PREFACE

The pronouncement by Simone de Beauvoir that woman is not born, but made caused a maelstrom in the field of woman’s studies (Beauvoir 301). Her epoch making chef-d’oeuvre, *The Second Sex*, brought to the attention of social as well as feminist critics the mental and psychological configurative index of the woman.

The training of Sophie in Rousseau’s educational treatise, *Emile*, delineates the ‘making of the woman’ by teaching her household duties and responsibilities like sewing, cooking and by making her acquire the accomplishments necessary to attract and enchant the male. Novels by writers of the 18th and 19th century, like Marcel Proust’s *A la Recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*) or Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* are also vindications of the status quo, which is exposed by Maggie Tulliver in *Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot. Virginia Woolf in her momentous work, *A Room of One’s Own* undertakes a strong defence of the Rights of Women. The self sacrificing image of womanhood in western literature was revolted against by the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen, who in *A Doll’s House* made Nora, the heroine, slam the door against all oppressive forms of patriarchal hegemony.

The literature of the East also assigns only a subsidiary role to women although we see them sometimes exalted to the role of a goddess in the house. Aurobindo’s *Savitri* and Soyinka’s *Lion and the
Jewel reveal to us respectively the Indian and African attitude to women. The women we see in Pearl S. Buck’s novels represent another facet of the East’s attitude to women.

Tangential to such portraits is the trope of women seen in all cultures from time immemorial like the women in Khajuraho temples, Eve in The Bible, Circe in The Odyssey and today’s statues of liberty like the beauty queens that parade the world contests. The diversity in such projections circumvents a vision of simple totality in defining women. Women as a ‘construct’ criticised by feminists, warrants closer scrutiny since mere western discourse cannot essentialize womanhood into a uniform entity.

In most of these images an underlying similarity in the basic qualities embodied by women can be discerned--that of passive submissiveness and the obedience of the western doll, the silent enigma of the Egyptian Sphinx and Italian Monalisa, the restraint of the Muslim women and the conventionality of the women of Far Eastern Japan and China. But the beautiful prostitute / femme fatale archetypal woman is a stark contrast to the epitome of goodness in the Indian Devi, African chi and the European Madonna. Finally, one is confronted by the overwhelming question evoked by the plethora of such symbolic images and representations – What is WOMAN?

The topic selected for investigation is ‘Imaging African Womanhood: A Womanist Reading of Selected Works of Buchi Emecheta.’ The study envisages an examination of the concept of
womanhood in relation to the works of the Nigerian woman writer Emecheta. One reason behind my choosing a Nigerian woman for the case study is the relative scarcity of research in this area. Ancient civilizations like those of Egypt and India have always stood foremost in scholarly and archaeological study, but general African civilization, despite being equally ancient and richly endowed, has not received the scholarly attention that it eminently deserves.

In spite of its popular myths and legends extolling the culture and the people, Africa, the exotic land which gave birth to literary figures like Othello, and Hypolyta, inspires curiosity rather than admiration even today. The foreign incursions from the time as early as 14th century resulted in renewed interest in the land. The early conception of Africa as a dark continent of untrodden jungles and uncivilized people who followed strange customs has now sunk into oblivion, as the aftermath of archeological excavations and sociological investigations in Africa. The ancient civilizations that existed in Africa and the social customs and traditions they followed are all part of the culture studies pursued today. One of these recent fields of study is the literature belonging to the different historical periods. Various anthologies have been conceptualized and compiled which have brought the African civilization to the centre stage. One such volume that aroused my interest is *Daughters of Africa* by Margaret Busby—an anthology of various kinds of writing by women of African descent. It contained a comprehensive survey of the literature written by the women of Africa from 15th century BC to the
present times. The life and experiences of African women through the ages are presented in the book. It was an eye-opener, in the sense that it showed me African literature in the right perspective and provided rare insights to my mind.

_Daughters of Africa_ contained works by both the mainland African women writers and also by the African-American women writers. On reading this book it struck me that though the African-American literature (which is basically, a disporic stream of writing) has been studied and criticized on a large scale, the African literature per se, had taken a back seat in the attention of critics. Another point that caught my notice is the relative prominence of women writing in African-American literature and the conspicuous scarcity of women writers in African literature. For instance, the names of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and the like leap to sight in the African-American section of the library but Black African literature derives its name from an almost exclusively male canon comprising Achebe, Ngugi, Ekwensi et al. Very few women authors take their place on the bookshelves and this has led to a comparative dearth of authentic material on African woman. Images like “Mother Africa” and the African-American ‘superwoman’ give the women of Africa a mystique, which I felt I should explore to the roots in order to understand the concept of the African woman. This was reinforced by my own fond memories of the Africa which I enjoyed during my childhood days spent in Nigeria. The folkoric songs and native tales and the custom of the Nigerian women carrying the children in an ‘oja’ on their back as they
worked fascinated me in those days. So I decided to take up the study of the African woman and her culture for my doctorate.

My reading of African women’s writing and sociological data on African gender related customs brought to me a confusing and conflicting mass of information. The initial works from Africa especially those by the white writers and some early male writings sold the idea that the colonization was beneficial to the African continent. But later Black writing from the continent vehemently refuted all such claims. The extreme case of Negritude movement is an outburst of this indignant denial. Studies on colonization brought to light many of the atrocities committed by the whites on Africa. However it should be acknowledged that the colonized gleaned some benefits too out of the association. Another fact that struck me was that the issue of the woman question or the gender concerns of those times were given only marginal consideration in the socio-historical studies of the period.

The mythical and legendary stories of the Great Queens of ancient Africa provide general information on pre-colonial women. Studies on the effect of colonization on women came up late and are relatively small in output. Some sociological works like those of Obbo and of Hafkin and Bay as well as Stanlie and Busia are illuminating and informative works on the subject. But these sociological surveys are not conclusive since they depict the impact of colonization on women as both emancipatory and detrimental to the African woman. Another major source of the history of African women is the women writing
produced in Africa. It is my intention to investigate among other things the supposed equality of sexes in old Africa and the effect of patriarchy on African women as reflected in the works of Buchi Emecheta.

The concept of ‘womanism’ has begun to catch the attention of postcolonial feminist critics. It is an apt term to describe the study of the African woman, considering the fact that ‘womanist’ was the epithet ascribed initially to the strong woman of Africa. She can be seen as a coloured, doubly colonized member of the second sex, yet to my understanding, the African woman, retains her womanist characteristics. As the concept of womanism does not have an independent stature outside the wide umbrella of postcolonial and feminist theories, a project on the African woman is a natural product of this theory within theory.

The works of Buchi Emecheta faithfully record the gradual transformation and evolution of the image of the African Woman. It is proposed to undertake an indepth study of the works of Emecheta so as to piece together the image of women from what she says about the second sex in her works. This investigation is based on selected novels; the novels I have chosen for the study are the following: *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood* (from the precolonial /colonial period); *Destination Biafra* and *Double Yoke* (from the postcolonial times) and *Gwendolen* and *Kehinde* (which form diaporic narratives). These works are functionary in pinpointing the gradual transformation and evolution in the image of the African woman.