Chapter II

WOMEN IN AFRICAN SOCIETY AND LITERATURE

Literature as the mirror of social change and custom is the focal point from which one can gather the sociology of the culture and learn about women’s place within it. The common African ambience after colonial impact is seen in the Negritude Movement, a rallying cry that spurred the masses to awaken to the value of their own native culture and to break free of the psychological and physical shackles of colonial power.

As per the maxim of Taine, literature is the product of time, race and milieu. As such, we find the social upheavals of the time reflected in the writings of the period. This is particularly true of African literature which has always faithfully mirrored social changes. The fiction produced by Achebe, who is considered the father of African literature, epitomizes this feature. His Things Fall Apart (1958), No Longer at Ease (1960) and Arrow of God (1964), speak of the confrontation of the African and European cultures. The political, social, economic and spiritual dilemmas ensuing the meeting of these two cultures are evoked in these novels. If Achebe’s Things Fall Apart is a masterpiece on the Nigerian and specifically Ibo history, then Ngugi’s A Grain of Wheat superbly portrays the inner turmoil of the Kenyan during the Mau Mau rebellion.
In his work *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie even commends literature for giving a better version of reality since history may be clouded by official statements. Only literature can ‘give the lie to it’ (Rushdie 14). African literature, which has an undercurrent of didactism, is an instrument of educating the masses on the existing social contexts. The author with his sociological responsibility tries to capture the historical consciousness of the people by speaking of the shifting sands of time in his writings. Such immersion into the social aspects of his country has been pointed out time and again as the bane of African writing. But the author cannot be blamed for being extremely conscious of the development in his society. James Ngugi says in his article “The African Writer and his Past”:

The evolution of human culture through the ages, society and nation through time and space is of grave import to the poet and novelist. For what has been is intimately bound up with what might be. Our vision of the future, of diverse possibilities of life and human potential has roots in our experiences of the past. (41)

Emecheta, the West African writer, hails from Nigeria, which possesses much striking literature. Nigerian writing is predominantly topical as one can see in the works of eminent writers like Achebe and Soyinka. Especially, Nigeria as projected in Achebe’s world, sports a number of writers who display the national sentiment in their works. Nigerian writing is characterized by ebullience and energy that
showcase the culture. Among the many African nations, Nigeria stands out as one having a distinctive literature of its own.

Women writing in Africa, which saw the light of the day only in recent times, assigns to itself the function of bringing out the history of women and their experiences through the centuries. This ‘other’ side of the story reveals information about African women who were silenced by the master-narratives that focused on the canonized racial and sexual ‘superiors’. Only through such information can we see the part played by them.

History is, in a way, a matter of perspectives and perspectives in turn are matters of values and politics. But precisely because of the fractures in the mirror of the history, we are able to recover its fragment, seeking for those that are lost and thus to recover the previously omitted or excluded from received accounts of historical events. (Solcke 272)

In women’s history, the movement of feminism disturbed the social equilibrium by advocating equal rights for women. This movement as well as that of postcolonialism had its impact on the African soil too. But the typically African experiences and situations raise questions against an essentialising notion that puts together women in a ‘globality of sisterhood’. African polemics questions the ghettoization of women’s experiences by overlooking aspects of race and class boundaries. The post structuralist seeking of the identity of
the woman, the analysis of the experiences of gender and ideological and power relations within society recasts the ‘his-story’ written by man and brings on a recasting of terms from the woman’s vantage point of ‘her-story’.

Such an identity politics which grew into prominence in the 1980s challenged the umbrella term of sisterhood that grouped ‘women’ into a unitary category. The term ‘woman’ encompasses within it multiple sections like women of colour/ white and lesbian / heterosexual and poor working woman/ middle class academia etc, which confronts the middleclass heterosexual hegemonizing of the term ‘women’ in essentialistic contexts. The fragmentation of the identity of women by race /class/ and sexuality brings a wide range of women’s issues open to debate.

The white feminist academia which patronizes the women of colour by rescuing them (in Spivak’s terms, “white man saving brown women from brown men”) occasions the raising of quite a few brows among the intellectuals in Africa. An example can be given in the poem by a Malawian about the African scenario which poignantly renders the historical injustice of her white ‘sisters’ who connived at the looting and lynching and raping her world (qtd. in Morgan 502)

after drinking and carousing
on my sweat
rise up to castigate
and castrate
their menfolk
from the cushions of a world
I have built!

She questions –why should these newfound sisters come between herself and her men?!! She concludes that only when Africa is truly free from imposters -

There will be time for me and time for you
to share the cooking
and change the nappies-
till then,
first things first!

A general history of women is denounced under such circumstances of differences in power relations, systems of belief as well as customs and traditions which starkly differentiate women of different races and classes. Women’s history thus has been termed justly as a ‘political field’.

If Caliban in *The Tempest* has become an icon of the postcolonial resistance, the history of the once colonized women also has to be foregrounded as a protest against the marginalization and exploitation of women. The subversiveness and resistant spirit of the women of the Third World can be read only from a close reading of the gynography as well as the history of Africa.
Buchi Emecheta is a Nigerian writer, and her fiction cannot be read independently of its Nigerianness. Any study of her works presupposes an understanding of the historical and cultural milieu which has played an active role in shaping every element of the fiction that seeks to mirror it.

The earliest known information at hand on Nigeria is about the Hausa states built up by the Berbers from the desert in AD 600-700 which included the state of Bornu. King Bawo and his descendants were instrumental in the formation of some of the Yoruba states there. The first known civilization of Yoruba is that of the Nok people about 900 BC. Historians record that civilization and development came to Africa from the Northern parts and not from Europe (Ward 8).

Africa did not get its civilization from the West. The cultural and social values that existed in Africa are believed to have spread from Egypt into Europe as well as Africa. The Nok people inhabited the West Africa from 800 BC to 200 AD. Though the North was initially pagan, later Islam spread to the country after the Songhai invasion of Nigeria by Askia, the Great. Later on, Christianity was introduced by the Western missionaries prior to colonialism. The various religions introduced into the country also had a role in shaping the history of the country. Nigeria is an amalgam of self-contained states separated from each other by differences in history, culture, ethnicity and religion. The nation is dominated by three major tribal groups--Hausa, Igbo, and the Yoruba. The Hausa states were
initially pagan, but Islam seeped in from Songhai and by the thirteenth century most of the Hausa states consisted of Muslim societies. But the Yorubans and Igbo were influenced more by the European invasion.

The Portuguese were the first of the Europeans to arrive in Nigeria. They landed in Lagos in 1472. The Portuguese established trading posts in the 16th century followed by various European nations who came for gold, ivory and slaves. Towards the end of the 17th century such legitimate trade was replaced by illegitimate trade in human cargo due to the abolition of slavery. The coast would have enriched its civilization by exchanging ideas with Europe, but the slave trade spoilt it. Slave trade originated in Africa consequent on the need for workers in American plantations. When Columbus discovered the West Indies in 1492, the King of Spain began to establish colonies in America. Soon the Spaniards made the native people of America work for them in their plantations and mines but they were not strong enough to stand the hard work. Then the Spaniards began buying Africans who were stronger as slaves from Portugal. So the Portuguese began buying more slaves from the West African coast, and after the Portuguese came the Dutch and the English and slave trade began on a large scale. As more and more slaves were needed in America, African kings began interwars to buy slaves for the West and trade in other materials stopped. As it was cheaper to buy European goods than to manufacture them in Africa, arts and craft of the culture deteriorated.
Trade with Europe brought down cultural growth in Africa. Again, slave trade did not afford them any period of peace conducive for civilization. The African nature was transformed into one of bloodshed and fear owing to this and the native civilization degraded gradually, giving rise to the ‘stupid black’ characters like Nnaife (Joys of Motherhood) in colonial literature.

It is interesting to note Basil Davidson’s words on the shift in the concept of the relative merits of civilizations, with colonialism:

The earliest recorded encounters between European and African kingdoms at the beginning of the 15th century, reveal remarkable accounts of relationships between equals – the exchange of diplomatic counsels was routine – and glowing European accounts of the thriving and vibrant nations of Bini, Dahomey, Ashanti, etc whose organizational powers and influence were constantly favourably compared by the Europeans to that of Roman Papacy. However as the plantations in the Americas developed and Afro-European trade demands shifted from raw materials to human labour, there was also a shift in the European literary, artistic and philosophical characterization of Africans …. [into] “savage” and “inferior” nature. (qtd. in Eze 6)

Christian missions were established about the same time and the teaching of English became widespread. The Church Missionary
Society began work in the west of Nigeria in 1842, about the same time as the Methodists and the Baptists. The Roman Catholics began their work in 1860. Many regions of Nigeria welcomed the missionaries and as colonialism took root, so did Christianity.

Relations between Britain and parts of Nigeria were formalized in 1861 when the settlement of Lagos was declared a colony. The Southern and Northern Nigeria, divided between the European nations based on oil sources were amalgamated in 1914 into the colony and protectorate of Nigeria. The name ‘Nigeria’ was coined by Lady Lugard, the wife of Sir Frederick Lugard, who effected the amalgamation. From the time of the First World War, African countries began to fight for their independence and towards 1950s the ‘imperial backtracking’ began. In October, 1960 Nigeria gained independence. Then came neo-colonialism in Nigeria, which was widely condemned in the literature of the times.

Due to the myriad tribes and races varying in history, culture, ethnicity and religion, Nigeria had become a pastiche-state. The ethnic divisions in Nigeria were manipulated by the colonizers to their advantage according to their policy of ‘divide and rule’. After the Second World War, a political unrest emerged in Nigeria owing to unemployment, low wages etc. Finally in 1957 the West and East constituting the Southern region achieved independence while the North did so in 1959. Nigeria formed its first Republic in 1960. At the time of independence, Nigerian economy came under powerful
foreign control, which led to neo-colonialism. This was aggravated by the discovery of oil reserves in 1950s. Along with this confusion, ethnic conflict ignited regional hostilities in the army, which was composed mostly of Igbos. In January 1966, the Army Majors made a coup against the Federal government and a military government was formed under Major Ironsi, an Ibo. This led to a highly charged atmosphere. Another military coup took place in July and Gowon became the head of the Federal Military Government. But the political opposition between ethnic regions increased and Ojukwu, the Military Governor of the East, began to call Ibo back to their region from the other states and declared ‘Biafra’ independent in April 1967. Thus the civil war, which was one of the bloodiest episodes in history, broke out. This forms the setting of the second novel taken for study, Destination Biafra. The issue of relief operations was one that concerned many outside sources--the basis of which was the Nigerian oil resources. The American and the British multinational petroleum corporations intervened in the Nigerian internal politics, adding fuel to the fire. But the war weakened considerably after December 1969 and in January 1970 Ojukwu abandoned the army and the war ended.

The Civil War made a deep imprint in the minds and annals of African history and, it is reflected in the literature of the nation. Examples abound like Munyone’s A Wreath for the Maidens (1973), Amadi’s Sunset in Biafra (1973), Ekwensi’s Survive the Peace
(1976), Soyinka`s *Season of Anomy* (1973) and Emecheta`s *Destination Biafra* (1982).

Women in Nigeria were not idle at the time of the civil war. Igbo women undertook demonstrations in the streets, on various issues like protesting against massacres, urging secession and condemning the Soviet involvement in the war. During the war, the organization of women distributed materials and supplied information to the army. Many women even joined in the civilian-militia units, as pictured in Achebe`s *Girls at War*. Women`s role in the war was praiseworthy: women’s market network and other women`s organizations maintained a distribution system for food. They joined local civilian defense militia units and in May 1969 formed a ‘Women’s Front’ and called on the Biafran leadership to allow them to enlist in the infantry (van Allen 84). Much women writing too surfaced after the civil war, describing the horrors faced by women in the War. Works like Nwapa’s short story *Wives at War* (1980), the novel *Running for Cover* by Pauline Onwubiko (1988), a play *Into the Heart of Biafra* by Catherine Obianuju and Rose Njoku`s *Withstand the Storm* (1986) are some of them.

The tales of these Caliban’s sisters are encoded within these narrative pieces, similar to the colonized man’s experience in the male canon. The traditional and modern beliefs and attitudes as well as customs are reflected in the literature representing the West African concept of reality. The literature of the nation is a “rendering
and an elaboration of a certain cultural ethos which might explain his people’s attitude to events of central importance in the development of African society” (Nkosi 24).

But it is conspicuously evident that the image of the ‘female’ in African society is hardly the vacuous, diffident and insipid creatures that people early Victorian Writing. The picture of the African woman of early and pre-colonial years is one of capable individuals characterizing a distinct persona. The Western literature and teaching have produced the general understanding that European culture liberated African women through the introduction of Christian monogamous marriage, Western education and the suppression of female circumcision. But it is a proved fact on African culture that political power and economic independence—elements that were outside the grasp of Victorian women—were part of the “tribal” life of the African women.

A sociological study of the African woman would reveal the actual circumstances of the woman of Africa down historical periods.

The earliest history of the land of Nigeria records the presence of *Hausa* queens like Amina, Queen of Zaria, who succeeded her father as a ruler and conquered the surrounding regions and maintained control for 34 years; she is also known as the originator of fortifications on the land. Before British colonization, *Yoruba* women of the Oyo kingdom held high political rank. The ‘Ladies of the Palace’, were eight priestesses and eight titled women including Iya
Oba (mother of the king, Iya Lere (royal treasurer), Iya Lagbon (crown prince’s mother), and Iya Mode (guardian of royal graves and medium for royal spirits). Another Yoruba political woman force is Madame Tinubu, who was the power behind the ruler of Lagos in 1860s.

The Igbo women too had a role in traditional politics. The ‘Omu’ was in charge of the women in the village with her chosen ‘ilogo’ (cabinet). Women were also organized in associations like ‘Inyemidi’ (wives of a lineage) and ‘Umuada’ (daughters of a lineage) that cited as peer groups. The Inyimidi gathered regularly for ‘mikiri’, a forum for women’s issues. During the ‘mikiri’ rules were formed about farming, livestock and the market, women discussed problems about men; strategies for solving them (including sexual, housework or childcare strikes) were arrived at collectively (Morgan 500).

The Igbo system of political rule is explicated by modern historians as the “dual sex political system”. Every major official had a female counterpart known as his ‘mother’ who took precedence over him at court and supervised over his work (Ladner 273). Each sex managed their own affairs and if the ‘obi’ ruled over the men, the ‘omu’ controlled the women –she is called by the Westerners the ‘Market queen.’ She is neither the wife nor the mother of the king but is considered the mother of her citizens. The ‘omus’ cabinet the ‘ilogo’ could challenge male authority in the community, if necessary. The women of the community also formed a corporate body called the
‘ikporo ani’- a representative body of women chosen from each quarter of the village or town, based on achievement. The women of ‘ikporo ani’ would meet at the summons of the omu and her councilors and report back to the other women in the village, until a consensus is reached on an issue.

Another women’s organization is the age-grade organizations – girls of the same age group formed ‘out umu agbogho’ (group of eligible girls) as a preparation for marriage. They had a ‘coming of age’ dance which was the high point of their lives. The dance group also provided training in social conduct for their members.

The attainment of titles was the only method by which women in traditional Igbo society could improve their social standing. The marks of distinction of the titled women were the threaded cowries and beads around their wrists according to rank. Titleholders including the ‘omu’, who has all the titles, had the duty of encouraging the other women to acquire them and shared the high title fees and other proceeds initiates paid (Okonjo 50-54). Women also achieved superior status in society by means of spirit mediumship cults. Women ‘mediums’ acted in quasi-political roles, such as sitting on a stool and judging trials and accepting greetings as a chief. She held a high place in the society. Women in pre-colonial Africa had enjoyed economic independence too. To quote Hafkin and Bay:
African women have varying degrees of economic independence… Wives and husbands in Africa usually have separate incomes, with clearly defined financial obligations to their children, their spouse and spouse’s lineage. Married women generally have the right to own and acquire property that is separate from that of their husbands and in many areas men and women were guaranteed equal rights to land use. Business transactions and earnings beyond marital obligations are considered a spouse’s private affair. (6)

Retail trade was the most widespread of women’s occupations, particularly in West Africa and they accepted economic responsibilities of the family. Before colonization, women engaged in a variety of occupations like preparing farm products or cooked food for the market, raising surplus crops for sale; producing craftwork; and trading farm produce or manufactured goods. Thus the pre-colonial African woman was an economic force to reckon with in the family.

In spite of the political and economic autonomy, African women could not be considered as enjoying an equal status with men. Most African societies established a strong bias towards male superiority. In many cases the economic responsibility upon the women became a burden. The basic framework of the African society is one of patriarchy, where, as elsewhere, men rule and dominate. To quote Hafkin and Bay, “Though women had a substantial measure of
economic independence and a voice in political affairs in many parts of the continent, they were not dominant, as some have said and they were not equal” (8).

They followed a number of customs and taboos which willed the female to take the subordinate position in society, such as the long puberty rites which kept them in seclusion; in West Africa women had to kneel in front of their husbands while serving them; many societies had menstrual taboos, keeping women apart in menstrual huts; another culturally legitimate way of suppressing women was clitoridectomy which again made women sexually subordinate.

A major social evil in pre-colonial African societies was the practice of polygyny of the male that brought biological and emotional oppression of the African women. In most of the cases, women tended to ignore the biological and emotional oppressions they had to undergo considering men as irrevocably polygamous and not capable of correcting them. They insisted only on the basic help from their husbands, like providing for the children and did not expect much of companionship and fidelity from them. The major rupture within family occurs at a breach of traditional system such as relegating the older wife to the background and not giving her the due respect that should be accorded to her position (Morgan 503). Polygamous households are still accepted on account of the help they get in child care and domestic labour. It is generally seen that polygamy often results in women marrying men much older than
them. According to demographic surveys forty per cent of marriages are still polygynous in Nigeria.

With marriage Nigerian women suffer most oppression and lose their status, becoming a mere possession, unvalued except as the ‘mother of sons’. Women are subordinated to men within marriage by means of overwork as she has the double yoke of work at home and in the workplace. The only solace she has is the traditional support systems like the grandmother, siblings, co-wives and other relatives.

Following the disruption of traditional support systems made up of the kith and kin by the colonial developments, the women of Africa fell into bad times. Their present position in neo-colonial Africa is widely different from what it was during its early history. Women became economically backward owing to colonial laws and took to petty trading and other domestic chores. But this too came in good stead during the times of recession. An example is the Hausa women of Northern Nigeria, who supplemented their husband’s wages by preparing and selling foodstuffs within their compounds (Entwistle & Coles 264). Similarly in many regions of Africa public and private sector works were interlinked in the case of women.

The oppressional forces within society do not kill the spirit of the African woman and hence the prototype of the African Queen and the rebellious woman in Africa. Aba Riots is an eye-opening episode in Nigerian history; it reveals the nature of the African woman. Aba
Riots occurred during colonial rule and was a direct aftermath of the ‘invisibility’ of women in the eyes of the male British officials:

With the incursion of the British system of administration into the African social framework, African women came under the hegemonic Victorian principles on women’s lifestyle and character. The British male-dominated systems of power were enjoined to be the new administration in Africa. The British recognized the male monarch ‘obi’ but the female counterpart ‘omu’ was relegated to the background. The British local government and Native Administrative Court acceded domination only of African ‘male’ power. As Kamene Okonjo relates:

The ‘omu’ lost her prestige and her clientele as her political and religious functions were replaced by colonial rule and Christianity. The introduction of clinics and foreign drugs replaced the sacrifices she and her ilogo had made in their role as guardians of the health and welfare of the community. Cases previously attended by her began to be dealt with by the British-appointed colonial magistrate. The introduction of imported goods into the market place ruined her system of price-fixing... The traditional title-taking that the ‘omu’ had presided over was displaced as Christian converts acquired the new title of mississi (Mrs) that
came with marriage in church and brought higher status in the new social order. (56)

The British also outlawed ‘self-help’ i.e. the use of force by anyone but the government to punish the wrong doers. The enforcement of this ban eliminated the women’s ultimate weapon of ‘sitting on a man’- their indigenous form of protest- by means of dancing, chanting, singing songs of ridicule. Christian missionaries also banned the participation in traditional rituals and associations like the ‘mikiri’. Colonialism and the Church thus led to the concentration of national political power with the section of educated wealthy male elite. Thus colonialism was the element that introduced class and sex stratification within the African society.

It was this usurpation of women’s political role that was the cause of *Ogu umun wanyi* or the Aba Riots, recorded in history as the Women’s War in 1929. An accurate picture is given in “Sisterhood is Global”:

The war was triggered by a census and property count in the Owerri province. The previous census had resulted in taxes for men and women. Therefore the women organized to prevent taxation of their property. Ikonnia, Nwannedo and Nwugo women leaders in Oloko held meetings at which women decided not to comply with the count and to raise an alarm if the officials demanded information. On November 23,
when an Igbo warrant officer attempted to count the goats and sheep of Nwanyerunwa, women from all over the province protested at the district office. They obtained a guarantee that they would not be taxed and forced the arrest and conviction of the official who had spread the alarm and assaulted the women. When news spread, tens of thousands of women descended on their local Native Administration Centres. Their indigenous form of protest (like sitting on a man) and demands for the warrant chief’s cap of office overwhelmed the British. The women demolished or burned 166 Native Courts and released prisoners in several jails. In two cases police and soldiers fired on them, killing over 50 women and wounding another 50. (Morgan 501)

With colonialism women fell behind in social importance, since accumulation of land became a means of property. Women with limited access to information on the matter had less land resource, thus increasing their dependence on men. It gave men as Mann says, a “potent means of controlling and disciplining women, heightening their subordination” (705). Mann also states that Christian teaching pictured men as providers and decision makers, while women had roles only within the family, thus undercutting women’s status in society.
Patriarchal and colonial laws cowed down women in rural areas:

They had no rights to the ownership of land or control over the produce they cultivated. The unpaid labour of women and children essentially subsidized the colonial wage-bill….Women received little or no education because neither Africans nor colonial patriarchs regarded it as important. (Schipper, *Emerging from the Shadows* 2-3)

The African males were quick to resort to the new ideology to restrict women’s autonomy. Moreover, city life in Lagos became the centre of loose morals with large scale male immigration which created a shortage of women.

With the abolition of slave trade, the immigrants and freed slaves returned to the land and women in urban areas had ample market to increase their economic autonomy. Privatization and commercialization of land which came up due to the property rights installed by colonial government again led to the women losing access to valued resources like land and thereby even labour and economy. The economic burden of the family becomes unmanageable to women like Nnu Ego in *Joys of Motherhood* due to such circumstances. This colonial policy in the 1860’s and 70’s made woman fall back in private property acquisition, since they did not have access to information about its significance. In some cases men also tried to block the grants of land to their women by influencing
colonial officials (Mann 693-97). Thus women had little of land resource, which became a major source of income for African people during the trade depression in the 1880’s. Finally women were relegated to petty trading of local materials and they were no match for the men involved in profitable export business, during the late colonial times.

This led to the concentration of national power in the hands of a small-educated wealthy male elite (Van Allen 61). The colonial capitalist demarcation of the workplace as public and private sector changed the values of traditional African women’s labour. Further, women’s oppression was institutionalized by the colonial marriage laws that “relegated women to the status of a minor under the control of her father, guardian or husband” (Courville 38). The introduction of Christian marriage deserves notice not only as catalytic of preventing polygamy but also as an agency of reproducing the European cultural norms and values. According to colonial law, the woman became entirely dependent on their men folk, since it deprived them of their ownership of land and its produce. African women “were raped into submission, were exploited as labourers and endured subhuman status as slaves” (Courville 39) as a result of colonization. Under colonial capitalism the women underwent exploitation in three forms based on their position in production, in family and in colonial society, which again points at the class, gender and racial discrimination.
The postcolonial times saw a marked change in the life of women, by introducing them to urban life. The liberation and the pleasures it affords are the subject of a detailed study in Kenneth Little’s work, *African Women in Towns*. He says that urbanization has corrupted the earlier sincerity in sexual relationships. The urban love affairs were mostly for the sake of pecuniary or material benefits. Colonial education had brought forward the new system of monogamous marriage system, which was more and more sought by the African women with the growth in educational status. But this resulted in disharmony in the house, since the males were still under the pre-conditioning effect of the traditional family system (Little 160). This is what is seen in the case of Kehinde-Albert relationship in Emecheta’s *Kehinde*.

The Western education initially given by the missionaries was not particularly enlightening to the women, since it was the preparatory ground for marriage and motherhood and not for citizenship or jobs. The single-sex political system, a legacy of the colonial power, is another detrimental factor in the history of African women’s life.

Many of the cultural changes created situations in which women were denied access to educational programmes and other training (including in agriculture) that would allow them to be on a par with the males of the society. But later on in Nigeria, universal primary education was introduced in 1976, which resulted in an
increasing development of women. Now there are women’s associations like WIN (Women in Nigeria) and NCWS (National Council of Women’s Societies) to address women’s issues. WIN recommended giving women independent access to land, training for peasant women, improving working conditions of rural labourers etc. NCWS argued for the reform of divorce laws to protect women’s property upon dissolution of marriage (Entwistle & Coles 262), and FOMWIN (Federation of Muslim Women in Nigeria) worked for reform on polygynous marriage.

In short, during pre/post colonial times the African women have been active beyond households and, engaged in informal commodity production and trade. Colonial construction of women as passive and powerless transferred them to domestic roles alone. Commodity production and private resource grabbed by men gave rise to class differences and inequality. But their status fluctuates with the changing sociocultural process. In the 20th century, with gradual development, women in Africa again show trends of enjoying economic independence and social power and are contributors to the economy (Seidman & Anang 205-217).

Feminism in Nigeria raised the consciousness of women to an awareness of their human rights and particularly those in relation to man. In spite of the deep rooted male domination within society, women came to learn the importance of education in uplifting their situation in society, by providing them social and economic security.
Above all, the inherent strength of the African woman prevailed throughout—as was projected in her resourcefulness and great capacity for emotional survival. Such a streak of moral stamina or womanism is an underlying quality that separates the African woman from the rest of her sex.

The fighting spirit of the Nigerian Ibo Women is revealed in the works of most African Women writers including Emecheta, who is an Igbo writer. The rising consciousness of the Nigerian woman of her rights, particularly in relation to men, can be traced through her works *Bride Price, Joys of Motherhood, Destination Biafra, Double Yoke, Gwendolen* and *Kehinde*.

If the colonialist’s image of the African woman as the dark and passive form was prominent in many male-authored texts, the works of the women writers bring out the self-assertive women in Africa:

[W]omen’s authorship is central to the subversion of the structures; ideologies and institutions that have facilitated gender discrimination…. [They] offer self-images, patterns of analysis and general insights into women’s situation which are ignored by or are inaccessible to the male writers…. The female writer should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman, as a Third World person. (qtd. in Kumah 8)
It is also to be pointed out that a true liberation of the African land can be had only by the complete participation of the African woman in the national role-playing, since she had always been integral to her society. The women writers speak about the power of the African woman – marriage, motherhood, emotional and economic marginalization, their resistance to oppression and role in the nation are recurring themes in women’s literature. They are at present making their voice heard and presence felt quite effectively.

A study on women of a specific culture requires an understanding of the multifaceted identity of the woman-- be it in the public or private domain. A general outlook upon the status of the woman folk that populate the world reveals certain common points about her. One of them is the one made by the UN which revealed that women do two thirds of all the work both within and outside the home; but they receive only 10 per cent of all the money earned on the earth. And also they possess less than a hundredth of all the wealth of the world. Historical reading of the literature of a nation too brings to focus such a nondescript place accorded to women. African literature too abounds with startling revelations on women in their society, both in male and women writing. A look at African literature is thus essential to come to terms with African womanhood and the common forces of social discrimination that they fight against.

The image of the African woman as depicted in African literature is a changing one. Precolonial literature reveals the
traditional African woman; we see that a transitional image during the colonial period and postcolonial literature reveals her transformation.

Even male writing of Africa exposes the relationship between women and society in Africa. An example is Leopold Senghor’s poems on Negritude, which evoke the ‘Mother Africa’ image, and tries to lull feminine consciousness into apathy thereby. The novelist Miriam Tlali objects fiercely to this:

it is a problem when men want to call you Mother Africa and put you on a pedestal, because then they want you to stay there forever without asking your opinion--and unhappy you if you want to come down as an equal human being. (qtd. in Schipper, Mother Africa 49)

The image of the ‘mother’ is unequivocally the most prevalent one to describe black women in African and Afro-American writings.

These images have been developed through a long and distinguished literary history, reaching back through the diaspora to ancient African culture in which ‘the African woman is associated with core values and is revered as ‘guardian of traditions, the strong Earth-Mother who stands for security and stability’. (qtd. in Worsham 117)

Male-writing portrays the woman in an unchanging pre-colonial picture: it presents the traditional woman - either in the mould of the passive girl or as the strong mother figure, happy in their lot. There is
a distinct reluctance to deal with women issues, particularly those specific to African culture such as polygamy and motherhood. The prevalence of such an image also points to the dearth of woman writers in the African scenario until recently. The male-writing generally focused on political and social aspects of the nation and society, where women figure only as appendages to man, or shadowy figures in the margins of the narrative. The stereotypical images of woman described in such works are studied in detail by Kenneth Little in his work *The Sociology of Urban Women’s Image in African Literature*.

But there are indeed some exceptions to this case like some of the works of Wole Soyinka, Sembene Ousmane and Nnugi wa Thiongo who picture women as resourceful and determined and taking her place by the ploughshare. But even so, it is only in the woman author’s works that we see women in their true colour, and as having a distinct personality.

Women writers speak of the real nature of the life of the African woman in the society. Often one comes across the exploited and suffering figure, as in Grace Ogot’s works or Flora Nwap’a’s *One Is Enough* or Ba’s *So Long a Letter*. An understanding of the true picture of women, along with solutions to solve their problems is given by many women writers. It is to be noted that Mariamma Ba sees female solidarity or bonding as the solution, whereas Emecheta links the solution to the educational enhancement of women.
According to Nwapa financial prosperity seems to be the key to happiness and prosperity in women.

Most women writers have paid equal attention to matters relating to the society and to those that pertain to women in the society. This is quite natural since we cannot hope to improve the society and make it change for the better without first improving the lot of women. Martin Delany, a 19th century philosopher, speaks of the role women play in forming the nation, in his treatise, ‘The Condition, Elevation and Destiny of the Coloured People of the United States, Politically Considered’:

Our females must be qualified, because they are to be the mothers of our children. As mothers they are the first nurses and instructors of children… No people are elevated above the condition of their females…To know the position of a people, it is only necessary to know the condition of their females; and despite themselves, they cannot rise above their level. (qtd. in Brown-Guillory 3)

The Marxist concept of alienation is the major principle that one finds ruling the life the woman, particularly in Africa. Woman is considered only as a mule of work in the home as well as at the workplace. She is essentially valueless, other than as a body, to bring money to the father in the form of bride price. A status she has gained is that of the ‘mother’. Again she is being objectified in the mother image. On being objectified she is again alienated from herself. As
the mother of a daughter, she is incomplete and she is constantly devalued in the house until she bears sons, as seen in the case of Amaka in *Joys of Motherhood*.

The psychoanalytic view of the mother being seen as the weaker or powerless parent is again seen in the *Bride Price*, where AkuNna’s mother passively accepts wifehood of her husband’s brother as per custom. She is also presented as being the mute observer as boy suitors play sexual games with her daughter, even molesting her, just for the sake of pleasing patriarchy. According to patriarchal principles women are instruments to serve the males of the family, to be the homemaker and to nurse them, giving priority to her sons, (daughters being just an extension of her weak self). According to Emecheta, only education could react against such a discriminatory system and enlighten the society against such sexist cultural practices. The mother figures in Emecheta’s works pose as question marks before the society. As Yongue states:

Like Nancy Chodorow in America and Julie Kristeva and Luce Irigary, in Europe, Emecheta responds to patriarchy’s psyche and societal repression of women as the reign of the phallic order which disconnects woman from her maternal being, except to serve the basic reproductive needs of the culture and economic and narcissistic….needs of the male (Yongue 77)
The name given to AkuNna – ‘father’s wealth’ is again an underscoring of this African attitude that women are only valuable as complementing the male wealth. The name educated AkuNna gives her daughter ‘Joy’ is an outpouring of Kristevan jouissance.

As the “mules ud de world” (Hurston 14), the women in such patriarchal set up are mere beasts of burden, bowed down by the amount of work she has to do uncomplainingly. Her own silence forces her to become in marxist terms the worker who produces for the society which does not even acknowledge her as a person. Thus to become a good woman who accords with the ideals of the society is to conform to feminine stereotype such as passivity and irrationality and indoctrinating their daughter likewise. Such false consciousness engendered in them is what propagates the unequal status quo among the sexes.

The woman is thus the figure undergoing exploitation and oppression. As a worker, African woman has her family responsibilities both at home and in the workplace, which makes her doubly oppressed. Her efforts as a worker and as a wife are merely futile. To quote such a woman:

I married him young
My beauty he could not escape
I married him poor
What we’ve I contributed
It is my sweat
My brain too
Now as weathered as I am
Teeth dropping down
Telling me to go
To go where? (qtd. in Jean F.O’Barr 65)

This is the condition that AkuNna’s mother too experiences when divorced by her husband in *The Bride Price*. It can be reinforced by an old Ibuza man’s story of his life: “My first wife ran away...because I beat her up. My second wife died when she was having a child. My third one had to go, because I fed her for seven years and she bore me no child (*BP* 11).

The oppression of the black woman is even more poignant considering the double yoke of colonialism and patriarchy that is enforced on her strangling her. The stereotypical mould that she is supposed to conform to is explicitly given by Mary Ellman in her work *Thinking About Women*; the list consists of female attributes like formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy and those who are given the negative colouring in literature gain the mould of either the shrew or the witch (57).

African women in literature were always associated in two major senses, positively as the life-giving mother figure and
negatively as the frightening witch who has to be restricted by codes and norms. Mineke Schipper in her essay “Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in African Literature and Criticism,” speaks of the mythological conception of woman in various parts of Africa (37-35). She records that in the Luba myth from Zaire, the Supreme Being, created two people—a man and a woman who had no soul. Only when God left the earth did he send ‘mutima’ (soul) which entered the first man, but not the woman.

Likewise in most myths of the world, the woman was not created originally. She was created later, as an after thought or accidentally as in the Saramo myth in Tanzania, which says that once upon a time two men lived on honey. One day as one man was taking out honey from a tree with the help of his axe, the blade of the axe fell down and cut off his friend’s penis. What was left was a bleeding wound like women’s genitals have. Thus woman is a mutilated man in the myth. The Asante myth from Ghana explains that man and woman came together against the will of God as is the Christian belief and though in the myth the man made the first transgression, the woman is punished more severely. But in the Hungwe myth from Zimbabwe, it is the woman who seduces the man. In the Nigerian Bini myth, men did not have to till the ground and they just had to cut off a piece of the sky to eat when they were hungry. But once a greedy woman cut off too much of the sky and it had to be put into the rubbish heap. Upon this, the angry sky rose up high above the reach of man and man had to work for their living.
In short, in most myths one finds that women are blamed for whatever goes wrong. The only positive image given to women in pre-historic oral literature or folktales is that of the virtuous maternal character or the loving mother who sacrifices herself for the children. This is again re-inforced by the introduction of the Victorian concepts of womanhood, brought in by colonialism. As Gayatri Spivak comments in “Who Claims Alterity?”: “The new culturalist alibi, working within a basically elitist culture industry, insisting on the continuity of native tradition untouched by Westernization whose failures it can help to cover, legitimizes the very thing it claims to combat” (281).

Thus Western mores and values, while it ostensibly sought to ‘enlighten’ the East in many ways, only tried to stamp down the woman as the weaker, second sex. Even the independent streak given to woman in pre-colonial period, economically and politically, was downtrodden. Therefore one sees in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*, the heroine Sissie tracing female subordination to the imposition of Western values – “My darling: it seems as if so much of the softness and meekness you and all the brothers expect of me is…really western”. She contrasts the strong, resourceful traditional African Woman to the “dolls the colonizers brought along with them who fainted at the sight of their own bleeding fingers and carried smelling salts around all the time” (117). Ghana, she feels, accords her a pure culture that promises dignity and self-worth to woman.
Even in the pre-colonial period, women, though in the family given only secondary status, rose to positions of power politically: there were women in the armies of Dahomey in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; women who married wives in Igboland and were called ‘men’ when they attained economic and social independence. In many ways the African women had a relatively autonomous life in ancient Africa. But the patriarchal domination was challenged by her later when feminism led to the rise of a new educated class of women. The resilient spirit in her asks her to fight for her rights and this is what one finds in Flora Nwapa’s *One Is Enough*, Emecheta’s *Double Yoke* and Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*. They even try to live in an urban atmosphere without the ‘support’ of a man.

The old world adage “A woman may gain the whole world but she would have lost her soul, if she doesn’t become a male’s extension or somebody’s mother,” is thrown to the winds by the new African Woman. The individuality expressed by the new woman of identity can be given in a few words:

The New Woman represents a theory of personhood where the individual exists as an independent entity rather than her kinship relations, where she has a responsibility to realize her potential for happiness rather than to accept her role, where she has indefinable value rather than quantitative financial worth, and where she must reason about her own values rather than
fit into a stereotyped tradition. (qtd. in Frank, Women without Men 7)

The transition of the African woman from the grovelling wife to the independent entity can be traced in a few women authored works such as Mariamma Ba’s So Long a Letter and Flora Nwapa’s One Is Enough. In both the novels, it is polygamy that prompts the heroines to say that enough is enough to their miserable conjugal state. In So Long a Letter, the last straw that broke the camel’s back is Ramatouleye’s husband taking as a second wife the schoolmate of one of their daughters – after thirty years of marriage and twelve children. The long letter is written to her closest friend Aissatou upon the occasion, as she also was a woman who faced such a condition some time back. In One Is Enough Amaka is detested by her ‘in laws’ due to her lack of ability to produce offspring. When her husband Obiora takes a second wife without her knowledge, Amaka rejects her husband and leaves for Lagos, where she becomes a prosperous business woman. She even gains twin boys in a relationship with a priest. When he declares his wish to marry her, Amaka’s rejection is crystal clear: “I don’t want to be a wife… A mistress, yes, but not a wife…As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife, I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body or soul” (132).

The problem that Amaka confronted as a wife – the stigma of barrenness -is a major calamity that could befall a woman in early
African societies. Infertility is a major topic of discussion in many women-authored novels such as *Efuru* by Nwapa and *Joys of Motherhood* by Emecheta. And if a couple is childless, the woman is ipso facto at fault. In such traditional societies, the inability to conceive is nothing short of a crime, and such a woman is better off dead than alive.

Set against such a background is the veneration for motherhood, or woman as the ‘mother’. Hence the black pride in calling the mother ‘Mammy’, another word for mother in all black American works, as well as Emecheta’s *Gwendolen*. The positive stereotype of mother is emblematic –the symbol of black struggle, suffering and endurance. Alice Walker’s concept of black motherhood includes certain attitudes of these women:

Values specifically attributed to Black mother include the belief that….one has within oneself the natural wit and resourcefulness to find strength in apparent weakness, joy in sorrow and hope in what seems to be despair. (qtd. in Worsham 121)

It is this attitude that black women continue to inculcate in their daughters, through generations. The fierce ‘mothering’ quality of the black woman is recorded also by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*. She records that that they place a very strong emphasis on protection. The African mother shields her children from all penalties allotted to them as corollaries to their status in race, class
and gender by teaching them skills of independence and self reliance so that they would be able to protect themselves. The multi-edged weapon of discrimination, i.e. race, class and gender, is thus blunted by means of the strong African mother. These mothers act as mother not only to their biological offspring, but also to those in their community:

African and African American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, other mothers--women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities – traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood. (Collins 119)

It is this communal sharing duties and co-mothering that bind the women of Africa or the black women together in one sisterhood. As the current of life flows forward, this sisterhood includes mothers, daughters and granddaughters and then female relations. They prosper by the support and love that they convey to each other. The bonds are made stronger united by the struggle they experience as black women; and owing to the struggle they overcome the patriarchal cultural fetters.

It is here that one pauses to think of modern enlightened societies that decry patriarchy to the extent that they eschew male support and call upon woman bonding as the only relationship needed
to succour them. Emecheta’s *Kehinde* ends with such a view, where the heroine emerges independent. But in Mariam Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, we find a woman going one step farther, and calling out to her female friend: “you have often proved to me the superiority of friendship over love” (72). Since man is the exploiter and the oppressor, woman rejects any truce with them and moves on to a feminist separatism.

In Emecheta’s *Kehinde* as well as *Destination Biafra* it is an educated and liberated woman who repudiates the sickening and degrading advances of men and sets out for a destiny of her own. Thus we see that Emecheta holds out education as the panacea to combat all the ills in women’s life. Even AkuNna and Gwendolen are portrayed as being allured by the enlightenment of books, since books give women a vision beyond the narrow confines of their lives. It gives them an imaginative power, widening outlook and an awareness of the possibilities that life and the world hold out to them.

The transformative effect that education produces in the lives of the heroines is evident in the way they name their children. In the case of both AkuNna and Gwendolen, the first born is a girl. Both are joyous over its birth and the enlightened parents give them striking names; while AkuNnna and Chike give their daughter the English name ‘Joy’ to celebrate their conjugal love, Gwendolen with more direct exposure to the West, decides to give her daughter the Yoruba
name ‘Iyamide’ which means ‘my mother is here’. In both the cases the woman of the family has begun to acquire a voice indicating a development in the status of the female. This ‘voice’ and the self are a metaphor to indicate the transformation of the African Woman. This is particularly evident in the case of Kehinde - Taiwo relationship. From the beginning of the novel Kehinde’s alter ego or her chi by the name of Taiwo is the ‘voice’ that guides her. At the end of the novel, when Kehinde takes on her house and declares her independence and autonomy, the voice finally says, “Now, we are one” (K 141).

Thus Emecheta’s novels are a loud exhortation to the African woman who espoused womanism in all stages of her transformation in identity. These novels “speak of female solidarity, power, and independence; of the liberation of women’s bodies, minds and spirits. They reconcile feminist aspiration and African integrity; they bestow wholeness and call for rebirth and renewal” (Frank, Women without Men 33).

In brief, African women writers in their works give the vision of the black woman, of power, beauty and endurance. In an interview Mariamma Ba exhorts the women writers:

Societal pressure shamelessly suffocates individual attempts at change…As women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which hems us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men,
we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon! (qtd. in Schipper, Mother Africa 47)

Women novelists write on the complex life situations a woman finds herself in and thus contribute to getting public attention focused on the women’s lot. They have been able to get the demand for social justice for women accepted by the public. A collective appraisal of the women and the remedies that should be attended to for their enhancement in social status preoccupies the writers who conceptualize the issues in the changing social milieu.

Thus Emecheta points out, education seems to be the elixir to put the woman and thus the society on the road to reform. The picture of the enlightened couples of the New Generation given in Bride Price (with AkuNna and Chike), in Double Yoke (Nko and Ete Kamba) and in Gwendolen (Gwen and Emmanuel) prefigures a bright and emancipated future for the African woman. The modern couples transformed by education can be cited as the pioneers of the new mental make-up of the world. Thus if Nnu Ego revolted against patriarchy, and Debbie denounced male dominance and Kehinde repudiated male support, we find their counterparts of the period (AkuNna, Nko and Gwen) acquiring a better life style. “At times women may even have to isolate themselves from men so that integration, when it occurs, will benefit from their strength” (Yongue 89).

As critics point out, in order to achieve true liberation, the African woman must first overcome the backwardness inflicted on her
by colonization and neocolonization, which made her second-class and ignorant. Next she should throw off the male hegemony and the patriarchy with its testimony of a thousand centuries by fighting for her equal share in power and privilege. And finally she should come to terms with herself – overcome her image of the negative binary and create her own niche in the world. Then Africa could proudly boast of a truly evolved woman who has taken in the best of all that the ages had presented her with. Jameson calls narratives a ‘social symbolic act’ and that it brings out the political unconscious of the society. Through literary analysis we thus arrive at an “unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts” (Jameson 20).