CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Portraits of women have figured in literature but so far they have reflected only man’s view of what women should be. What women have actually felt and experienced has not been heard in literature. The dominant normative experience represented in literature is male. Traditionally, in most fiction, men are the central characters and women just background figures. When male writers depict female characters, they often do it from a fiercely male perspective. Women are seen primarily in relation to male protagonists who occupy central positions in their works. Generally, African and African-American male writers in their depictions of female characters conform to the above stated observations.

In the writings of male writers from Africa we see that women are either cloyingly idealized or shown to play only secondary roles. For example, in the poetry of Leopold Senghor from Senegal, African womanhood is idealized — woman as “Super Mother” and “Symbol of Africa” — and this picture ignores the disadvantages of the African woman’s day-to-day life. In Chinua Achebe’s novels women play subordinate roles. He has portrayed only male heroes and
male protagonists. Though Uchendu, one of the characters in his *Things Fall Apart*, glorifies motherhood by pointing out that "Mother is Supreme," in reality, women lack social and political power. Male writers subscribe to the prevailing notion of motherhood and define ideal womanhood in terms of motherhood. In short, the female reality of woman in Africa is not portrayed properly in the writings of male writers.

Black women portraits from the United States of America too did not reflect the reality of black female experience there. Male writers portrayed only male heroes and protagonists and ignored the complexity and vitality of black female experience. In the Anglo-American literature in the South, the black woman image was that of the "mammy", "concubine" and "the conjure woman." The strong, kind, nurturing mammy was the dominant black female image. In the 1960s the image of the black "matriarch" flourished. In Afro-American writing by both male and female, the image of 'the tragic mulatta', persisted for decades. From William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1850) to Nella Larson’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), a literature of the tragic mulatta emerged – stereotype par excellence.

Black women writers from both the continents, Africa and North America, were faced with the task of doing away with the "uniformly undesirable
stereotypes." For a long time, in both Africa and the U.S., the black women writers were either sidelined or ignored by male writers. Their contributions to literature went unrecognized. They remained "the unheard voices." In Africa, very few journals and scholarly magazines bothered to write about African women writers. Only now, in recent years, African women writers have been discussed at length and more and more African women writers have arrived on the literary scene. In the U.S. too, the scenario was the same. The world of black literature had traditionally been the world of black man's literature. The contributions of women to African-American literature were ignored and women authors belittled or suppressed. Calvin C. Hemton in his *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers* points out, "Except for Gwendolyn Brooks, and perhaps Margaret Walker, the name of not one female protagonist was accorded a worthy status in the black literary world prior to the 1970s" (40). With the publication of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman*, the black male literary dominance over females weakened. Since 1970, with the publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Maya Angelou's *Why The Caged Bird Sings*, black women writers have come to the forefront of African-American literary creativity. Through their writings they have challenged the hegemony of the male perspective.
Black women writers have succeeded in bringing the “exact Voice of the Black Woman” (qtd. in Gates, RBFR 1) in literature, a voice so far suppressed and sidelined by men in their writings. Black female stereotypes have been probed and destroyed and the realities of black women’s lives in Africa and the U.S. have been portrayed. In the words of Alexis De Veux, they were engaged in

A struggle to express ourselves. To be heard. To be seen. In our own image. To construct the words, to name the deeds. Confront the risks. Write the history. (qtd. in Hemton, 55)

Their struggle to be seen and heard brought into literature a special knowledge of their lives and experiences that is different from the descriptions and portrayals of woman by man.

Of these women writers from Africa and the U.S., two women novelists from West Africa and three women novelists from the U.S. are chosen for this study of Black women portraits. Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria) and Mariama Bâ (Senegal) from West Africa and Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker from the U.S. are grouped together for the purpose of making the study quite representative and comprehensive. Morrison, Marshall and Walker are from different regions of the U.S. Paule Marshall explores the Barbadian – American experience, Walker sets her novels in the South and Morrison in the Midwest.
Therefore, there are three angles to the study of black female portraits in the U.S. Buchi Emecheta, an anglophone writer, from Christianized Nigeria explores the lives of Ibo women under the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. Mariama Bâ, a francophone writer, probes the status of Muslim women in Senegal. Two angles to the study are therefore obtained in choosing these writers from West Africa. All these writers are brought under one group and studied since black women from both Africa and America have experienced sexism, enslavement and colonialism and their roots are the same. Further, Carole Boyce Davies in her *Black Women, Writing and Identity* asserts the need for a cross-cultural or comparative approach to Black women writers:

.... the Cross-cultural or comparative approach to Black women writers is an important way of advancing our understandings of Black women's writing. (33)

Therefore, black women writers from West Africa are studied together with black women writers from the U.S. cutting across the boundaries of geography, time, place and culture. This study builds "bridges between continental and diaspora writers" (Davies,1).

In the writings of black women writers, the complexity of black female experience is exposed and explored through a variety of characters, many styles of life and many different ways of approaching the issues. As the black
women novelists chosen for study are from two continents, a brief biographical introduction to these writers, their works and the influences that shaped them into the writers they are, would be a fitting preamble to the whole study.

The most gifted and prolific of the African women novelists is the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta. She was born in 1944 in Yaba, near Lagos, Nigeria and has been living in England since 1962. Orphaned as a young child she was taken in by foster parents who mistreated her. At the age of ten she won a scholarship to the Methodist Girls' High School, but by the time she was seventeen she had left school, married and had a child. She accompanied her husband to London where he was a student. Aged twenty-two, she finally left him unable to endure his constant physical abuse and his resistance to her attempts at independence. She took an honours degree in sociology while supporting her five children and writing in the early morning. Her first two novels *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1975) are based on her own experiences as a single parent. Her next three novels *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) dramatize the problems African women encounter in a traditional, male-oriented society. Her later fiction *Destination Biafra* (1982), *Double Yoke* (1982) and *The Rape of Shavi* (1983) met with less enthusiasm from reviewers. Her autobiography *Head Above Water* (1984) won critical acclaim. She has written a number of

Emecheta has won several awards: Best Black Writer in Britain (1978), Jock Campbell award (1979) and Daughter of Mark Twain – an American Literary Award. According to Katherine Frank;

... Emecheta's novels compose the most exhaustive and moving portrayal extant of the African woman, an unparalleled portrayal in African fiction and with few equals in other literatures as well. The entire realm of African female experience can be found in these books... (Draper, 709)

Emecheta's inspiration to write came from a number of sources. The stories told by women in moonlight sessions influenced her. Her grandmother was a keen story teller and Emecheta recognised story telling as an important event. Emecheta regards story telling as women's profession. She says:

"What I am trying to do is get our profession back ... women are born story tellers. We keep the history. We are the true conservatives - we conserve things and we never forget. What I do is not clever or unusual. It is what my aunt and my grandmother did, and their mothers before them. (Draper, 708)
Five of Emecheta's novels are chosen for the study of black female portraits from West Africa: Second-Class Citizen (1975), The Bride Price (1976), The Slave Girl (1977), The Joys of Motherhood (1979), and Kehinde (1994).

Mariama Bâ, the Senegalese writer, was born in Dakar, Senegal in 1929. Brought up as a Muslim by maternal grandparents she studied Koran during school holidays. She was educated at Ecole Normal for girls in Rufisque, unlike many other women of her generation. A pioneer of women's rights, she became involved in several Senegalese women's organizations. Her commitment to eradicating inequalities between men and women in Africa led her to write So Long a Letter (1980), her first novel, which received much acclaim and admiration. The novel originally written in French was translated into sixteen languages and won the first Noma Award for publishing in Africa. Bâ died tragically in 1987 in Dakar, just before her second novel, Scarlet Song (1981), appeared. Both the novels are taken up for study as they explore the female condition in Africa, especially, in the Senegalese Muslim society dominated by attitudes and values that deny women their proper place. Bâ believed that the “sacred mission” of the writer was to strike out “at the archaic practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our precious cultural heritage.” Her novels succeed admirably in her mission. (Foreword, SLL)
Paule Marshall was born in New York in 1929 of Barbadian parents and was raised in a close-knit West Indian community. She studied English literature at Brooklyn College, worked as a librarian and a writer for a black magazine travelling to West Indies and Brazil on assignments. West Indian culture and dialect are prominent in her writing, as are the conflicts that face Caribbean-American immigrant families like her own. Paule Marshall has stressed the influence of her mother’s kitchen community on her writing. The gatherings of women in her mother’s kitchen were important to her as a writer. Commenting on their impact on her, Paule Marshall says:

I was always so intimidated as a little girl by the awesome verbal powers of these women. That might be one of the reasons I started writing. To see if, on paper, I couldn’t have some of that power. (qtd. in Christian, BFC 105)

Her very first novel Brown Girl, Brownstones published in 1959 (reissued by The Feminist Press in 1981) abounds with such power. This novel “paid homage” to the women who first instilled in her the gift of oral art. Brown Girl, Brownstones broke new ground in its portrayal of a Caribbean immigrant family, in its use of a black girl as its protagonist, and in its exploration of gender dynamics within the black community. In 1961 she published a collection of short stories, Soul, Clap Hands and Sing and in 1969 she published The Chosen Place, The Timeless People and in 1983 her third novel, Praisesong
for the Widow. Though Marshall wrote in the 1960s her work remained unknown for a long time. In 1970 her story "Reena" was published in Tony Cade Bambara’s anthology, The Black Woman, and the literary presence and power of Marshall were finally established. In an interview in Essence magazine (May 1979) Marshall says:

I’m concerned about letting them speak their piece, letting them be central figures, actors, activists in fiction rather than just backdrop or background figures. I want them to be central characters. Women in fiction seldom are. (qtd. in Washington 324).

Women figure prominently in her writings because their power shapes her work. Marshall has won numerous prizes and awards including the prestigious Mac Arthur Fellowship in 1992. Two novels by Marshall are chosen for this study: Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959) which ushered in a new period of female characters and Pralsesong for the Widow (1983), where Marshall explores the loss of identity.

Toni Morrison, American novelist, editor, essayist and critic was born of strong-minded, self-reliant parents in 1931. She has achieved national prominence and popularity and won numerous awards including the Pulitzer and Nobel Prize in literature. She is one of the few novelists who is also an
editor. As senior editor at Random House, she has brought into print the autobiography of Mohammed Ali and Angela Davis, Tony Cade Bambara, Henry Dumas, and Gayl Jones. She grew up in Lorain, Ohio. It was neither rural south nor urban north but a working class community of many ethnic groups. Morrison did not learn the inferiority imposed on Southern blacks but the value of ethnic differences. From her parents who were educated and who encouraged her reading she gained strong role models of women and an intense dislike for white people. Morrison got her Master's Degree in Cornell.

Talking of *The Bluest Eye* and why she wrote it, Morrison says:

I wrote it because I had not read it before. There were no books about me. I didn't exist in all of the literature I had read. When I reached this moment, the writing was important because I had to bear witness to what was not recorded. This person, this female, this black did not exist 'centre-self.' (qtd. in Russel, 92)

Morrison in her works gives voice to the black women side-stepped by the writing of the day. Like Marshall, who stresses the influence of her mother's kitchen community, Morrison says: “I do feel a strong connection to “ancestors,” so to speak.... They were the culture bearers”(McKay, 398). Morrison has been praised for her poetic prose, her vision, her perceptions of black pain and the way in which she constructs narrative.
Talking to Thomas Le Clair, in an interview, Morrison lists what her novels should do:

They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment. (Le Clair, 370)

More specifically, she says she writes about love—“how people relate to one another and miss it or hang onto it” — and “how to survive whole.” Although she dislikes being called a “poetic” writer, when asked what she thinks distinguishes her fiction, she replies, “the language, only the language”(Le Clair, 373). Morrison sees language as an expression of black experience, a means of revelation, and a force to unify her work. Repeatedly in interviews, she stresses that “the language must not sweat,” “the seams must not show.” Morrison complains that “most contemporary books” are “not always about anything”; her own are about self-knowledge and human relations within the family and neighbourhood. Three of Morrison’s novels are chosen for study: The Bluest Eye (1970) which relates the story of a little black girl whose desire to change her brown eyes to blue in order to be accepted by the whites results in tragic consequences, Sula (1973) which explores friendship between women and Beloved (1987) which portrays the emotional aftermath of slavery.
Alice Walker, novelist, short story writer, essayist, critic, poet and editor was born in Eatonton, Southern Georgia in 1944, where most blacks worked as tenant farmers. Much of her fiction is informed by her Southern background. When she was eight years old, she was blinded in the right eye and spent most of her childhood withdrawn from others because of her disfigurement. Walker commented later that due to this incident, she began to really notice relationships. She attended Spelman College on a scholarship, where she was active in the Civil Rights Movement and later graduated from Sarah Lawrence in New York in 1965. She began her literary career as a poet. A prolific writer, Walker is specific about her task:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual, the survival whole of my people. But, beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of Black women. (qtd. in Evans, 479)

She acknowledges her mother’s influence on her creativity in her “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens”:

... through years of listening to my mother’s stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories – like her life – must be recorded.... She had handed down respect for the possibilities –
and the will to grasp them... Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength – in search of my mother’s garden I found my own. (TWI 521–522)

Walker stresses the importance of bonds between women as a means to contend with racism and sexism. Three of Walker’s novels are chosen for study. They are, The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) which chronicles three generations of a black sharecropping family and explores the effect of poverty and racism on their lives, Meridian (1976), a tale of perseverance and sacrifice set during the Civil Rights Movement and The Color Purple (1982) which won the Pulitzer prize for fiction in 1983 and made Walker a literary celebrity.

In the writings of the black women writers chosen for study women are featured in complex and multiple ways. They are the central figures, not just backdrop figures as portrayed in the novels of male writers. Marshall states emphatically: “I wanted women to be centres of power. My feminism takes its expression through my work. Women are central for me” (qtd. in Washington, 324). Morrison, in an interview, talking about her women characters to Christina Davis, says:

Well, in the beginning I was just interested in finally placing black women center stage in the text, and not as the all-knowing,
infallible matriarch but as a flawed here, triumphant there, mean, nice, complicated woman, and some of them win and some of them lose. (Davis, TM 419)

In the writings of Marshall, Morrison, Walker, Emecheta and Bâ, the female figures hovering in the wings and background are brought center stage and an entirely new drama emerges as a result of this radical change in sexual perspective. The experiences and voices of women are well represented in their novels. Male writers have never adequately represented women characters and female experience in literature. But the black women novelists have rectified this omission through their works.

Talking about the similarities between African and African-American writers, Morrison tells Christina Davis in an interview:

There’s a gaze that women writers seem to have that is quite fascinating to me because they tend not to be interested in confrontations with whitemen – the confrontations between black women and whitemen is not very important, it doesn’t center the text... (Davis 418).

In the words of Walker:

Twentieth-century black women writers all seem to be much more interested in the black community, in intimate relationships, with
the white world as a **backdrop**, which is certainly the most appropriate perspective in my view. (Tate, 181)

The truth of the statements of these prominent writers is very well revealed in the novels under study. Emecheta considers African-American women writers to be the best; Flora Nwapa feels Walker's definition of 'Womanist' writer fits her as well; Walker praises Emecheta for her creativity, 'a writer because of, not inspite of her children.' Black women writers not only acknowledge each other across the boundaries, there is also a sort of common goal in their creative endeavour i.e. women should be brought center stage and the silenced black woman must speak for herself. Therefore the grouping together of the representative black women writers from the two continents for the purpose of study is a perfectly legitimate one.

The aim of the enquiry of this project is to point out the complexity, variety and richness of black female portraits from both Africa and the U.S. The black female characters in the portrait gallery of black women writers chosen for this study reveal that they are not stereotypes but well-rounded ones. The outline of the study may be sketched thus: The second chapter is devoted to analysing the portraits of mothers and their influence on their daughters. Many aspects of mothering are analysed through the mother portraits of Nnu Ego, the mother who "gives her all" to her children; Sethe, the slave mother; Eva Peace,
the killer mother; Silla, the aggressive, domineering mother; Pauline, the indifferent mother; Mem, the meek but loving mother and Meridian, the mother who gives up her child for the sake of higher studies. The psychological explorations done by the writers in portraying the mothers and the style and technique employed by them to present the female experience of mothering are also touched upon. The third chapter examines another aspect of womanhood i.e. wifehood. The study of the portraits of wives shows the dominance of sexism in both the cultures – African and African American - and reveals the problems peculiar to each. The relationship between black men and women is also scrutinized. The study shows a spectrum of wife portraits ranging from the meek and submissive to the domineering, indifferent and independent. In the next chapter the portraits of rebels and women who move towards self-realization are studied: Aku-nna in Emecheta's The Bride Price, Kehinde in the novel named after her, Sula in Morrison's Sula, Selina in Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones and Meridian in Walker's Meridian are all rebels. Almost all the rebels are educated. Education and financial independence help them in their rebellion. There is also the urge in some of them to find their roots and selves. In the characters of Aku-nna, Meridian and Selina there is a clearly seen evolution that makes their stories bildungsromance. As Calvin C. Hemton says, “there is a freshness of style, sensitivity and language, a boldness of subject and stance, and a newness of treatment imbued with
exciting promise"(43) in the works of the black women writers chosen for this study. The range of experience explored and presented by them is breathtaking. A study in juxta position of the women portraits by the black women writers from Africa and the U.S., promises a richer and more intricate picture of the conflicts and aspirations of black women and their relationships to black men and women than an examination of a single black writer could provide.