Chapter VII

CONCLUSION

The image of the African woman in common parlance is one of undaunted energy, symbolised by the picture of the female of ample proportions backing a child in an oja, weathering the hot tropical sun. Focused research into the actual circumstances of the womanhood of Africa unravels a changing scenario in the development of their social outlook. Historically the woman of Africa underwent a number of psychological transitions as epoch-marking changes swept through the land such as colonization, civil war and self government. These historical events brought in their wake their respective cultural values, whereby the African soil too was influenced.

A yawning gap exists between the concept of the legendary Amazonian woman warrior who forms socio-political as well as a sexual threat to the debilitating hegemonic discourses, and the African women of the later times who are considered living images of their staple food of pounded yam which they spend all their energy to prepare daily (Nnoromale 182). This points to a drastic cultural change that affected the African woman in the interim period. Colonial process that lasted from the 15th century to the first half of the 20th century was a brutal encounter of the African people with the
European powers, which sought to instill into them the enduring ideologies of racial supremacy and ethnocentrism. The colonial discourse with its rigid norms of Victorian patriarchal constructs dealt an even heavier blow on the African woman. It is an obvious conclusion that colonization had an impact in changing the mentality of the African woman.

The western rule that the woman should be a meek and passive second sex was ingrained even into the free spirited African woman of the early times. This was deeply engraved into the woman’s psyche through discourses and the woman of Africa had to overcome it during the period of decolonisation. Their Western counterparts’ fight against it became the massive movement of Feminism. But as Filomina Steady says, feminism is the determination to be resourceful and self-reliant and as such it was a strategy black women always had recourse to even from precolonial times. Such a womanist standpoint was the basic feature of the African woman and their liberation only needed a revival of the old spirit deeply embedded in them. In Literature of Her Own, the feminist Elaine Showalter speaks about the phases of feminism--feminine, feminist and female--as the different stages of development in woman with the progression of time. She also says that these three phases are reflected in the career of a single novelist (Showalter 192). On analyzing Buchi Emecheta’s work, as in Bride Price, Joys of Motherhood, Destination Biafra, Double Yoke, Gwendolen and Kehinde, we see that the three phases of feminine, feminist and female attitudes are evident in her works and
characters. Each of these novels exemplifies the feminine, feminist and female phases of Emecheta’s writing, thus bringing out the identity of the women characters in them.

The heavy patriarchal ambience in which the protagonist of *Bride Price* AkuNna finds herself is the perfect setting for the feminine plot in the novel. The daily indoctrination of the Law of the Father and the consequent stereotypical womanhood she is made to conform to are described adroitly by Emecheta in the first novel. In *Joys of Motherhood* we find Nnu Ego lapsing sometimes into insane behaviour, an act of subversion, which is a major topos in feminine novels. These conforming women in feminine novels realize themselves only after their death, which is the only release from the feminine role. In Nnu Ego’s case, after her death though many people appealed to her to make women fertile, this was left unanswered.

Going a step further, in Emecheta’s feminist novels the urge to “break from the yoke of biological feminity also expressed itself as the wish to be male” (Showalter 192). It is this change in attitude that we find reflected in Debbie in *Destination Biafra*. Her androgynous character in which she wishes to become like a man and therefore dons military trousers is an example of the feminist aesthetic. The face of the African womanhood that begins to question society’s straitlaced rules for women is to be found in Nko in *Double Yoke*. In her one finds elements of the superwoman of Africa, taking on her familial responsibilities and at the same time wrestling out a life for herself despite overpowering male harassment. Finally the third phase where
the woman is openly and insistently an uncompromising female, where man is optional, is seen in the last two novels *Gwendolen* and *Kehinde*. Here the woman has got rid of all the mental and emotional cobwebs of inferiority and inhibition. Now the woman knows that she is a person in her own right and has space to live in this world. Gwendolen, the successor of Nko, is a refugee from emotional and sexual malcontents in her life, but she finally seeks out a wholesome life for herself. Kehinde, introduced as a First World immigrant, finds her foothold in the adopted mother country and declares herself independent.

The six novels this dissertation is concerned with have been studied within the framework of postcolonial feminism. 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 theories with the white race calling the tune in the former and the male gender doing the same in the latter. Thus the power politics which sets the rules of the game marks out the Black African woman as distinctly second rate in both the cases. The postcolonial conditions of ‘othering’, ‘ambivalence and ‘hybridity’ can be traced out in the life of the protagonists of these novels.

Though the pre-colonial African woman had relatively more independence than her sisters of the white race, colonialism resulted in incorporating the ‘superior’ tenets of Victorian England into the
African race. Because of this turn of events, even the African woman found herself liable to acquiring economic, political and individual rights that white feminists advocated. Therefore, the feminist theories and the correctives offered by them are in part applicable and at the same time in part irrelevant. As Minha says: “today it is more convincing to reject feminism as a whitewashed notion and a betrayal of roots and values or vice versa, to consider the promotion of ethnic identity treacherous to that of female identity or feminism” (105).

It is attested through cultural studies that the Black Woman and her problems occupy a specific category in itself as being a different race. Black African Feminism is thus a study of the characteristics that separate the African woman as a distinct race. In order to understand the position of the African woman and her social dilemma, it is imperative to have a working knowledge of the social history of the women’s status through a historical time span.

Considering the fact that Emecheta’s novels studied in this dissertation are centred on the episode of colonialism, the historical study is also divided into pre / post colonial times.

African studies have proved beyond any doubt that the women of the precolonial times were more independent and had greater autonomy over themselves than their colonized successors. Women were economically, politically, socially and spiritually at par with and at times superior to men in Africa in those times. The African women especially the Igbo women (featured in Emecheta’s works), were economically self-
reliant. They took up farming and trading in the produce for their up-keep. The woman’s associations and collectives gave them a social say and the dual-sex political system, gave the woman power to control their affairs and occasionally to punish the man in his wrong-doings. The spirit-medium and the religious cults where a woman was chosen as the priestess (as in Chielo in Things Fall Apart) testify to the respect women commanded in precolonial Africa. But colonization brought in drastic changes in the situation. The British ‘indirect rule’ demolished the dual sex political system and the political power began to be wielded by the males only, according to Western standards. The capitalist labour system and the rules ascribed by it made woman a secondary labour power. Christian marriages also were another form of suppression through the bondage of foreign rules. The relative autonomy of polygamy in the traditional settings gave way to a degenerate and oppressive version of it in the colonial times. Thus as a group, African women came under a terrible blow under colonialism. Under colonial conditions the woman of the Third World occupies the lowest rung of dependency. `Molara Ogundipe Leslie cites six mountains which bow down the African woman’s back- oppression from outside like colonialism and neocolonialism, the traditional structure: slave based and communal, backwardness, man, colour and herself (African Woman 107). Colonialism had brought in the additional burden of racial distinctions into the society, which made the woman inferior to both the white masters and black husbands. Though many of the African tribes were matrilineal, male
supremacy in households was accepted. Colonization did little to improve the status of women, and they were kept backward in ignorance and illiteracy. Education imparted to women was nondescript compared to the scientific and technological information given to men. During the postcolonial period, the situation of African woman changed only marginally. The effect of the western dogma and principles held on to the conscience of the African people as a hangover. The clash of old and new principles and the subsequent mental dislocation of the people can be clearly seen in the literature of the period.

Patriarchy too exerts its hegemonic control over women in all socio-political levels in society. This is reflected in the Mother Africa trope that Florence Stratton attacks in her work, Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender. She speaks of the silencing of the female by portraying them as passive objects with mere biological roles. The idealization of their status of motherhood is supposed to act as a compensation for their subservience throughout life. But this depiction falls short of reality, as the African woman is one with a say of her own, and one who takes her stand at the ploughshare by her man. In spite of all her abilities she is trampled upon; if by no fault of hers, she is found infertile. Barrenness is the worst crime a woman could be accused of in Africa. The present conception of African women as silent and passive beings is a legacy of colonialism. The supposed qualities of the ‘weaker sex’ are attributed to their counterparts in the ‘Dark Continent’ too,
instilling rigid patriarchal values along with racial concepts into the people.

Any in-depth theorizing of Black women could be done only within the conceptual framework of race, class, and gender dynamics, as reasoned earlier. Thus the historical context and the ensuing socio-cultural experiences of the woman could be effectively understood. Considering the fact that racial discrimination is of paramount importance in their socio-cultural fabric, the concept of gender is intertwined with racial identity, thus bringing forth African women as a racialized class.

As a class too the African woman is exploited by the patriarchal modes of production. The secondary stature of women’s labour was reflected in their wages. Another instance of women as proletariat in production is seen in their role as offspring machines used to produce the next generation. That these children too belong to the man after birth attests to the ‘worker’ status of the woman, since their products are alienated from them. Their labour has been bought at a much lower wage than their male counterparts and the colonialists enjoy the surplus value. As women, their reproductive products too are not their property. Thus for the Black women issues of gender are intermingled with those of race. “Black women cannot choose between their commitment to feminism and the struggle with their men for racial justice” (Mac Kay 267).
As said earlier, anthropological studies have highlighted the high status of women in African societies. But subsequent research has pointed out that African culture also was built along the patriarchal lines, but they allowed women their space in the social and individual life. Precolonial Africa pictured in the literary stage as in Nwapa’s *Idu*, and *Efuru* put forth this quite succinctly. This liberated phase of the African woman is also depicted in the initial part of *Joys of Motherhood* which describes the ‘Mother’s Mother’, Ona. The negative side of the African society with the inflexible hegemony of patriarchy is depicted through the story of AkuNna in *Bride Price*. The transformation in the wake of colonization is seen in both the rigid Victorian patriarchal norms and capitalist exploitation imposed on the African community. The psychological alienation of the African people from their traditional patterns of living can be traced in Nnu Ego’s life in Lagos. Caught in this transition stage the African woman of this time suffered under the negative effects of the traditional system like polygamy, not to mention the stigma of infertility and the economic and cultural deprivations of the colonized urban state.

The changing flux of time brings about new values, in the place of old ones--we see Nnu Ego who tries to conform to the outdated values perishing in ignominy and and Adaku, her rebellious co-wife who embraces the new order, achieving personal and emotional liberation from the tyranny of traditionality. This woman of the new order also decides to educate her daughters as Nnu Ego did her ‘male’ children. Here she figures as a pioneering figure that opens the door of progress through
education for women. Thus education— one of the boons brought to the African land by colonization— paves the way for the changing nature of the African culture and its women too. This education is cited as the escape route for women in *Bride Price*, but the inexorable hold of traditional taboos drags down the morale of the women in the novel. Women of the next generation symbolized by AkuNna’s daughter ‘Joy’, are hailed as possessing hope for a better world.

Debbie in *Destinaton Biafra* is a striking example of this aspect of the evolution in the African woman. If the traditional set-up relegated woman to a place beside her man, the Western ideals convert the African Woman into a separate individual in herself, who is able to reason out her life and ideals on her own. This can be seen in Debbie’s stance in her nationalistic zeal in the Biafran war. A striking transformation is to be seen even in Debbie, in the course of the plot. Though we find her voicing the Western values of feminism rigorously, at the end we are also pleasantly surprised to see Debbie upholding the major tenet in African womanhood, that of mothering. The African woman may have lost sight of her ideals under the fog of novel and enchaniting ideas, but finally she seeks out her way into a rational reunion of both the values. This rebellious aspect of womanhood finds an illustration in Nko, a girl from the rural village who transforms herself into a single mother and an able academician. The African woman is pictured as finding her feet seeking values both from the West and from her own country’s native hometruths.
The transformation in the African culture reaches its crescendo in the postcolonial times with the immigration and the resulting transculturation in the border zones of the First and Third world. In *Kehinde*, Emecheta displays the diasporic section of Africans in Britain who inhabit the interstitial space or the ‘in-between’ border of being African and English. They constitute the hybridized cultural community, assimilating both the African and European values. The ambivalence, the consequent dislocation and the adaptation that they go through are clearly pictured in the novel. Kehinde, the heroine, comes to terms with her life, rejecting forever the degrading effects of polygamy of the traditional system and accepting the liberal outlook of the modern era. *Gwendolen* is initially set in the West Indian Jamaican island featuring the creole identity of the protagonist. The central figure in the novel is the scapegoat of traumatisation of her gendered identity by paternal figures. This laceration of her self is brought into relief by the racial ambivalences that she has to undergo in the diasporic First World. Yet Gwendolen is figured as a character with strength to overcome all odds and carve a niche in the world for herself. Racial and economic problems are secondary to sexual annihilation that she has to confront, yet she learns that as an African mother she could find meaning in a future of independent existence.

A cross sectional study of Emecheta’s novels reveals the image of African womanhood from precolonial through neo/postcolonial Africa. This analysis brings forth the cumulative identity of African womanhood as one of resilient strength and personhood. The
independence of outlook which was part of precolonial African women may have dimmed with the stranglehold of patriarchy in traditional settings as well as the instilling of Victorian constructs into the familial structural pattern. But the woman of Africa evolves into a maturer being with the help of education – she wields western tenets such as feminism to fight back and reassert her individuality, but also does not forget the percepts of her land such as the value of mothering. The final overview of the Woman of Africa brings forth the womanhood at ease with her African identity, and who has at the same time overcome the debilitating forces of traditional patriarchal hegemony. The New African woman is able to visualize an independent and progressive mode of life for herself. The Womanist has come to fore.

Womanism is the feminism born in African milieu which is at the same time political and pragmatic. It espouses the positive and ebullient nature of the African female. Though the women of Africa declined political status in the early part of the century due to oppressive colonial regime, they too played an essential part in achieving independence. Today they are aware of the democratic political climate that offers them unique sociopolitical opportunities. Nigeria can be cited as the best example of this case (Mikell 407-408).

The gradual transformation in the women of Africa can be distinguished unmistakably through this sociological reading of Emecheta. Further research is imperative at this point in the the field of culture studies since the progress of women of colour indicates an
advance in the status of womanhood. Sidelined as social inferiors, black women have an enormous repertoire of experience from which they could act as mouthpieces of all that are marginalised and discriminated against. Womanist thinking also puts forward the viewpoint that all women, whether English, African, Indian or Chinese, have their own distinctive racial identity. This angle in women’s studies could raise the perspectives of culture and humanity to a higher realm.

Culture undergoes change by means of various historical events that engulf the community. Women, the traditional repositories of culture, hand over these evolutionary traits to the succeeding generations. Women’s studies focuses on the crises faced by the lesser acknowledged sex of ‘mankind’, and is instrumental in tracing out the social conditions and the evolutionary history of the community in a given culture. In the contemporary scenario where gender, race, class stratifications play a vital part, the significance of women in judging social indices is foregrounded. The ‘de-colonised’, ‘wo-man’, of the present Africa is a product of the history of her land and culture. She enshrines a spectrum of qualities collectively termed ‘womanism’ in the field of literary studies today. The magnum opus of Emecheta’s literary work gives ample scope for a wholistic study of the woman of Africa. As cited by Lidia Curti,

The use of Black women’s language and cultural experience in books by Black women about Black women
results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures. (12)

Literary womanist studies help to focus on specific issues that shape the lives of women of colour. Thus women’s studies highlight the fact that these women have a definite history, not to be ignored and that this should stimulate an awareness pertaining to progressive consciousness. It could be stated that womanism validates the history of women of colour, labelling them as valuable and complex. In short, it celebrates the lives and achievements of black women and women of colour. Equipped with education, resilience and the will to survive, African women can scale great heights making meaningful contributions to society. Like their fictive counterparts these women vie with men in contributing to the making of the culture and its development. African womanhood is on the path to self realization and forging an identity of her own.