Chapter VI

WOMANISM IN BUCHI EMECHETA

If the theory of post-colonialism is a direct confrontation of nationalistic power building through discourses, feminism is another fight against power structures built in a similar way. It is a movement that asks for equal rights for men and women so as to improve the lot of women by fighting against the social structures that impede their growth. But this is by no means an easy task. Male writing has so perpetuated the patriarchal values that it takes a really concerted effort to make the other half heard. Patriarchy is so deeply entrenched in the social consciousness that nothing short of a cultural revolution can ensure a fair deal for women. It is here that we see the relevance of womanism.

The concept of patriarchy as defined by Kate Millet in her work *Sexual Politics* is based on the relationship between the sexes where the male is dominant over the female:

Men’s power, … goes deeper than the power based on class or race, and it is so universal, so ubiquitous and so complete that it appears ‘natural’ and until named by feminists, invisible. It is maintained by a process of socialization, which begins in the family and is
reinforced by education, literature and religion; it also rests upon economic exploitation, state power and ultimately, force (particularly sexual violence and rape).

(qtd. in Humm 27)

Mary Wolstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) triggered the massive movement which branched off into various shades like liberal feminism, socialist feminism, existential feminism, radical feminism and the like. Other modes of categorizing feminism exist such as first wave feminism, second wave feminism and third wave feminism. Psycho analytic feminism and recently womanism also have been employed in feminist studies. Strains like eco feminism are also gaining ground.

It is a fact that women all over the world do not undergo oppression in the selfsame way. Categories of gender, race and class have a great say in the matter. We can see that in the case of the developing and underdeveloped countries the situation of women differs from that in the developed nations, and even in the latter, the degree and kind of female oppression change from one community to the other, according to their race and class. Therefore the tripodal criteria of gender, race and class acquire prominence in the study of womanism.

Sex is equivalent to the biological attributes and gender is the socially produced aspects of masculinity and femininity according to current discourses. It is gender discrimination that women face when
they try to enter historical male bastions. These social roles call for masculine characteristics like aggression, boldness and rationality – those positive qualities that are traditionally reserved for the male of the species. Feminine sex is associated with qualities like irrationality, emotionality, passiveness etc. But such a distinction based on gender is questionable in its binary logic since it is only a socially constructed concept. A notable point is that gender ‘roles’ are not tenable especially in the case of a third world woman, as seen in the case of black women slaves. These constructs are conveniently forgotten in the case of these mules of the world who work as hard as and even more so than their counterparts. Sojourner Truth, a daughter of Africa, says:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And aint I a woman? …I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, no man could head me! And aint I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And aint I a woman? (Busby 38)

Another social construct that has acquired far-reaching effects in social relationships is ‘race’. Racial differentiation, which has been the backbone of colonialist discourse, is also a major distinction in the
status of womankind. Naming a woman black, coloured or yellow-skinned is an act of marginalizing the woman of that category as the ‘other’ group which undoubtedly give the white woman the superior status. Ethnicity is another term of demarcation and it is applied to cultural, religious or linguistic groups with a shared history or social customs. This is also relevant particularly to the African society that has a number of tribes and races. Women of each race are considered an easy target of avenging wrongs by the enemy, which again brings women under the double attack of patriarchy and racialism, as we have seen in *Destination Biafra*.

The third concept in the ‘tri axes’, class, is a group of people who share a common socio-economic position, involving a hierarchical structure which also provides a sense of identity and a relation to other classes (Bryson 55). Feminists like Shulamith Firestone consider women as constituting a class of their own based on their sex, as a group that has to undergo male oppression. But this cannot be condoned fully, since all women cannot be generalized as one class, when women all over the globe come under different economic hierarchies and therefore experience oppression of varying degrees and modes. The lifestyle of the wife of a business tycoon in the First World will definitely be different from the life of a village tribal girl in an underdeveloped third world country. We see in Emecheta’s works that an African ‘been-to’ woman is of a different class (Kehinde), from a village tribal woman (Ifeyinwa). This calls for a distinct approach towards women of lower economic strata.
Likewise, the life of Debbie and that of Nko evolve in different tangents towards the identity of the African mother, according to their different socio-economic background.

The parameters of gender/race/class strike home the elements of essentialism in traditional white feminist principles. The theories put forth by the ‘middle class white women’ are not sufficient to delineate the circumstances of the third-world women who are economically and socially at a lower rung than their European counterparts. A white solipsism, which was the general tendency of feminism in the initial stages, gave currency to the superiority of the white academia over the third world. Therefore the Third World feminists have raised their voice for the need of a separate canon of their own as is evidenced in the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Sara Suleri, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and the like. To quote Spivak, white feminism is blind to the “epistemic violence that effaces the colonial subject and requires her to occupy the space of the imperialists self-consolidating other” (Three Women’s Texts 268).

The first world feminists with their condescension to their lesser sisters, of the colonized lands, depict the double colonization of the women of these once-colonized countries. The privileged position accorded to them by their socio-economic and educated background lets them consider themselves as spokespersons to the women of the underdeveloped world, thus imparting a degree of cultural chauvinism. They upheld the necessity to end all totalitarian
oppression and hegemonic control but were accomplices of the same crime. The ignorance of the real problems faced by these sisters in their actual day-to-day life again renders them inadequate to this task. This is reiterated by Spivak in her essays like “French Feminism in an International Frame” and “Can the Subaltern Speak?” The first world feminists trying to impose their theories on the third world women is in itself a case of intellectual colonization.

The attitude of African women writers is underscored by Filomina Steady’s concept of African feminism. She says that the black woman is the pioneering feminist. Feminism is not a Western import, but a strategy they always held on to, to counter the effects of race, class and sex oppression. According to Steady, true feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant (qtd. in Sratton 13). We see that if militant feminism is a new phenomenon for the West, it was a constant reality for women in traditional West African Igbo societies.

Carolyn Kumah in her paper “African Women and Literature” quotes Mohanty, to say that Western feminism has three basic drawbacks – a. considering women as a coherent group b. unsubstantiated universality c. the binaries within the discourse which presents the Third World Women as ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound etc, while the white feminist is educated, modern and having a control over her person (qtd. in Kumah 5). This can be proved baseless considering the earlier African situation where
women were well able to take care of themselves and their family and sometimes even the society.

African women are by tradition and contemporaneously speaking, better off in significant respects than were their British Victorian counterparts. Thus not only do most African females today already possess the vote, but even illiterate wives are often entitled by indigenous customs to own property of their own. The latter right did not come to married women in England until 1810 and it was not until 1928 that the franchise was gained in equality with men. (Little, Sociology 197)

Though Western Feminism has been branded inadequate to combat the evils of the Third World gender problems, many of the African critics like Abena Busia and Ogundipe-Leslie have acknowledged the validity of feminism in African nations. But the critic Cleonora Hudson-Weems decries imitation and asks for a true liberation by means of the African womanism. The writer Buchi Emecheta, like Flora Nwapa, has rejected the label of being a feminist, which points at the racio-cultural and economic divergence from Western Feminism. Taking up the issue on both sides of the divide, it can be concluded that womanism is a distinct form of feminism that faces issues pertinent to the woman of colour, which is particularly relevant to the black woman. But at the same time the roots of the concept dig deep into post-colonial and feminist theory as
the former deals with issues of the marginalized class and the latter with women’s problems. Thus an analysis in womanism can be made on the basic principles of post-colonial feminism. But the term ‘womanism’ has gained currency due to its ‘feel of inclusiveness’ that embraces all women of colour, regardless of race and class.

Initially the Feminism that spread in the Third World was an exact facsimile of the Western model and served only to bring out a tangled mass of theory and practice, which refused to add up together. Therefore, third world feminists began to speak up for a different stream of thought rejecting the concept of “universal sisterhood”. Many black feminists vehemently opposed the idea of sisterhood. Thus the ‘westernization’ of Third World Feminism that took place in the beginning was soon displaced with angry protests against essentialism. This concept took a firm place in academic circles and gained momentum ruling out the idea that two billion females of the globe can be generalized into one category of ‘women’. The misplaced importance given to the term served to dissuade the theorists from finding the similarities between cultures in their scramble after differences. It should be kept in mind that cultural studies bring up a wide range of intersection and at times, lack of apparent intersection, between cultures. It has brought in its wake analogues and parallels that bring out the enormous variety of societal links and contacts. It is interesting to note how bell hooks rejects the need for any homogenizing in feminist struggles:
[W]omen do not need to eradicate differences to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond together. (Sisterhood 240)

Hence it becomes clear that females of the Third World do belong to the collective group called women but with certain distinct qualities of their own. They are different from their First World counterparts, but there is a definite meeting ground of the two and the Third World feminism has to base itself on the principles of the first world theories too. The two systems should be regarded as being and complementary.

In the Third World itself the patriarchal patterns of domination and the concrete problems faced by women differ according to the varying socio-cultural backgrounds. Trinh-T-Minha puts it comprehensively:

It is indeed devious to think that WOMAN also encompasses the Chinese with bound feet, the genetically mutilated African, and the thousand Indians who committed ‘suttee’ for one royal male. Sister Cinderella’s foot is also enviably tiny but never crooked! And European witches were also burned to purify the body of Christ, but they do not pretend to self-immolation. (97)
Each culture has its own unique social set-up and problems arising from it. They also develop culture specific solutions for such issues, which include the woman question. So the women from all over the underdeveloped world cannot be put into the homogenizing category of the ‘Third World Women’ either. Hence it follows that women of each culture have to be given attention to and studied specifically. This cultural difference becomes apparent in the works of writers like Emecheta and Nwapa.

Speaking of the Globality of Sisterhood in her essay, “Nigeria: Not Spinning on the Axis of Maleness,” Ogundipe-Leslie states, “[t]he oppression of Black women is deeply tied to the variable of race in the history of imperialism” (Leslie 502). The mainstream feminism had more or less ignored the women of colour and the racial oppression undergone by them. They concentrated only on the perspectives and issues concerning the white middle-class woman. The struggles and problems of the women of colour have been marginalized and even degraded in the agenda of women’s movement. They were concerned only with improving the lot of the elite group of the white middle class women. As bell hooks says in “Ain’t I a Woman”, “The woman’s movement had not drawn black and white women closer together, instead it exposed the fact that white women were not willing to relinquish their support of white supremacy to support the issues of all women” (276). The white women refused to give up their white privilege and align themselves in sisterhood with the black woman or
the woman of the Third World. They excluded issues of importance in the lives of the women of colour.

Womanism arose out of the gaping fissures in revolutionary movements that stood for marginalized categories in terms of race and gender. As a concept it emerged from African American community highlighting the issues pertinent to black women. Civil Rights Movement in America and Feminist Movement were found wanting—the former focused on equality for African American men, where women were left in the background and the latter conveniently forgot their sisters of ‘lesser light’. Though the term ‘womanism’ was first used in 1863 with similar meaning as ‘feminism.’ it gained popularity with Alice Walker employing it in her collection of essays, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose”. Since womanism initially dealt with concerns of black woman in the US, it was taken to indicate African American or Black Feminism. But Black Feminism was a term under dispute considering the fact that feminism as a movement ignored the prominent issues of the black sisterhood. Since then ‘womanism’ as a concept has developed into an encompassing version of feminism that crossed boundary lines of race and class.

The theory of womanism created a space for black women and other women of colour who found themselves unable to identify with both white feminism and black feminism. Thus womanism allowed them space for dialogue and an opportunity to air their grievances and create their own movement. Such a theory evolved out of the broad
definition given by Alice Walker in the essays in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”. Walker explains the term womanist as being opposed to ‘girlish’ (a quality ascribed to the female sex by the established male canon). She says that a womanist is a black feminist or a feminist of colour. She is also one who is responsible and capable. She often acted in courageous and willful ways, attributes that freed them from the conventions that limited white women. Womanism is a concept that encompasses women of all races—whatever the nationality. Also they represent energy and stamina—qualities that reinforce their capability. Again it does not ask for separation from the other sex, rather it calls for an integrated outlook. In Walker’s words:

A woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers woman’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist except periodically, for health. Traditionally universal as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink and yellow and our cousins are white, beige and black?” Ans: “Well you know the coloured race is just like a flower garden, with every colour flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you
and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time”. (Walker 233)

This explanation of womanism by Walker can be cited as a radical definition of the concept, even implying that black women are in some ways superior to white women because of their specific black tradition. In the first definition too she constructs ‘womanish’ as opposite to the characteristics ‘frivolous, irresponsible, not serious’ girlishness, thus depicting black women’s experiences in opposition to those of white woman. Here we find womanism as being not only different from but also superior to feminism. Womanism can be concluded to be an affirmative, embracing ideology that celebrates the experiences of black women and women of colour.

Such a distinction is a direct attack against the homogenizing exclusion practised by white solipsism. The white women of the Feminist Movement stand accused of focusing on oppression in terms of gender ignoring issues of race, class and sexuality. Thus womanism becomes the platform to call attention to the multiple layer of oppression experienced by woman of colour especially of the Third World. As reiterated earlier, the triple factors that shackle women of colour are the race, class and gender oppression. They form an intrinsic bond between themselves, working together to fetter the social and personal life of the black woman.

We see the black woman portrayed even in literature as objects derided and considered next of kin to animals. Systematic devaluation
of black womanhood is not just a matter of race hatred; it was a calculated method of social control. Black women have been painted in dehumanizing and discrediting terms. They have been oppressed and controlled by means of such sex stereotyping and libelling of character which eliminated the inherent strength of the African female. Later literary representations bring to light that though the white ‘misus’ supervises over the black servant woman, it is she who actually depended on the capability of the black woman. In the article “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology” Deborah King states, “Black woman’s survival depends on her ability to use all the economic, social and cultural resources available to her from both the larger society and within her community” (303). Due to suppression of their race through history, black women have developed sharp survival skills, such as utilizing everyday strategies of resistance. Because of oppression on count of race, class and gender, the women of colour have their own specific perspectives on reality, as distinct from the white race.

The entry of womanism as part of women’s struggle shows that such liberatory movements must not be “monolithic, homogeneous or centralized in the organization representing one set of attitudes and struggles, rather the movement should include a wide range of groups operating a different context with different priorities and political visions” as quoted by Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis in their text, Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives (Joseph et al 43). The evolutionary nature of women’s
liberation movement and its inclusive nature are evoked in this statement. Woman rights activists should shoulder the responsibility of constantly acting as a critique and questioning of the tenets and principles of the movement.

The agenda of the black sisterhood dealt with the triple edged oppression which is a matter of immediacy for them. Those areas under dispute which were disregarded by white feminists were brought to debate. The complex and simultaneous triangular forces of oppression upon the black woman are the centrifugal force in grappling with black identity. The liberation of black women and the proclamation of this sidelined group as variable and complex parts of womanhood are the ultimate aim of this new stream of feminism.

The struggle of white women is different from that of the women of colour since their experiences are interlaced with such oppressional institutions. Black feminist thought thus represents a multiple state of layered consciousness which requires in depth knowledge of the dynamics of race/class/gender vortex. Womanism emerges as a specific thought that addresses the different aspects of lived experience by the woman of colour, by which they refute the conditions of marginality foisted upon them. Womanist politics thus is a revolutionary ideology with an agenda to address the concerns of the women excluded from the centre.
Most African women writers such as Nwapa and Emecheta have expressed a reluctance to call themselves feminists. Buchi Emecheta states:

I am just an ordinary writer who has to write. Being a woman and African born, I see things through an African woman’s eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African woman I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist, then I am an African feminist with a small ‘f’. I do believe in the African kind of feminism. They call it womanism. (qtd. in Pandurang 118)

Emecheta’s characters, ranging from pre-colonial to diasporic citizens, are representative of the essential characteristic of the African woman.

To quote Cynthia Ward on Emecheta’s feminist themes:

Her novels represent the experience of the African woman struggling to assert herself against historically determined insignificance, a self constituted through the suffering of nearly every form of oppression... that human society has created, a self that must find its true voice in order to speak not only for itself but for all others similarly oppressed. (Ward 83)
The six novels by Emecheta taken up for study depict three different stages of Emecheta’s status as a woman writer as well as the natural progression in the identity of the woman. The titles of each of these novels testify to this fact. *Bride Price* and *Joys of Motherhood*, which represent the precolonial /colonial stage, embody the ironical slant in Emecheta’s writing. It is irony that Emecheta uses as her weapon in depicting her feminine models. The titles of *Destination Biafra* and *Double Yoke* which portray the feminist phase of her career, indicate the mission of exhortation that Emecheta takes up through these works. The duty of the writer as one to give out a clarion call to the masses can be seen in these titles. The name ‘Debbie’ of the heroine which is an acronym of the title, speaks out that the ultimate goal of each woman is an ideal Biafra, an utopia where justice will reign supreme over all men and women. It is the double yoke confronted by the modern woman that Emecheta projects in her next work. *Gwendolen* and *Kehinde*, as the titles suggest, reflect the African woman acquiring an identity of her own as a person who can stand on her two feet and has a say of her own. The gradual acquiring of a specific and individual identity by the heroine is promoted by Emecheta in these novels of the last phase.

Gender, Race and Class are the triple criteria upon which postcolonial feminist works such as those of Emecheta can be scrutinized. These three constitute the spokes of the wheel of social status. How the dominant power tries to exert its superiority can be understood by a close look at the literature of the period. In *Joys of
Motherhood, we can see that as a race. Africans undergo gendering construct and since they are relegated to the status of ‘paid slaves’ their position in the social hierarchy as a class is deplorably low.

There took place definite changes in gender attributes with the arrival of colonialism in Africa. Nnu Ego dwells on the typical African man and the feminized form of it in her husband:

He [the real African] belonged to the clear sun, the bright moon, to his farm and his rest hut, where he could sense a nestling cobra, a scuttling scorpion, a howling hyena. Not here. Not in this place, this square room painted completely white like a place of sacrifice, this place where men’s flesh hung loose on their bodies all day long. (46)

The multifaceted figure of oppression converging on gender, race and class that connived to bring down the African nation as a colonized state and the women as doubly colonized figures finds expression in the novel. The nation and the men are portrayed as an emasculated set, whereas the women take up active roles traditionally reserved for the masculine gender as seen in the case of Nnu Ego raising her family alone.

The hegemonic systems of colonialism and patriarchy subjugate the woman both economically and biologically. As Katrak says:
Certain aspects of household and familial organization can be analyzed with a feminist concept of patriarchy (sexuality, fertility, ideology) while others can be slotted in the analysis of the need to reproduce the labour force on which capitalist products depend on (domestic labour, childrening, socialization). (160)

Women of Africa find their femininity evaluated in terms of their capability of mothering (preferably males) and in the colonial society their status as useful partners in economic realms is downrated. She is circumscribed to the private sphere unlike in the pre-colonial era. Thus the African woman is lashed from both sides by the cruel parameters set by patriarchy and colonialism that conspire to break her back.

A different picture of oppression is seen in The Bride Price. The hero and heroine of the piece are parallel figures: each represents oppression, in fact double oppression within the society. If Akunna’s double oppression is based on Race and Gender, Chike’s is grounded on Race and Caste. The narrative technique employed by Emecheta configures the development and rebellion of these oppressed entities and their final effort for freedom. Here the subaltern group in the novel achieves a marginal space of selfhood and independence. As a product of African culture, Akunna’s marriage is symbolic in that it is a “ceremonial climax of her rebellion against entrenched sexual roles
and other social customs which she perceived as limiting and demeaning” (Brown, *Women Writers* 52).

The novels of Buchi Emecheta set in England depict the African community and the problems faced by them in alien lands. These works -- *Kehinde, Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch*-- combine to form a critique of the lives of black women in the first world. The tri-axes of oppression in terms of race / class /gender could be neatly studied through these novels. By linking the disadvantages of women with the handicaps of poverty, Emecheta places the experiences of her women within a broad context of social injustices in Great Britain, the West as a whole and the Third World.

*Gwendolen* presents the heroine’s experiences as a black in England and as a woman in Jamaica and England. The novel also contains a scathing comment made by Emecheta on the white world which acknowledges the blacks solely for their own benefit. It is also significant for the attitude of the whites towards blacks as projected in it:

...the lower working class black. Life would have been easier if they were all kept that way, in picturesque ignorance from which they could be called upon to display their physical agility in sports or to wail their fate in low haunting melodies, for the amusement of all. (160)

The psychological hegemony wielded by the whites is replaced in the case of the women by that exerted by the males in their life. Even
educated women had to conform to the traditional value system as per their law. Accordingly, Francis does not approve of Adah’s lifestyle in London in *Second Class Citizen*—“The greatest mistake an African could make was to bring an educated girl to London and let her mix with middle class English women. They soon knew their rights” (*SCC 70*).

The double colonization is a heavy yoke that the black woman has to bear. This conspiracy with the whiteman’s culture induces Kehinde in the novel to object to her husband’s polygamous lifestyle which is endorsed by the African patriarchal social setup. The traditional attitude to polygamy is cited wryly by Emecheta in *The Slave Girl*.

But years later Nigerian man solved the problem themselves. A woman could be taken to church and a ring slipped on her finger as easily as a piece of string round a man’s cattle to mark it out from another persons. But that did not mean that the man could have only her. What if he has enough money and could afford more wives, or if the first one married in church had no child? So man would simply take wives when they felt like it; while woman on the other hand, must have one husband and only one. (*SG 173*)

The part played by Christianity in giving women the secondary status is revolted against by Adah too in *Second Class Citizen*: “Those
god forsaken missionaries! They had taught Adah all the niceties of life. They had taught her by the Bible that a woman was supposed to be ready to give in to the man at any time…” (SCC 30).

The double bind of patriarchal tradition and hegemonic colonisation collude to break the back of the African woman by enslaving her to the men in her life. As Emecheta records in her autobiography, *Head Above Water*, women “still stooped and allowed the culture of her people to enslave her, and then permitted Christianity to tighten the knot of enslavement.” (HW 3). Indigenous and imported patriarchy which conspire to produce the collusion of the hegemonic power of imperialism and regionalism, is articulated by Francis Obi: “You keep forgetting that you are a woman and that you are black” (SCC 167).

The double colonization of the black woman is not any less in the African soil. A version of it is represented in Nnu Ego. Once transplanted into Westernized Lagos, Nnu Ego finds that she was subordinate not only to her husband, but even more so to their white employers. *Joys of Motherhood* is a critique in postcolonial feminism in the portrayal of Nnu Ego. Both postcolonialism and feminism overlap at many levels as they speak of the dichotomy of power/powerlessness and superior/inferior aspects that categorize the world order. Parallels can be drawn in both the theories with the white race calling the tune in the former and the male gender doing the same in the latter. The power politics, which sets the rules of the
game, marks out the Black African woman as distinctly the second rate in both the cases. The phases of ‘othering’, ‘ambivalence’ and ‘hybridity’ spoken of as postcolonial conditions demarcate the life of the protagonists. Nnu Ego, the daughter of Chief Agbadi, accepts unconditionally the inferior status in the colonial Lagos.

The hegemonic nature of society inscribes the weaker section of the society with passivity and subjugation. If the black race is branded as such an inferior species, the woman belonging to the black race leads a life akin to animals. To quote Louisa O’ Brien;

Women as doubly colonized, firstly by white colonialism, and secondly by black masculinity are placed at the bottom of a hierarchy of value through the gendered response by the black man to his racial oppression. Those two oppressions are thus irrevocably intertwined: the more feminized the black man is by the whiteman, the more he is inferior and the more he needs to assert his masculinity, by which I mean his superiority, over the black woman. (100)

Such a treatment meted out to women is seen in Nnaife’s relationship with Nnu Ego as well as in the cruel rape of Debbie by black soldiers in Destination Biafra. The fact that Debbie is used both by the African male and the European power in the same manner makes her position as a doubly colonized citizen pitiably exposed.
Debbie is only one woman, in the thousand who lose their honour and whose life is blackened by the atrocities of the colonial and male-authored war conditions. The rape of Debbie, the protagonist, symbolizes the rape of the nation. The war is an “allegory if the imperishable rape of Africa and her continuing trauma and humiliation at the hands of the African rulers” (Stratton 113). This is echoed in the words of Lawal Salihu who taunts her relationship with the English man: “To the Bature you are just a whore, to be used and discarded, just as they are doing to our country” (DB 120). The real condition of the Biafran war and the trauma the women underwent are given in minute and horrifying detail by Emecheta in the novel. “War becomes a theatre not for male heroics, but for female endurance” (Driesen 7).

Even when the male leaders defect and leave the country to the dogs, women like Debbie fight for their nation’s cause. Debbie tells Alan Grey in the end:

I see now that Abosi and his like are still colonised. They need to be decolonised. I am not like him, a black white man; I am a woman and a woman of Africa. I am a daughter of Africa, and if she is in shame, I shall stay and mourn her in her shame. (DB 245)

She embodies the rebellious reawakening of the ‘superwoman’ of Africa. In her we find the African woman who had become alienated from her culture coming to realize the value of her own
cultural precepts. Debbie and Nko symbolize the rebellion of the African woman against the precolonial stranglehold. They are the products of the new generation - one with recourse to education, the illuminating factor.

As the daughter of a well placed bureaucrat Debbie’s foreign education gives her a militant aspect and she wished to make a life of her own without recourse to parental advice. Her sojourn at Oxford University caused a psychological dislocation in Debbie quite earlier. She was not the pliant daughter Ogedemgbes expected her to be and resented her parent’s attitude that matrimony was the next course in life for her- “If her parents thought they could advertise her like a fatted cow, they had another thought coming” (44). She is determined to be equal to men by taking up the profession of an army officer.

It is a similar situation that confronts Nko in Double Yoke. The plot develops along the lines of innumerable questions facing the evolving African woman – should she lose her identity in marriage and be a good woman in the traditional sense, or get a degree and be labelled a feminist, rebellious and a bad woman? Could she carry the double burden and rise up a new ‘avatar’? Emecheta in the novel asks the extremely relevant question at the time – “Which is the right way for the women of Africa?

The answer is depicted in the life of Nko in the novel. Another such character is epitomised in Kehinde. Kehinde is the product of the age of globalization--a diasporic immigrant, living between two
worlds, one native and one adopted. In her co-exist Nnu Ego’s traditionality, Akunna’s rebellion and Debbie’s modernity, traditionality born of ancient African customs and modernity out of the Western ideas.

Thus Nko and Kehinde emerge as winners in the game of life. Emecheta in *Double Yoke* gives the picture of a loser in Madame Edet. She makes a distinct contrast between Dr. Madame Edet and Nko - the former, of the older generation, desperately tries to mould herself into the pattern dictated by patriarchal society on the one hand and the colonialist revivalist religion and the other, the latter of the new generation is completely unfazed by the dictates of patriarchy and colonial culture and is single-mindedly after her one aim of achieving education and have the best of all worlds.

Emecheta gives the traditional picture of womanhood in Ete Kamba’s appraisal of his mother:

> The epitome of womanhood, the type whose price was above the biblical rubies. The type who took pride not in herself but in her man. The type who would always obey her man, no matter what, even if he commanded her to walk through fire, the type that never questioned. (*DY* 37)

It is this typecast/icon that Nko succeeds in breaking. She along with Kehinde could be projected as an iconoclast, since they rejected traditional stereotypes.
A heroine of the older generation who tried to fight for an existence for herself is AkuNna in *Bride Price*. The rebellious stand of Akunna surfaces occasionally in the novel when she is confronted with conflicting situations. In spite of the thorough injection of African beliefs in her, Akunna realizes the need to break free from the manacling forces of her oppressive society despite herself- “Another thought that was going through her mind made Akunna afraid. She was beginning to feel that it was unjust that she was not allowed a say in her own life, and she was beginning to hate her mother for being so passive about it all” (120). Emecheta seems to hint that the women of older generation who accepted the feminine roles prescribed for them were in part responsible for the downtrodden life of the women.

Again when she is kidnapped and about to be forcefully made wife of Okoboshi, Akunna is militant and determined to kill herself if such things come to pass. “She is not going to be a willing bed-partner to somebody she did not love and who had never spoken a single kind word to her in her whole life” (*BP* 141). She manages to narrowly escape being raped that night by Okoboshi by taunting him that she is not a virgin, and that she “has been taught what men taste like by a slave” (144). This is the scene in the novel where Akunna appears to fight for herself, in an effort to protect her womanhood from being molested by the cruel hands of traditional patriarchy- she is even willing to undergo social ostracization and eventual death. The spirited response of soft-natured AkuNna speaks much for the independent nature deeply embedded in the African woman. This
precolonial aspect erased by patriarchal and colonial percepts deserves particular mention.

Emecheta refers again and again to this ‘past’ of African woman in her novels. In *Joys of Motherhood* Nnu Ego in her pitiable circumstances becomes a dislocated schizophrenic who yearns for a return to the traditional securities as well as rebelling against the shackles placed on her by the patriarchal systems. Nnu Ego is pictured as caught between two worlds, unable to go back to the pre-colonial world of her mother Ona and incapable of adapting to the fast changing modern world like her co-wife Adaku. The image the African woman presents is one of strength and power as well as the epitome of the essence of being a woman, a mother figure. Emecheta encapsulates the actuality of the circumstances as opposed to the romanticized aspect of African womanhood in this realistic novel. As a record of the social conditions in the initial stages of colonization of Africa, *Joys of Motherhood* is notable. The change from traditional mores to westernized rules of living that the colonial world has to imbibe can be seen here. The imported cultural values and outlook are passed on to the colonized African, thus bringing on feelings of ambivalence in them, where they constantly oscillate between the old and the new world order. Such a dislocated mindset of the colonized leads to schizophrenic identities and hybrid mullatoes physically and psychologically. This state of affairs is even more pathetic in the case of women, who undergo double oppression on racist and sexist terms.
As a result, it is a complex entity that finally evolves in the guise of the woman of Africa.

The one room apartment they live in, in the urban area is too constricted to allow the polygamous family and innumerable children of the traditional lifestyle. The plight of Nnu Ego is clear in her thoughts: “At least in Ibuza, she would have her own hut and would at least have been treated as befitting her position but here in Lagos …she was faced with the harsh reality of making ends meet on a pittance” (137).

Such a situation is seen in Kehinde too. Like Nnu Ego she too falls into a precarious position once she gives up economic independence:

Kehinde imagined how it would feel to be completely dependent on Albert, a situation that would be quite strange to her. How could she expect Albert to take care of all her financial needs, just because she was married to him? And with all his sisters and relations watching? It was too un-African. (52)

She learns the merits of this Igbo custom to its fullest extent, when her husband and his relations humiliate her, once she is back in Nigeria, a been- to woman without any means of her own.

Emecheta’s autobiographical novels also speak of the strength of women. In spite of the trials in her life as the only working partner,
Adah is a resilient and determined young woman and she also tries to bring to fruition her ambition to become a writer. Again Francis tries to destroy her by burning the manuscript, her precious brainchild. This is the ultimate calamity to occur and she leaves her home for single parenthood of five children.

In raising up her kids as a single mother Adah falls back upon her inherent independent streak and the individuation that her native African society had helped foster in her. “Adah actually, credits that conservative background with having encouraged the development of her independent spirit (Brown, Women Writers 44). Though industrialisation and the consequent economic individualism are western concepts, individuation is a mode of life inherent in many traditional cultures.

Lisa H Iyer states,

It is usually wrongly assumed that African women who choose autonomous paths are choosing ‘western’ paths. While ‘aspects’ of western culture do influence (Emecheta’s) characters, many of these are found in non western cultures as well - they are ‘western’ but not uniquely so. Thus “Western” and “individuated” are by no means synonymous: these women opt for progressive modes of development which are neither inherently Western nor African, masculine nor feminize, but ideally
human. Their process is an eclectic hybridization leading towards transcendence. (124)

Community life was central to all African communities and we come across it in many of Emecheta’s novels. In the early life of Gwendolen in the valley, the love Gwen had as a child for everyone in the community is portrayed as typically African—“She had learned to share her love, to include all of them… because that was the way things were done in Granville (17). Similarly in Bride Price, in the initial chapters, on arriving in Ibuza, the Ibo heartland, the family is enfolded into the traditional customs and practices, and into the communal pattern of life prevalent in African societies, which Emecheta records “is marked by what the psychologists would call the group mind” (BP 11). According to such traditions, Akunna and Nna Ndo are portrayed as suddenly finding themselves the children of a large community teeming with relatives:

To the Ibos and some Yoruba’s in Nigeria, a natural mother is not a child’s only mother…The title is extended to all young aunts or elder sisters, in fact to any young female who helps in mothering the child. It is very important that a child is the child of the community. (34)

Another aspect that helps the traditional African women in their lives, apart from the measure of autonomy accorded them is the sisterhood they enjoyed which was a corollary of the community life they followed. Emecheta speaks of the help Adah receives in London
in  *Second Class Citizen*; they were the confidants or those who taught her the ropes in her early jobs. In a poignant episode, it is her library boss, a lady, who sends her children the only Christmas gifts they receive that year; another friend takes Tiki to school when she is weak from the third child birth. Again  *In the Ditch* is a portrayal of the lives of the ‘mums’ of the world and it is the rendering of an exclusive, female society and the plot moves along the bonds that are formed within the Pussy Cat Mansions. A revolt organized by their women’s groups leads to an improvement of their surroundings. Adah forms lasting friendship with one Whoopey and as the novel ends they finally realize their dream of living in a new apartment.

Similar to Emecheta’s other novels,  *Gwendolen* too builds a world of women where they act as allies to each other. In their hours of need women depend on their trusted women friends and relatives. That only a woman who could understand another woman is evident from the episode of wife-battering in Mrs Odowis’s life when only Sonia helped her. She considers Sonia akin to her sister despite differences in culture. “She had never had a sister in her native land in Nigeria, but Sonia Brillianton was the nearest sister she had” (*G* 62). She pays back Sonia by being with her when Winston leaves her a widow with a daughter impregnated by him.

The relationship of Gwen with other women in Granville, Jamaica, is the unalloyed African scenario of woman sisterhood. All the womenfolk joining together under Granny Naomi to condemn
Uncle Johnny for molesting a little girl is a clear picture of it. Sonia concludes the saga of Gwendolen by symbolically stabbing the dustbin representing Winston Brillianon, the image of male patriarchy, exploitation and betrayal.

Emecheta in *Kehinde* builds a society of women, where men exist marginally. Kehinde’s friendship in London with her bosom friend Moriammo was the envy of their husbands. The most touching case of woman bonding in *Kehinde* is the mother-daughter relationship between Kehinde and Bimpe. When Joshua is depicted as a stereotypical boy-man character, who looks down on all females in general, Bimpe joins Kehinde’s emotions in womanly sympathy. Strikingly, from her childhood onwards, it was Ife and Taiwo, her two sisters (living and spirit respectively) who guided Kehinde in her conflicts.

*Destination Biafra*, which is a work on the women’s experiences in the war, also brings out the essential qualities of the strength and solidarity of the African woman. Their quality of bonding together in adverse conditions and pitting their combined strength against the common problem is focused, on in the novel. The strength given to each other under trying conditions is characterized in Mrs Madako and particularly in Debbie’s mother Stella Ogedembge.

Another such mother figure could be seen in *Double Yoke*. Nko’s mother is a source of wisdom and it is she who gives Nko the
courage to shoulder her heavy yoke and come out victorious in the end. But the university education asks her to trade with her sexuality in order to gain a good degree. It is again her girl friends who come to succour her when she is humiliated by Ete and friends for the relationship. Though they had not liked the affair going on, once they see that Nko is in trouble, they rally around her and sympathize with her saying that “It is easier to get a good degree using one’s brain power than bottom power” (DY 155). The constant support of her friends and mother enables Nko to emerge as a successful academician and mother.

As Stratton points out:

Like Adaku and Amaka before her, Nko negotiates sex out of necessity – in order to fulfill her ambitions. Nko is also, like Nwapa’s heroines, provided with a supportive female community. As well as encouraging her to achieve her goals, her mother and room mates help her to understand her situation. (131)

Again in The Slave Girl, it is the girl’s companionship that makes life liveable for Ogbanje Ojebeta and it is by the encouragement of her mates like Chiago, Amanna and Nwanyinuozo that Ojebeta makes the escape from slavery. The protagonist depicted by Emecheta as being a failure in her life and ideals is Nnu Ego, who had given space only for sons in her life. She is reported as regretting in the final accounting of her own life: “she would have been better
off had she made the time to cultivate those women who had offered her hands of friendship. But she never had the time” (197).

Thus Emecheta’s novels fall back upon women’s solidarity as a prime factor of support for the uplift of their fellow creatures. Such a sisterhood is a movement away from the eurocentric stress on individual rights and liberty, and the collective is defined in terms of a sisterhood of sharing. The agents for resistance are therefore communal and plural.

The crowning glory of the African woman’s life is time and again cited as voluntary motherhood by Emecheta. Like Debbie who takes up an orphan child as a single mother and proclaims the emblem of the African woman, most Emechetaen heroines uphold the sanctity of the role of the mother.

Despite the fact that she was made pregnant by a person whom she despised, Nko in Double Yoke never even thinks for a second about abortion. To her the baby in her womb was hers to love and cherish. She whole-heartedly embraces the prospect of single motherhood, when it appeared as if Ete Kamba had deserted her. If anything, the new status made Nko ‘acquire a kind of independence’ (160). As her friend Mrs. Nwaizu predicted, Nko was “going to be a sure academician and a mother. She was still going to have a double yoke to carry … [she is] a child of this age” (159).
Again in *Gwendolen* it is indeed the impending motherhood of her daughter coupled with her stay in the asylum that reconciles Sonia to Gwendolen. “She must go and see Gwendolen though. After all she was carrying her grandchild….She did not care which colour her grandchild was, as long as the baby and June-June were all right” (187). Thus the hopes of a baby reunite mother and daughter-African motherhood sets all problems at naught. The respect that African woman of all countries gives to the status of a mother is evident in Ghanaian nurse Ana and the Nigerian lady Mrs Odowis, waxing eloquent on the Western ignorance in calling a woman the endearing ‘baby’. Gladys gives Sonia a piece of her mind when she realizes Sonia doesn’t mind her boyfriend addressing her thus:

You may want to be called “Baby”, but I don’t, because I am a full woman in my prime. I am proud to be so and I have my own babies. So why should I feel flattered for a man to reduce me to a state of dependency like a baby? I think some white women like it. But I’ve never yet met a black woman who would not box the ears of a man who called her “Baby”. Baby indeed! (219)

This exhortation is a clear womanistic statement in the novel. Emecheta is glorying in the status of womanhood which is implicitly denied by the image of the baby.

To Adah, Emecheta’s prototype, her children are the inspiration and the means to write. Instead of considering children as an obstacle
to her dream of becoming a writer, she integrates them into her project. Christina Davis quotes Alice Walker’s essay “A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of Her Children”, to disapprove of the western attitude that raising children is incompatible with creative work. She says Adah in Emecheta integrates the profession of a writer into the cultural concept of mother / worker that she retains from Ibo society. Just as the African mother has traditionally planted crops, pounded maize, and done her washing with her baby strapped to her back, so Adah can write a novel with her children playing in the same room. (qtd. in Davis 20-21)

Thus Adah as the African woman is a challenge for the women of the western world, which considers motherhood a hindrance in achieving their potential in other fields. The strong woman of Africa who realizes her capabilities and restructures her life accordingly is seen in the later novels by Emecheta. In Double Yoke, the resourcefulness and the strength inherent in the specimen of African womanhood can be heard in Nko’s words:

Her father was dying and she had promised herself that she would raise her younger brothers and also look after her mother, whilst she was married to Ete Kamba. So nothing was going to come between her and her dreams.
She wanted to prove that what a man could do, a woman could do also. (107)

Ete Kamba realizes that the modern innocent, educated African woman could not be tailor-made to suit his wishes. This is precisely what Nko voices in her reply to him, “I love you. I want you to love me too … But I want you as you are, as against your wanting me as you think I ought to be” (62). It indicates that the new woman of Africa is applying new yardsticks to her relationship with men.

In *Gwendolen*, Mrs Odowis, Sonia’s Nigerian friend in England, is an independent woman who follows her education as well as job and takes care of her children with no help from her husband. The change in attitude in the African woman can be seen from AkuNna onwards. AkuNna is projected as the future African woman, as hoped for by Nnu Ego - “I am beginning to think that there may be a future for educated women. I saw many young women teaching in schools. It would really be something for a woman to be able to earn some money monthly like a man” (*JM* 189).

Colonialism and missionaries brought on education for the natives, even for its women, thereby opening a wider world of knowledge and perspicacity to the females of the African world. As Frank points out “in fact their degree of servitude is inversely proportional to the amount of education they receive” (Frank, *Death of the Slave Girl* 481) and hence whereas Adah, and Debbie and Kehinde are liberated heroines in the end, Nnu Ego, the illiterate is
the most oppressed. Both AkuNna and to a lesser extent Ojebeta are portrayed as being better off than their contemporaries as they are aware of the situation they find themselves in. The joy of book learning is an experience described in the lives of most of her heroines like Ojebeta, Aku Nna and Gwendolen. It is education that Emecheta points forth as the liberating factor in the lives of the African woman.

The hero in *Bride Price*, Chike, is the modernizing principle in the novel, and is depicted as espousing a more or less equal marriage between the sexes, in their life together. She is allowed to have a job and become an independent and self determining partner during their life in Ughelli. Such a transition in the minds of the African male is seen in Ete Kamba too after he is counselled by Mrs. Bulawao. The African womanist believes in her male counterpart and empowers him too. In short, there is an affiliative reorganization in gender roles, of male-female relationships occasioned by changes in the traditional social order.

A progressive and integrated outlook is the motto clearly etched in the novels of the last phase. The psychological stagnancy that shackles the African grandmothers is thrown off by the educated African woman, who takes stock of her situation, evaluating past and present circumstances and attempts to seek the best option of them. Far from being a dislocated, ambivalent entity forced to live in a liminal space between two worlds, Kehinde forms a psychic bridge
across the two cultures. Her return is in Homi K Bhabha’s words, “the return of the diasporic, the postcolonial hybrid” (319). Kehinde now feels at peace with herself and her ‘other’ self, Taiwo, who never allowed her to take suppression lying down. (Taiwo bears a striking resemblance to the spirit of Ona, Nnu Ego’s pre-colonial mother). She makes a striking pronouncement as the curtain falls: “Claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything, it makes me more human” (141).

In almost all her novels we find that Emecheta’s heroines surmount all their difficulties in life and emerge a winner. Her prototype Adah in Second Class Citizen and In the Ditch, can be seen to exert her indomitable will and self-determination in order to break out of fetters posed by a racial environment and psychological female dependency. The final birth of her novel is symbolic in that she has put down all restrictive forces and is forming a new self for herself. As Iyer states: “Adah emerges from her trials a prouder and wiser woman, potentially a melange of progressive African and western cultural modes, increasingly free from the reactionary baggage of both cultures and embarking on a journey of transcendence and the self-definition” (32).

The general trend of African womanist criticism has been to evolve an agenda with a commitment towards the survival and wholeness of the entire people--male and female. Ogunyemi expounds on it:
Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideal of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structures that subjugate the blacks…its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels. (*Womanism* 72)

Womanism is a movement towards harmony and progress. Though it is a liberative movement focused on women of colour, it also aims the essential wholeness of any race--white or black. As a move towards gender equality too, it follows a tolerant ideology in that it promotes the uplift of both male and female. While progress of women is the agenda, the male of the species is also encouraged to come out of the chauvinistic stereotype. The womanist novels though similar to feminist works, are characterized by their own distinctive features as we have seen in Emecheta’s case.

We can conclude that womanism arose as an answer to the plea of the woman of colour in order to address issues that white feminist movement glossed over, especially those issues imperative to the daily life experience of the woman of colour. Racism that the black woman encountered in their collectivity with the white sisters led to the formation of black feminism and womanism. Therefore the liberation of the woman of colour of the Third World from the
multiple oppressional forces of race, class and gender is the ultimate political need of the hour. The black women’s lived experiences depict the validity of the contribution of the past, present and future in their resistance against gender and race constructs. Womanism thereby proclaims the woman of colour as having a history of great complexity and value which promotes their identity as celebratory in the modern world.