dreams; they frighten her and freeze her love. It is not to inherit his air-cooled rooms that she is going to give birth to Sidharthan and Syamala; they have a different mission, she decides. What she offers is stiff resistance to the Father's Order that tries to make claims on the children in exclusion and negation of the mother’s rights: “Prakasini, speak to me about my children,” he said with great eagerness. ‘They are the children of the sun,’ she said . . . . ‘They are the children of this mountain, of the trees, of the rivers, of the sea, of the stars . . . ’ ” (110).
When the mother herself problematizes their paternity, he cannot disprove her. So he begs her not to deny an heir to his acquisitions, a son who would ensure his continuity. He grows so very persuasive and tyrant-like in his demands that she realizes “she had to give birth to his enemies” (110).

There is an attractive blurring of boundaries in the story, between fact and fiction, dream and imagination. While Prakasini is beset by questions that have ideological and metaphysical dimensions—of mother-right and the need for an uncorrupt space, free of patriarchal delimitation, to deliver her precious babies, a thoroughly mundane concern, namely unmarried pregnancy, is causing a furore in the family circle. Father, mother, grandmother and servants variously express their shock and terror at Prakasini’s swollen belly and also at her brazenness in announcing her intention to give birth to the children from an illicit relationship unsanctioned by social codes. According to these codes, for a woman to conceive outside marriage is anathema (though, paradoxically, by the same codes, woman who does not bear children in marriage is downright inauspicious). So Prakasini’s father fetches a witchdoctor to abort the unwanted pregnancy and treat her for mental illness. But neither the witchdoctor’s lore nor her father’s anger, neither mother’s despair nor the grandmother’s tears can prevail over the maternal instinct which warns Prakasini against the inimical forces on the prowl, seeking to exterminate her children even before they are born. With unswerving determination, the mother proceeds to take charge of the destiny of the children, and to bring them into the world despite the social stigma of illegitimacy they may have to bear. For her, the fact that they are born in her love is proof enough of their legitimacy and value.

It is a dilemma typical of mothers’ experience in the contemporary world of conflict that Prakasini has to face. Motherhood groans under the yoke that
institutions have placed upon it, smothering its natural and spontaneous aspects. The social environment is hostile towards the mother who seeks fulfilment for her maternal self, unassisted and outside the restrictive frames of patriarchal ideology. The unsuitability of the milieu for the mother to exercise her choice is brought home through Prakasini’s experiences. Everywhere her eyes meet the terrible aftermath of the holocaust caused by male selfishness and craze for power. The miserable sight of dying children and penury-stricken mothers discourages her. Still her great love cannot bear to deny her children their right to live. Having lost faith in man, Prakasini turns in her need to the kind mother Earth. And it is to the aged Muttašši (“grand mother”), whose love and understanding are as profound as the earth itself, that she communicates her intentions: “Muttass, I need a small patch of ploughed land to give birth” (111).

Prakasini’s expectations for her children reveal a deep discernment regarding the essential relatedness of human life to the elements and the mother’s part in sustaining that relationship:

When the children come into this world, she needs the July rains to wash them. It is the scent of soaked earth and wet leaves that they should first breathe. . . . It is the music of the wind and the rain that they should first hear. It is the colour of the sky that they should first see. It is the salt of the sea that they should first taste. . . . (111)

In Prakasini’s claim of matrilineage for her children, there is an assertion of the predominance of the spontaneous, unconditioned and unembellished self that receives its authenticity and nourishment from its natural environment. There is also a rejection of the institutional manipulation of the human subject in ways that put its instinctual powers to waste. The Father’s Order that denies woman’s experience is of the same stuff as the capitalistic order that oppresses
the common humanity. Thus womanhood/motherhood in the story suffers a marginality and repression similar to that of oppressed social classes, and consequently shows an equal proneness to insurgence at the violation of rights.

The maternal in its most poignant aspect is seen in the title story of *Paapattara* (*PT* 100-05) where the topical issue of female infanticide is brought to narrative focus. In the tribal colony of Paapattara (meaning “land of sin”), Lakshmikutty is in labour. Her heart-rending cries are interpreted and criticized by the older women of her “tara” (“settlement”) as too much fuss over a common phenomenon like childbirth. In actual fact, this maternal anguish is occasioned by her fear of delivering a baby girl. For in all her three earlier deliveries, the infants, being female, were mercilessly poisoned to death by the machinating mother-in-law with the assistance of Muttu Edatti, the tribal midwife from the neighbouring Caavutara (“land of death”) who attended to her. She has been branded as “a bitch who mothers females” (*PT* 102). Her husband, Koccunarayanan, uses this appellation to qualify her, as a daily ritual. In Lakshmikutty’s nightmares, her husband appears as the reincarnation of Kamsan, the legendary murderer of infants; and her mother-in-law and Muttu Edatti assume the aspects of executioners who carry out the despotic patriarch’s orders and safeguard his interests. Some of the neighbours, taking pity on Lakshmikutty at her fourth conception, advise Koccunarayanan to let her retain the child this time, whether boy or girl. But he refuses on the ground that he has no money to give as dowry to a daughter. So Lakshmikutty cries her heart out, even in the throes of labour, for her dead children and for the one about to take birth into death.

The older women of Paapattara try to hush up Lakshmikutty’s agonized cries. The ageless truism that women have found comfort in, and which Lakshmi herself has offered to younger sufferers, is repeated to her now:
"If you are born a woman, you can't avoid these things, Lakshmi girl," says Muttu Edatti (103). She fails to divine behind the moaning that fills the labour room the unbearable regret and conscience-prick of a mother who has to bring forth her defenceless, unsuspecting, trustful baby, not to live but to die. Lakshmikutty imagines that the cries of thousands of murdered infants rise in a terrible chorus from the woods near the settlements. Whenever she closes her eyes, she sees a sea of blood with the smashed heads of infants floating in it. She dreams of caressing cute female babies, but their feminine loveliness oozes out of her yearning hands in clots of blood, filling her with terror.

The two tribal settlements in the story are significantly named. They are the lands of sin and death, notorious for heinous crimes committed to the feminine. In Lakshmikutty's "tara," Tankavelu's second girlchild was killed on the very day of its birth. Lakshmikutty's younger sister Tattamma had been threatened by her husband Marutappan that she would be killed if she delivered a girlchild; and the pregnant girl had burnt herself to death to avoid witnessing the usual destiny of girlchildren in Paapattara overtake her own child. Every time Lakshmikutty gave birth to a baby girl, her mother-in-law prepared a potion that she claimed to be a laxative and applied to the mother's breast and the baby's tongue. The baby's first mouthful of the mother's milk assured its exit from the world. The curse of murdered infants and their helpless mothers hangs over the land. Koccunarayanan and Marutappan, the modern versions of Kamsan, stalk the land, menacing innocent babyhood and portending misfortune for motherhood; Lakshmikutty's mother-in-law and Muttu Edatti who assist them in their evil work are the devil's own disciples. The mothers of the land are powerless against these exterminators of femininity; they are destined to survive their children and live the rest of their days in perpetual bereavement.
Lakshmikutty condemns herself for being a mother utterly incapable of protecting her babies. Now, with the infinite patience and perseverance and the innate ingeniousness of a threatened mother, she seeks ways to save this last baby. Despite Muttu Edathi’s willingness to execute the patriarch’s dictates, Lakshmikutty perceives a streak of kindness in the hands that attend to her and in the words and looks that try to ease her pain. To this innate human compassion in the older woman, the desperate mother makes a silent plea:

Will you get my daughter secretly out of this place? Before Kamsan arrives with thundering footsteps, . . . before Koccunarayanan’s mother comes flying with her rough sorceress’ hands, will you get my baby out . . . across the river . . . and get her to the land on the other side where the feminine blossoms? I shall give you my chain and taali [as reward]. (105)

It is the highest price she can possibly afford that Lakshmikutty offers. Apart from the fact that the taali, made of gold, is virtually the only thing of material value that she possesses in marriage, her willingness to part with it has a deeper significance. She makes a choice here; viewed from the mother’s perspective, motherhood and its commitments outweigh marriage and its social obligations as well as privileges. In order to retain her child, Lakshmikutty would forfeit the taali, which is the ‘sacred’ symbol of her submission in marriage to the male order and an assurance of her social status and security. Though the story comes to an end without specifying whether it is a girlchild that Lakshmikutty gives birth to, or whether the mother is able to smuggle the child safely out, it surely anticipates her break with the system that violates the maternal code.
As Friedan points out, the "second stage" of women's movement is one of broader insights regarding the question of motherhood as a basic human need:

The change in woman's historical, political reality is that motherhood—which was once her necessity and passive destiny, and which confined, defined, used up her whole life—is now no longer necessity, but choice, and even when chosen, no longer can define or even use up most of her life. (Second Stage 90)

On examining this change in the context of Morrison's black American and Joseph's Indian cultural backgrounds, it may be noted that in both these communities, rejection of the maternal role is viewed with repugnance and suspicion, and childlessness is regarded as downright unfortunate. Consequently, in their fiction too, maternity is seldom rejected as debilitating. However, reduction of mother's experience in the patriarchal set-up stirs up resistance; there are instances in the works of both writers where institutionalization of motherhood and exploitation of woman through it are strongly reacted against. There is sustained tension in their stories between the experience and the institution of motherhood, which resists the general tendency to take it for granted; instead motherhood is foregrounded as a staple aspect of womanhood. Motherhood is an issue that the views of these contemporary writers from across the two hemispheres converge on.

Diverse cultural factors govern the treatment of woman's experience in marriage and family in the works of Joseph and Morrison; still, a good degree of commonality is seen in their approach. Significantly, neither Morrison nor Joseph seems to hold man responsible for woman's plight in marriage and family; instead, both man and woman are seen to be victims of a system that demands domination from the one and subordination from the other. A critical dissimilitude in their treatment of marriage is that in Joseph, the institution itself
is problematized as a major axis of woman’s oppression, whereas it is the more basic question of man-woman relationship that Morrison brings to focus. For the Indian mind, man-woman relationship is inconceivable except as socially sanctioned in marriage. However, mechanical routine and conventionality of marriage smother its naturality and spontaneity. There are other cultural factors that burden it further: Indian marriage, which is rooted in tradition irrespective of caste and religion, is a bond between two families rather than two individuals; therefore personal expectations are demanded to be modified to suit the common interests. This means a greater accountability to the system that leaves the average Indian woman little scope for resistance to oppression in marriage; compliance becomes a habit with her.

In their treatment of marriage as a theme in fiction, both Morrison and Joseph draw attention to the rigidity and inflexibility of its codes. However, there is a noticeable difference in the responses of the women they depict. If the empowered black woman rejects the supremacy of social institutions and conventions that seek to control her conduct, or finds loopholes to break free of the limitations inscribed in the marital and familial situations and to reaffirm her autonomy, Joseph’s women are more or less stranded, by force of social and religious taboos, in their environment of bondage. In the Indian cultural situation, where institutions establish a firmer hold on the individual, woman’s open resistance to marital oppression in the form of divorce, separation or extramarital relations is practically unthinkable. Since maternity is conceivable only within conjugal bonds and any deviation from this rule is socially tabooed, woman’s choice is limited to subjection of her autonomous self in the repressive frames of marriage and family. Her loyalty to these institutions is ensured by the maternal factor that renders her psychologically inert and unable to resist exploitation. In the light of such negative circumstances, the tumultuousness
that characterizes the inner lives of women in Joseph's narratives, who resort to silence, violence, or craziness as their method of resistance, assumes a subversive significance. It has the potential to burst out in active rebellion.

As female experience depicted by Joseph and Morrison shows, the ultimate effect that the institutions of marriage and maternity have upon woman is to mould the autonomous individual in her to fit the societal frame that reserves stringent disciplinary measures for her. She must become one in the crowd that has little volition and is therefore easy to herd according to patriarchal interests. This loss of her free self is the price woman has to pay in order to gain social membership even of a subordinate kind.

Feminist theorists of all schools recognize the ways in which marriage, family and motherhood are transformed into instruments of oppression for woman. The greater her involvement in the social process through these institutions, the greater the sacrifices demanded of her; her disprivilege proves to grow in direct proportion to her conformity.