CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The line of enquiry undertaken and presented in the foregoing chapters relates to a study of the black female portraiture in the novels of African and African-American women writers. Black women writers from the United States of America, Morrison, Marshall and Walker and black women writers from West Africa, Emecheta and Bâ are studied in juxtaposition to explore the black female experience presented in their portraits of black women. As advocated by Carole Boyce Davies, a cross cultural study has been made, clubbing together the continental and Diaspora writers.

The study of the black female portraits by these writers reveals how different they are from those by men. As a result of the radical change in sexual perspective in the works of these writers, an entirely new picture of women emerges before our eyes. Black women who were marginalized in the writings of men and who were forced to hover in the background are placed centre-stage. They are the actors and “activists” and the focus is entirely on them. The Central figures in all the novels chosen for this study excluding Walker’s The Third Life of Grange Copeland are women. Some of the novels
are even titled after the principal women characters like Morrison’s *Sula* and Walker’s *Meridian*. Other than the thematic centrality of black woman protagonists, we find black women illuminating their own situations, reflecting on their identity and growth and their relationship to men, children, society and history.

The study of the black women portraits also shows how black women writers from both the United States of America and Africa have moved away from the stereotypes and present the reality of black women’s lives in their particular geographical areas and cultures. Instead of the stereotypes perpetuated in White American Literature and early Black literature from both the continents, we are shown well-rounded characters. Black women writers from the U.S. have effectively destroyed the stereotypes of black women prevalent in Anglo-American and early Black literatures. The images of the “mammy” and “matriarch” in the Southern White literature and “the tragic mulatta” in Black literature have given way to complex characters pulsating with life. The stereotypes have been broken and destroyed forever in the portraiture of Sethe, Eva, Sula, Silla and Pauline by African-American writers. In the black female portraiture by the West African writers, Bâ and Emecheta, the cloyingly idealized portraits of women as “supermothers” are replaced by portraits of women who reflect the actual life lived by the African women. Writers from both
the continents have veered away from the path of the stereotypes and have portrayed black female experience in all honesty and truthfulness.

In the portrayal of black female experience by these women writers from West Africa and the U.S., we see similarities as well as differences. For instance, the practice of polygamy, the stigma of barrenness, the pressures placed on African women to produce male children and the many customs and taboos that restrict their independence are areas of experience peculiar to African women. Skin colour and the privileges that go with it, and the western concept of beauty are areas of experience unique to African-American women. What is common to both of them is their experience of sexism, enslavement and colonialism. Sexism is dominant in both the cultures. There has been indigenous slavery in Africa as depicted by Emecheta in her The Slave Girl. The horrors of slavery in the U.S. have been graphically portrayed by Morrison in her Beloved. Women from both the continents have experienced colonialism. African-Americans have borne the double yoke of racism and sexism. Black women writers have exposed the sexist oppression, which is a common factor in both Africa and America. So long, African-American writers did not talk about sexism as they thought racism was to be opposed first. But these women writers show how racism and sexism work together to oppress women. Black women from Africa too expose the sexism inherent in their societies and the
oppressive nature of customs and mores, which help in male domination. All the portraits studied reveal all these facets of black experience.

As motherhood has been thrust on women as their sole function, this singular experience of women has been analysed in the mother-portraits of African as well as African-American writers. Emecheta through her portrait of Nnu Ego and Walker, through her portrait of Meridian question the entrenched notions of motherhood in their societies. Though motherhood is glorified in African societies, in actuality, women are reduced to the “function of mother.” They are forced to bury their sense of self. Nnu Ego’s sacrifice goes unrecognized and her society justifies it through the saying, “The joy of being a mother is the joy of giving all to your children” (JM 224).

One cannot miss the irony intended in the title The Joys of Motherhood. As for Walker’s Meridian, she is hounded by a sense of guilt for having sinned against the maternal tradition in giving up her child for the sake of higher studies. As she too internalizes the values of the society like Nnu Ego, she suffers. She finds peace only when she expands the meaning of the word mother to mean all who create and save life. Some of the mother-portraits by African-American writers become conspicuous by their very nature of being terrible. They are the killer-mothers. They kill out of mother love. Morrison’s
Sethe in *Beloved* and Eva in *Sula* kill their children. Sethe is a complex mother figure who refuses to be a victim of slave masters. A slave woman, she challenges the system of slavery that negates the notion of motherhood by killing her child. The powerful Eva is a matriarch but she escapes being a stereotype by the very complexity in her character. She protects her children but at the same time she does not hesitate to kill her son when he becomes a drug addict. Marshall's portrait of Silla in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* presents another angle of viewing motherhood. A Barbadian immigrant, Silla has to pursue material stability at any cost to fight racism in the U.S. Marshall penetrates the social stereotype of a matriarch in her portrait of Silla. The analysis of the mother-portraits draws attention to the psychological exploration done by the writers in their portrayal of mothers.

If black women writers challenge the accepted notions of motherhood through their mother-portraits, they expose the blatant sexism in their societies through their portraits of wives. Their wife-portraits show the dominance of sexism in both the cultures. The study of the portraits of wives reveals the problems peculiar to each culture. While the African wife's freedom is curtailed by customs and taboos that make her subservient to her man, the African-American wife is treated brutally by her husband because of his powerlessness to attack the whites who oppress him. Most often African-American wives are
deserted by their husbands. As a result, there are many female-headed families and black women are denigrated as matriarchs.

The portraits of wives by African writers point out the status of wife in African societies as a mere possession. The much-idealized mother in the portraits of men, is in actuality a slave, a mere possession, as a wife. Emecheta exposes well the injustices inflicted on women by traditional customs and mores through her wife-portraits. The plight of widowed women who are inherited by their brothers-in-law is portrayed through Ma Blackie in *The Bride Price*. The customs to be observed during widowhood which deny widows autonomy and hygiene and life in a polygamous family are illustrated well through Blackie's portrayal. The custom that a man may make an unwilling woman his wife by kidnapping her and cutting off a lock of her hair and the prohibition against women marrying descendents of slaves are shown through the plight of Aku-nna in *The Bride Price*. Nnu Ego's portrait in *The Joys of Motherhood* illustrates well the stigma of barrenness, the difficulties faced by women in polygamy, ill-health due to repeated pregnancies and the pressures on women to produce male children. The portraits of the Senegalese writer, Bâ, too draw attention to the oppressive nature of the traditional customs and how men make use of customs and religion to satisfy their selfish needs. She points out through her portraits how wives are exploited and abandoned by their husbands.
in the name of culture and religion. Bâ's Ramatoulaye in So Long a Letter reflects bitterly on marriage which for a woman means the amputation of her personality and her dignity making her an object in the service of her husband, his family and friends. If Emecheta uses the slave girl symbol to drive home women's subordinate status, Bâ implies the psychological imprisonment of married women in the custom of seclusion of widows. The portraits of Bâ and Emecheta prove that feminist issues are important to African women and belie the myth that African women have sufficient freedom. Their portraits of wives further reveal that women do not support polygamy and that the sufferings of women are not only due to colonialism but also due to the traditional mores and customs of their particular societies. They expose the portraits of women by men to be unrealistic by presenting the female reality of woman as wife in Africa. The reality of the second class status accorded to wives and the way men cleverly make use of customs for their selfish ends are shown clearly in their wife portraits. The plight of African-American wives is probed in the portraits of Marshall, Morrison and Walker. They scrutinise the relationship between black men and women and the societal forces that strain marriage. Walker's portraits of Mem and Margaret, the wives of sharecroppers, highlight the twin evils of racism and sexism. They are the willing victims of their husbands' rage and frustration under the dehumanizing system of sharecropping. In their willingness to help their husbands retain a semblance of
manhood they submit themselves to brutal treatment at their hands. The portrait of Celie in *The Color Purple* exposes the sexist oppression of wives by their husbands. Morrison's portrait of Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* shows the slow disintegration of her marriage with Cholly because of her lack of self-esteem. Marshall's portrait of Silla in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, unravels the struggles and misgivings of a Barbadian immigrant wife who is bent on making her life in America, a success. It is a highly rewarding experience to study the portraits of black wives from three different segments of black society in the U.S.

Other than the portraits of mothers and wives, this study has taken up the portraits of rebels for analysis. They are the women who rebel against traditions and customs in their societies because of their ability to think. They are seekers of selfhood and sometimes they go in search of their roots too. Emecheta's Kehinde rebels against the Ibo definition of wife and mother and redefines herself in new terms. Another rebel portrait by the same author shows a young Ibo woman's rebellion against custom that makes a woman a mere possession. Morrison's Sula is different from others as she is wholly engrossed in "making herself", defying the Bottom community's insistence on marriage and motherhood. Walker's Meridian discards enforced marriage and motherhood but ends up as a saint who is devoted to the welfare of the blacks. The study of the rebels points out that education and job have made these
women think and be independent. The study also draws attention to the fact that the rebels act out their rebellion in their own communities and even if they go out, they come back to their communities. Only the rebel portraits of African women writers show that rebellion is possible for African women only in alien lands. For instance, Emecheta's Kehinde leads an independent life only in London and not in Nigeria. Her Aku-nna has to leave the rural Ibuza for urban Lagos to marry a man of her choice. Marshall's Selina and Avey Johnson are a class apart. As they are engaged in the struggle to know themselves, they go in search of their roots to the Caribbean. The study helps us understand the fact that rebellion is possible for them only because of their education. They do away with the definitions of society that restrict their freedom and autonomy and emerge as individuals who assert their selves. African as well as African-American writers reveal their commitment to explore female experience. They also provide role models through their portraits of rebels like Meridian and Kehinde and instill a positive sense of female identity by portraying women who journey towards self-realization.

Black women writers present not only a rich variety of women portraits but also use a variety of styles and techniques in telling their stories of black women. All are good storytellers too. One is impressed by Morrison's narrative strategies, imagery and her poetic prose. A master craftsperson, she uses
different narrative strategies with dramatic effect in portraying her protagonists’ lives. We come to know about Sethe’s crime, the events that lead to it and her tormented psyche through flashbacks, fragmented narration and multiple points of view in her Beloved. A spiral format is used in Sula. The primer is used as prefatory material to The Bluest Eye and to introduce chapters recounted by the omniscient narrator’s voice. The extracts from the primer are used as epigraphs to contrast the ideal white family life and the reality of Black family life in the racist U.S. The typographical running together of the words is used with special effect to show how meaningless and inapplicable the ideal primer life is, in the Black American context.

Alice Walker is an equally conscious craftsperson and she uses the technique of “quilting” as she calls it in her Meridian to show us the evolution of Meridian. Walker stitches together the non-chronological sections making a quilt like pattern, thereby linking the past with the present. A chronological structure is used in The Third Life of Grange Copeland. The Color Purple is presented in the epistolary style and black folk English is used with good effect to show the inner core of Celie and the oppression she has suffered.

As for Paule Marshall, her special forte is the delineation of character. She has sculpted complex women characters in the Barbadian-American
cultural context. Marshall stresses the need for the black people to understand their history and rituals in order to retain their wholeness. Rituals, especially dance, is a special technique employed by her to convey her message. Her protagonists' search for roots and self-recovery are effected through rituals. The rituals form part of the text, part of the transformation of the principal characters, not a mere backdrop. Avey's physical and psychological journey to find her roots are shown through rituals in *Praisesong for the Widow*. Avey's participation in the "Beg pardon" ritualistic dance enables her to reconnect with her ancestors.

The Nigerian Buchi Emecheta too uses rituals as a narrative strategy. The cultural mores and rituals depicted in her novels do not form a mere backdrop but become a force strong enough to affect the lives of her protagonists. Karla F.C. Holloway points out "Ritual is not only a literal aspect of African women's literature it is a textual strategy as well" (145). The thickening of events in *The Bride Price* showing Aku-nna's growth from ignorance to realization of the actual status of woman in African society and her rebellion are told through the depiction of a series of rituals in the Ibo society that make a woman's status firmly subordinate to that of the male's.
Bà uses the device of the personal letter, the epistolary form in her *So Long a Letter* to show us Ramatoulaye's inner conflicts much like Walker who uses the same form to lay bare Celie's trauma. The device of the letter-diary form helps Ramatoulaye to analyse her situation as an abandoned wife and that of other women in similar situations and make a new beginning.

It is interesting to note that some of the novels by these writers can be read as *bildungsroman*. Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *Second-Class Citizen*, Walker's *Meridian* and Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* are all novels of personal development. The plots of these novels are substantial *bildungsroman*. *Second-Class Citizen* shows Adah's growth from naivete and ignorance to self-realization and independence. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* beautifully portrays the development of the young girl Selina into a woman within the rituals and mores of the Barbadian-American cultural context. *The Bride Price* narrates the growth of Aku-nna from an inexperienced childhood to an awareness of women's subordinate status in the Ibo society and to her final rebellion. *Meridian* shows the growth of Meridian from a stereotyped existence to a meaningful existence in the service of her people. Rosalind Miles has pointed out that women writers have successfully developed "a female *Bildungsroman* as a long overdue and necessary counterweight to the long
tradition of the Portraits of Artist as a Young Male" (qtd. in Gomez, 253). This is true of the black women writers taken up for this study.

Another interesting thing is some of the portraits of these writers reflect the author's own experiences and character traits. Adah's experiences in The Second-Class Citizen are loosely based on Emecheta's own experiences in England. Readers have found similarities between Meridian and her creator Walker. But Walker says: "Meridian is autobiographical only in the sense of projection. Meridian is entirely better than I am..." (Tate 184). Walker's life as a sharecropper's daughter has enabled her to record with authenticity the hopelessness and despair in the lives of sharecroppers in her The Third Life of Grange Copeland. Paule Marshall's observation of her mother's powerful use of West Indian dialect in her discussions with her Barbadian friends has helped Marshall in forging a forceful language for Silla in Brown Girl, Brownstones. As for Morrison, she says: "I don't use much autobiography in my writings. My life is uneventful. Writing has to do with the imagination." (Tate, 127)

It is pertinent to note here that all the women writers taken up for this study have been labelled as feminists. As women characters are central to their works and as issues concerning women and their relationship to men, women, children and society are explored in their works, one would tend to look
upon them as feminists. But these writers do not react favourably to this labelling. Walker dismisses the label and calls herself "a womanist". She defines this term as:

a woman who loves other women.... Appreciates and prefers woman's culture, woman's emotional flexibility... and woman's strength.... Loves the spirit.... Loves herself. Regardless.

(Matuz, 402)

Emecheta too rejects the label, stating:

What I am doing is writing social documentary novels, based upon what I have seen and experienced in my part of Africa. If the men folk think this is feminism, then I am a Feminist. But whatever they think, would not deter me from writing about what I see and how I feel. (Kunapipi 114)

Though these writers refuse to be categorized as Feminists, the novels taken up for this study show plenty of evidence of their feminist sensibility. They are concerned with sexist oppression in their respective societies and they expose it. By recording the injustices meted out to women, Bâ and Emecheta protest against sexual inequality. African-American writers point out how sexism and racism work hand in hand in the suppression of women. African writers show how traditional customs have been helpful in the effective
subordination of women. These writers not only talk about suppression of women but also deal with other feminist concerns. They probe mother-daughter relationship, view mothering from different angles, in different social and cultural backgrounds. They also portray female friendships, puberty, and female adolescence and probe heterosexual and lesbian relationships. Walker even points out to lesbianism as a way out from male oppression in her *The Color Purple*.

The writers taken up for this study show through their women portraits that black women are thinkers and feelers, not mere automatons. Their protagonists are not always role models to be emulated. They have flaws. They are very human. Even Meridian who is an exemplary woman is a “flawed revolutionary” (Tate, 184). They display the entire gamut of emotions - they quarrel, cry out in anguish and despair, dominate over others, submit themselves to brutal treatment, rebel against restrictions placed on them as women, behave outrageously and sometimes ascend to the level of a saint. We have the enigmatic Sula, the terrible Eva, the meek Mem, the assertive Silla, the pathetic Nnu Ego – the variety is simply astonishing. The writings of black women writers, indeed, exhibit a vast portrait gallery of women as mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, friends and whores. Experiences hitherto not exposed and examined are dealt with in their fiction.
Black women writers also weave a rich tapestry of cultural details – a delight to the social scientists. The narrative and the cultural details blend so well that the cultural details form a part of the narrative tapestry. Their characters are firmly rooted in the culture and tradition of their societies. So, in order to understand the rebellion of Aku-nya, Kehinde and Aissatou one has to understand the culture from which they come. To appreciate the sufferings of Mem and Margaret one has to know the hopelessness in the lives of sharecroppers in the Southern U.S. To empathize with Pecola’s yeaming for blue eyes one should understand the insidious influence of the white cultural values on the black psyche. These varied characters are from different backgrounds, different regions and different cultures and classes. A rich variety of the black women portraits are available for this study because of its cross-cultural nature. The writers explore all aspects of black women’s experiences, their weaknesses, strengths, failures, eccentricities and peculiarities. They explore the innate humanity of their characters. Their accurate and penetrating portrayals of black women in their novels accompanied by different narrative styles reveal the inner reality of black women so far hidden in the male portrayals of women and in white literature about black women.
As a woman researcher I find this study to be an enriching experience. Oppression of women is rampant everywhere, though the nature and the degree of suffering varies. As it has become a global concern, this study is a relevant and contemporaneous one. The portrait gallery of black women can be further widened by including fringe portraits of prostitutes and lesbians. Lesbian portraits are available in the writings of Gloria Naylor and Audre Lorde. The study can also be extended by including more black women writers from other parts of Africa and by crossing the boundary of genre too. For instance, Bessie Head from Botswana and Ama Ata Aidoo, a playwright from Ghana, can be studied along with these writers. Such studies and researches will go a long way to help set the record right, which the black women writers have taken up as a mission.