INTRODUCTION

Africa has had a long and glorious tradition of literature even before the advent of the “lettered” Europeans on the continent. As in the other cultures and in other countries, literature in West Africa was basically oral and folk oriented, the tradition stretching back into time immemorial and its impact is evident on its modern literature. By and large modern African literature seems to be a replica, an imprint of the oral literature of its own past in form and content. The modern writer finds it easier to communicate through modes he is familiar with and often the subject of his creative writing is a proud and nostalgic recall of his racial past. One may even define the African literature of the modern times as a crystallisation, a codification of the non-lexical literary tradition of Africa. It is generally in the form of songs, fables and parables and is transmitted by word of mouth and through well-established traditions, customs, practices and habits. Change is the law of life, but tradition embodied in and communicated through literature not only helps to prevent a violent erosion of values in life but also aids the processes of a slow but steady evolution of a society and its culture.

The western powers came in as traders. To stabilize their political base and colonial domination they let the Missionary Organizations propagate Christianity and proselytize the native African. The African was lured to church through such humanitarian institutions as hospitals and schools. He was converted, healed and educated not entirely for humanitarian purposes but mainly to serve the political and economic ends of the colonial power. However, the liberal Christian missionary
education has had a beneficial effect on the native African. He was reawakened to the glories of his own past. He rediscovered with pride his self-hood and identity. The muted tongue grew articulate and the illiterate masses attained the gift of communication through letters. Modern African literature is thus in a sense the product of the encounter between the new values preached by the Western colonial powers and the reawakened ardour of the African for the glory of his own past.

It must be acknowledged that modern literature in Africa has developed out of colonial experience coming to reinforce indirectly or through a cultural mediation, the radical tradition of indigenous heritage. Each region of the African continent has had its own social, historical and political experience that is reflected in a variety of ways in the works of modern African writing in English.

In the West African literary scene, Nigeria stands foremost in its creative endeavour with an abundance of literature in all its major forms. It so happens that the most gifted and creative writers, both men and women of Anglophone Africa, are Nigerians and with the advent of independence their pent up enthusiasm for self-assertion and self-expression has been channelised into creative writing in a prolific way. Nigerian independence in 1960 has resulted in a Renaissance of which the emergence of literacy is a vital aspect. Political independence and nationhood have awakened the dormant Nigerian writer, resulting in a spurt of literary activity.

Igbo writers have always dominated the West African literary scene, influencing other writers. Even a cursory look at the West African literature in English shows that a major portion of imaginative writing has come from the Nigerian writers
of the Igbo tradition. The Igbo society like every other society has its own customs and practices, which define the status, role and behaviour of individuals inhabiting it. Time-honoured tradition has a very strong hold on the average Igbo. Novelists like Achebe, Amadi, Ekwensi, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta illustrate some of the interesting customs, superstitions and religious faiths of the traditional Igbo society.

**Position of Women in Africa**

Woman’s position in the traditional situation has to be understood with particular reference to the Nigerian Igbo society. The African tribal tradition has assigned subordinate position to woman in its social set-up. However important the functions and duties of a woman are, she is always relegated to the background. And women have accepted, without any overt protest, this subordinate and quite often menial role assigned to them by men, despite the fact that they have a "kingdom" of their own with both its obligations and its recognition. In most African societies, cultivation of the land is primarily the responsibility of a woman. As queen of the household and the family, woman reigns supreme in matters concerned with the preparation of food, which has its own customary significance and rituals, connected with fertility. Important matters like the marriage of the young people and a host of concomitant obligations could not be decided upon and satisfactorily resolved without her being consulted and without her active involvement. Yet, in this predominantly man’s world, the woman was placed on the subordinate level.

This inferior and often ignominous position a woman was assigned in traditional African society can be inferred from the shadowy women characters we
come across in African novels like *Things Fall Apart*, *The Only Son*, *The Concubine* and *The Great Ponds*. The narrow and conservative African social set-up enforced this subordinate role for a woman and the least sign of revolt was severely suppressed.

A woman is obliged to subordinate her interests and desires to the collective will of the community. The narrow social norms constrained her to obliterate her “self” and separate identity. A self-assertive female character demanding her rightful place in the social set-up is unthought of and hence does not find a place in these novels. The women characters are quite charming in so far as they play their assigned roles as playthings in the hands of their men. They are no more than shadows flitting across the scenes of the drama of human life wherein the interests of the males hold sway. The novelists of West Africa in general and of Nigeria in particular failed to recognize the possibilities of projecting in their creative fiction a female protagonist of a truly heroic character. They could not free themselves from the compulsions of tradition. One could find an occasional Ihuoma of Elisha Amadi’s *The Concubine* or Chiaku of *The Only Son*, or Anna of John Munomye’s *Obi* as a highly individualised character, but the only fulfillment such a woman is permitted to seek is the attainment of the position of wife or Mother. The women characters of these novels, as a rule, “work out their lives subordinated to the caprices of their men folk.”¹ In spite of the occasional glimpses of individuality in their character, they are not heroic women for they have neither vision nor revolutionary ideas guiding and

---

motivating their lives so as to become truly heroic. They do chafe at restrictions imposed on their will and attain a sort of individuality for themselves and even secure a sort of equality with their men-folk, yet they conform and subordinate themselves to the dictates of society and the men.

Traditionally much ambiguity surrounds women in African societies. The varied impact of Africa’s historical, sociological and political backgrounds is significant to a literary analysis of the female characters. The novelists of Senegal attempted to analyse the importance of the role of motherhood in the society against the background of social obligations to the family, children and community. The most salient feature of the Senegalese fiction is the woman’s relegation to the house. The Senegal society is very much dominated by the Muslims. The degree of isolation and confinement is greatest in Muslim household, where man’s superiority over woman is well established in the basic philosophy of the Holy Quran. This picture of an oppressed female is clearly seen in the novels of Sembene Ousmane and Mariama Ba.

The position of woman in South Africa is that of a creature doubly oppressed and doubly exploited. When we look into the situation of South African family life the position of women is pathetic because they do not live with their husbands. The husbands are labour tools in the hands of the whites and so they go into the urban areas for work on yearly contracts. The urban woman’s situation is as bad as that of her rural counterpart. Meager wages paid to the black work force by the white masters makes it impossible for them to give good education to their children. Poverty and illiteracy are helped to perpetuate themselves. No wonder then, that the black women
in South Africa are either totally illiterate or grossly under-educated. That is why the South African woman is doubly oppressed, both by her male counterpart and by the racial discrimination. This picture of women in South African society is clearly seen through the works of Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer and others.

The changing social structure of traditional African life occasioned by European colonisation of Africa, the subsequent introduction of Western education and imposition of a capitalistic economy and the consequent fight of the Africans for Independence has meant a greater relative change in the life of the African woman. Despite the change in her social position the East African writers continue to present her in the traditional roles of daughter, wife and mother. But writers like Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Ruheni, Nuruddin Farah and Samuel Kahiga present the women characters in a different way. For instance we may take the female protagonist of Samuel Kahiga’s novel *The Girl From Abroad*. Kahiga’s heroine is strikingly different from the women we usually find in other works. The heroine June is a courageous and educated girl. She was educated in America. The return of the native results in the trauma of shattered illusions of sweet home, happy home. Disillusionment sets in as she finds her farm and home being sold away by her father. She speaks of her broken happy dream and disappointment to her friend Matthew Mbathia. Now she wants to return to U.S.A. In her anguish she says,

One reason I find it so intolerable to stay here is that it is not the same old place I used to know. To tell you the truth I am heartbroken. Coming back here and feeling all the life I used to know has been swept away. The house is gone the farm is gone...²

---

Feeling homeless now that she is back home the native longs to go back to the country of her adoption to feel quite at home. This is the kind of trauma, poignant and heartbreaking, suffered by most of the expatriates the moment they step on the native soil. One feels homeless and displaced under the changed conditions. June in her final talk with her boy friend tells him,

I have to run away and hide in an impersonal society where I can do exactly as my soul tells me. Where nobody knows me enough to try and shape my life for me.

This novel depicts the change in the African woman's personality. The African woman has come of age. She has grown articulate and self-assertive.

In his earlier novels, Ngugi has presented women characters who are totally submissive and tradition-bound. But the women of his later novels are a marked contrast to the former. There is a sea change in his attitude and understanding of women. The women depicted in *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* are either women liberated or women fighting for selfhood.

The position of women is the same all over Africa. They are always submissive and subordinate to men whether they live in South Africa, East Africa or West Africa. African cultures have traditionally allowed certain freedoms, which in other parts of the world women have, but have only recently begun to enjoy. In Nigeria women have played and still play a very important and often a very crucial role in the cultural process. A mother is central to the Nigerian family life for she helps to preserve and

---

3. ibid. p.85.
protect those vital elements that make Nigerian culture distinctive. A child's growth is conditioned, controlled and guided primarily by the mother. The mother plays a pivotal role in transmitting the native tongue, the indigenous language to the child. It is she who hands down to her offspring the treasures of wisdom of the tribe. As a child she had committed to her memory all the literature of her tribe, all the fables and glorious history and now, as a mother, it is her turn to communicate the same to her child through the medium of moonlight stories, song singing and dance. These stories are a repository of the traditional norms of tribal life. The most celebrated female character in African society is the mother. The African fictional mother is no fictitious character, she is real. She is the epitome of love, strength and affection, and mentor, philosopher and guide rolled into one.

The image of woman as wife occupies a central position in African literature. The early novels show the wife in her traditional role, mainly as a housewife and child-bearer, and the writers are preoccupied with her suffering. The majority of wives in the African society are the suffering ones, tolerating injustice helplessly, so totally brainwashed by traditional taboos as to be incapable of leading independent lives. Though the women themselves were unable to revolt, they found spokesmen in several writers. As women experienced this conflict between individual satisfaction and traditional norms, more and more women writers came forward to explore the causes of suffering and the nature of suppression. Writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head and Grace Ogot have tried to portray a different picture of women in their works.
For an African wife, like her Indian counterpart, the traditional ideal held forth is that of merging her identity in that of her husband's as Achebe firmly says in an interview,

I think you are right about my portrayal of traditional women. The reason must be that their roles were defined and clear, and basically accepted.  

It is difficult for the African woman to rebel because the code of submission, sacrifice and chastity is dinned into her ears and imprinted on her mind from childhood.

In the old tribal structure the African woman has had a more active role to play, but with increased urbanization her power in the family circle has suffered a decline. In the recent decades there has been an increase in the number of educated women in employment bringing to the fore new problems of tension, anxiety and accommodation.

The contribution of women to African Literature has not been limited to the modern age. In the oral traditions of Africa women played a considerable role as storytellers and performers. But this was changed by the colonial experience, which tended to de-Africanise the African personality. The male is the master and he often constituted the majority on the aggregate. Woman is relegated to the gilded cage. She is no longer considered as a major contributor to the creation of a civilization. The male writer is more fortunate than the female. His presence is taken for granted.

Fortunately taboos die with time and the deaf and dumb females have acquired a voice.

It is a voice of confusion, of confrontation, of commitment. It is now the women’s turn. She has a lot to write and it is a fortunate phenomenon that she is taking a step out of the Womb.⁵

Writing is still largely an esoteric vocation, a haven of the elite, inaccessible to an illiterate majority faced with immediate realities of misery and concerned with survival.

In the very recent times a few women writers have made their mark successfully in the literary world. In her article, “Three African Female Writers”, Maryse Conde says,

I simply believe that the personality and reality of African women have been hidden under such a heap of myths, so-called ethnological theories, rapid generalizations and patent untruths that it might be interesting to study what they have to say for themselves when they decide to speak.⁶

They have made use of the images of the concubine, the loyal wife, the earth mother, prostitute, and the “been-to” found in the writings of male African writers, but from a different perspective. They have started speaking eloquently in prose, poetry and in drama too.

Roseanne P. Bell in her article “The Absence of the African Woman Writer”

I offer a perspective which is rarely considered when one studies African literature: that African women are by no means ignorant of the triple oppressions - race, class and sex, which are partially responsible for their relatively unimpressive position as writers, and that African women are informed of the cognitive and conative experiences which, in conjunction with changes in other real and concrete practicalities, can and must lead to a liberation of their creative output.

The changes brought about in the life and attitudes of the African people by Western culture, education and religion, the colonial situation that was as much a tyrannizing force as it was a liberating influence and the changes wrought in the economic conditions of the people, proved powerful levers to bring woman out of her cocoon status into an independent, assertive, self-reliant and often dominant figure in the African world. The struggle towards this transformational end, which started at the turn of the century, is still going on. Literature, which until recently was male-oriented has started reflecting the sparks that were emanating from this struggle of the woman to be herself. Despite the exclusion from educational, social and political opportunities, a number of African women have overcome the obstacles and succeeded in writing and publishing their works. Lloyd W. Brown explains:

The women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in the field.

Feminist consciousness permeates the works of ten major female novelists from black Africa. They are Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Mabel Segun from Nigeria, Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland from Ghana, Mariama Ba from Senegal, Rebecka Njau and Grace Ogot from Kenya and Bessie Head and Nadine Gordimer from South Africa. The works of these authors are centered upon the problems, the pains and the hopes peculiar to African women. Their works are intimately concerned with the predicament of their heroines who represent African womanhood under the stress of social change. They project the image of a truly heroic female, rebelling against the established traditions. The image that emerges from these writings differs from the one created by the male writers. This is particularly true of the portraits of woman both in the traditional and changing roles. These writers place their women characters in situations where their values clash with those of men and their milieu. The heroines are rebels against the established traditions. Though they conform enough to the role reserved for an African woman in that they seek marriage and fulfillment for their womanhood in motherhood along with the common run of women folk in their communities, they are rebels too in choosing their partners in life and asserting their individuality in their confrontation with society and their husbands. A new African woman with a mind of her own has thus come into being, heralding the dawn of female emancipation from the constricting role which has been reserved for her by tradition.

The gender war has become the major theme in their writing: it ranges from the consolations of motherhood as a female prerogative to the protestations of women's
The publication of *Efuru* in 1966, by Flora Nwapa was a major event in the literature of the English speaking Africa. This and her other writings established her as a writer with a feminist realism centered upon the problems, the pains, the hope and the anxiety peculiar to the situation of an African Woman. Her novels are intimately concerned with the predicament of her heroines who represent African womanhood under the stress of social change. She has of course an impressive gallery of women of different types who are flippant, vain, fickle and idle, gossipy, shrewish and sharp tongued, servile and self-indulgent.

An African woman is despised and denigrated, ill-treated and even turned out of her home if by mischance she is unproductive and barren. The African woman is valued only for her potentiality to propagate the species and not for her self. *Times Literary Supplement* succinctly sums up the predicament of a barren African woman in its comment on *Efuru*:

*Efuru* is a beautiful, superior woman, who cannot marry or have children successfully. Her neighbours acknowledge her generosity, but cannot intervene in or comprehend her tragedy. A sage diagnoses that a river Goddess has in fact chosen Efuru as her honoured worshipper. So far as earthly companions are concerned she must remain alone.

...... The persons in Miss Nwapa's story have an objective complexity and sophistication dependent neither on chiaroscuro analogies with the behaviour of expatriate Europeans nor on the nostalgia generated by the deracinated graduate revisiting his people.  

Efuru, the heroine, is the embodiment of every feminine virtue and grace. With courage and grim determination she pursues the path of her own choice and with patience and fortitude bears the sorrows that come her way. She shows by her life that she is no escapist ‘sissy’ who meekly surrenders to the dictates of tribal traditions, village gossip, envious scandal-mongering or threats of excommunication. Twice she marries and twice she is cheated of the happiness she sought in marriage and yet survives these shocks to attain a higher bliss in attaining integration and complete identity with the Goddess of the Lake, Uhamiri whom she worships, thereby transcending the earthly considerations of pleasure and happiness. Flora Nwapa’s Efuru is the first and most bold departure from traditional image of a woman character in African literature.

Her second novel Idu confirms the arrival of the truly heroic woman character in African creative writing. Idu portrays an ideal Igbo wife who proves that true love is a greater motivating force in the human world than anything else. Nwapa’s conception of love and the marital bond is rooted in the African world view. Deep love does not contemplate the possibility of separation. Children are desired and they are cherished but love for one’s partners in life matters most. Abiding love between two individuals follows even into the life beyond, to be united in death and even after.

The heroine Idu is a beautiful, kind-hearted, loving and industrious woman admired by all in the community for her virtues and noble traits of character and conduct. She is the wife of Adiwere a trader, and theirs is a happy marriage. The
people in the village view them as an ideal pair. One character, Nwasobi, speaks of them as "made for each other: ... God created them as good people and God gave them to each other." They have everything: prosperity, plenty of good trade, contentment in personal lives, social harmony and company of good and admiring friends. But theirs is a fruitless marriage. Idu suffers deep and often inconsolable grief at her barrenness though Adiwere is not in the least perturbed by her apparent inability to bear a child.

Polygamy is permitted in Africa and in fact a man's worth is measured in terms of the number of wives he has and children he has fathered. Idu encourages her husband to take a second wife. After marrying the second wife, Idu conceives. The second wife leaves the house because she does not fit into the pattern of life Idu and Adiwere have evolved for themselves. After their son Ijoma is born their happiness increases. Idu is not able to conceive till four years after the marriage. But Adiwere dies of mysterious stomach disease before the second child's birth. Idu flouts the convention by refusing to marry her husband's brother and prefers to follow Adiwere to the land of the ancestors. She succeeds in her death-wish by her renunciation of worldly pleasures and attains a kind of voluntary death.

Through this novel Nwapa demonstrates that although the African woman, like others, is primarily a creature of love, she has other concerns deriving from her cultural situation. Self-sacrificing is a noble act and Idu is noble and courageous in her patiently waiting for the proof of her motherhood.

Nwapa’s heroines Efuru and Idu are wholesomely and invariably good. Both
are wives, mothers and traders in a traditional setting. They are beautiful, brave,
virtuous and wise, yet they are fated to suffer in life. Nwapa’s heroines are trend-
setters and they are the progenitors of a new generation of African women who rebel
against the restrictive tribal mores and assert their individuality and freedom to follow
the course of life prompted by their conscience and would not yield to the dictates
and pressures of tribal practices which do not fall in line with their own convictions.

Like many other black South African Writers Bessie Head also lived in exile
in Botswana, till her death recently “as a stateless person”. Her fiction draws
significantly upon the experience of being a non-white in South Africa. She is the
only non-white South African woman writing in English. Her moral idealism comes
through most powerfully and effectively in her first three novels. When Rain Clouds
Gather (1968), Maru (1971) and A Question of Power (1974). Her heroines Paulina
Sebosa, Margaret Cadmore and Elizabeth are new women. The heroine of Maru,
Margaret Cadmore, is an artist and we view most of the narrative events through her
eyes. Margaret represents Ms. Head’s ideal womanhood. Similarly the entire narrative
of Ms. Head’s third novel A Question of Power, is filtered through the consciousness
of Elizabeth, the protagonist. She is suffering from a nervous breakdown and the
narrative is actually a description of events as they unfold within her mind and of the
relationship between these internal events and the world outside. All the novels of
Bessie Head depict the extreme suffering of women because of subordination and
racism. Mariama Ba of Senegal is interested in elevating the position of female
in a predominantly Moslem, male-oriented society. So Long a Letter and A Scarlet
Song are her best works. In the former work, filled with autobiographical elements, she traces her life in a society caught between tradition and change. Though she is a traditionalist at heart, she aspires to be a revolutionary. She is a primary school teacher and has long been active in the feminist movement in Senegal. The novel describes man with all his negative attributes - as the unfaithful husband, the womanizer and as the victimizer. This ‘Letter’ is written in the form of a notebook kept by the heroine named Ramatoulaye. It is a sequence of reminiscences, some wistful, some bitter, recounted by the protagonist, recently been widowed. The ‘Letter’ is addressed to a very close friend Aissatou, a divorcée working as an interpreter in the Senegalese embassy in New York. Although polygamy is sanctioned by Islam, the action of her husband is a calculated betrayal of Ramatoulaye’s trust and a brutal rejection of their life together.

When she is widowed, Ramatoulaye refuses Tamsir, her husband’s brother, who by tradition has a right to take her as wife. She lashes out:

    You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don’t know what marriage means to me: It is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person. 11

Ramatoulaye is caught between tradition and progress. Hence this novel is a study of the isolation of married women who refuse to accept polygamy in a society that takes it for granted.

Grace Ogot is Kenya's best-known female writer. In addition to the novel *The Promised Land* (1966) she has published two collections of short stores, *Land Without Thunder* (1968) and *The Other Woman* (1976). Talking about her stories in an interview with Bernth Lindfors she says,

Many of the stories I have told are based on day-to-day life. Sometimes they are about the people I grew up with or went to school with; sometimes they are a family next door, a family I know quite well. 12

Her short stories reflect various problems that women face in the day-to-day modern African society. These stories reveal some of the situations in which young, educated girls find themselves when they attempt to live as individuals rather than as members of a closely-knit but restrictive community.

Rebecca Njau is another famous Kenyan writer. She studies and portrays the oppression suffered by women in rural societies. She shows her sympathy and understanding for people in general and for women in particular.

The Ghanian novelist, poet, dramatist and short story writer, Ama Ata Aidoo treats the position and status of women in a completely different way. She has projected a new type of heroine, the image of a truly heroic female in her works. Both she and Flora Nwapa have created heroines who are rebels against the old and established traditions. She has written two plays *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa* and published a collection of short stories entitled *No Sweetness Here*.

The persistent focus of all these women writers is that the experience and roles of women are distinguishable from men's. In all these works the woman's experience revolves around her self-perception rather than around the man's needs. The destiny of Africa continues to be of concern to many writers. The heroines, depicted by these women writers, definitely have a contribution to make. As a result the new African woman with a mind of her own has come to herald the dawn of female emancipation from the constricting role which has been reserved for women by tradition.

Coming in the line of these writers, Buchi Emechata is easily the most genuine, eloquent and impressive for she speaks with a voice that is authentic. Asked in an interview about her relationship to other female writers like Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot, Aidoo, and Bessi Head, Emecheta described herself as "their new sister". With an impressive output of eleven novels, an autobiography, a number of children's books, short stories and essays to date, she is also a very prolific novelist. But it is not her output that one is struck by, so much as the central stuff of her novels. Reading them, one notices that she is a writer who takes the business of writing as a serious calling, as a means of dramatizing the Igbo values she is heir to. And what is remarkable is her serious presentation of the pains and hopes and anxieties of the African women which caught the immediate attention of the readers and made the novels an instant success, bringing her a full, heartening recognition. Besides winning a number of prestigious awards like 'The Daughter of Mark Twain Award' in 1975, 'The Jock Campbell - New Statesman Award' in 1977, 'The Afro Caribbean Poets Golden Sunrise Award' in 1977, 'The Best Third World Writer for 1976-1979 Award'
and 'The Best Black Writer in Britain Award' in 1980, she has also received considerable critical attention - particularly from knowledgeable critics like Katherine Frank, Carol Boyce Davies, Marie A. Umeh, M.J. Daymond, Eustace Palmer, Ketu Katrak and Femi-ojo-Ade.

In terms of content and technique, Emecheta's fiction can be considered, in the words of Olade Taiwo, as "significant literary intervention", and her works seem to be products of courage and cerebral thrust, springing from the collective urge of the African women to speak for themselves.

They are, thus, both works of art and compelling social statements. In fictionalising the life and world of African woman and foregrounding her predicament, she takes her position among the other major novelists of black Africa. This must be viewed as an interesting phenomenon in African literature which was, till recently, male oriented.

The thematic preoccupations of Emecheta have to be examined in relation to the ambiguity which marked the status of women in African society for a long time. On the one hand a woman was thought to be strong enough to take care of the cultivation of land, preparation of food and matters of matrimony. But socially, on the other hand, she had to be satisfied with an inferior, often ignominious position, as just a farm-hand and a bed-mate, who could be scolded and beaten, or used and cast away, by man, whose interests always hold sway. She was not valued for what she

---

was, but for her usefulness in running the name and propagating the species.

The role reserved for woman was, thus, a limiting one which entailed an unquestioning subordination of her will to the will of the community. She had, no doubt, a kingdom of her own, with its obligation, but this kingdom endured, and stood recognised, only as long as she accepted her subordinate position, and took no notice of her 'self'. She could never imagine clashing with the constricting social norms.

We find this reflected in literature also, where an authentic female voice was not to be heard for a long time, and it can be seen particularly in the portrayal of woman in African fiction. A woman going beyond her confines, or inventing an identity or demanding her rightful place in society was never part of the imaginative world of the African novelist.

Women characters were allowed to bob in and out of the scenes of the novels, sometimes very charmingly, as long as they acted out their destiny as the playthings in the hands of men who could always lord over and practise polygamy. Therefore, these characters were mostly shadowy, as can be seen even in the celebrated works like Things Fall Apart, The Only Son, The Concubine and The Great Ponds. Occasionally an Ihuoma in The Concubine or a Chiaku in The Only Son or an Anna in Obi may be endowed with a certain individuality, but it is not a fulfilling individuality. The only fulfillment that their creator allows them is that of a responsible wife or a mother who merges her identity with that of her husband. A woman character in a heroic mould was almost a literary impossibility.
The reason for this could be that the creator of literature was the male writer. Woman was never counted as a contributor to the creation or sustaining of a culture. The only presence in literature was that of the fortunate male writer.

The situation was such as to warrant the emergence of a voice like Virginia Woolf’s in *A Room of One’s Own*. Strikingly, in African fiction, when such a complaining voice was heard, it was none else than that of Buchi Emecheta. In an interview with Tunde Obadina, she says:

To be a good novelist the writer must operate with a conducive atmosphere. She must have time and space to reflect and indulge in introspective thinking. For many potential writers in this country neither the time nor the space is available. In addition to family drawbacks the government seems not to appreciate the value of home produced works. It seems to be doing very little to encourage writers financially and otherwise.¹⁴

The complaint was timely, because women writers’ voices still continued to be as the unheard voices, rarely discussed. When as many as five hundred eighty four writers were included in Donald Herdick’s list of African writers, women accounted for only thirty one of them.

But the situation changed, when the life and attitudes of the African people came to be influenced by Western Culture. If the colonial experience was a tyrannizing force, it was also a liberating one, drawing the African woman out of her confines and making her see what it was to be herself - the new woman. As taboos broke and

---

obstacles crumbled, this new, assertive African woman, with a mind of her own, came across the pages of the new novels. This is what happens in the novels of Emecheta also, with gender consciousness acquiring diverse themes in them.

Emecheta began as a protest writer, and it is this "direct feminist protest", as Lloyd Brown calls it, that determined the quality and direction of her writing. The protest expressed itself in complete ways in her novels, resulting in thematic variations which added new dimensions to the changing profile of the African woman. Nothing concerning this profile seems to escape Emecheta's attention. The joys and sufferings of woman, her triumphs and failures, her responses to the changing ethos, the questions of bondage and freedom, the presence of taboos, the tyranny of customs like bride-price and polygamy, the consolations and responsibilities of motherhood, the struggle for economic independence and security, the quest for self-hood and identity and the effects of colonial experience on her psyche - all get transformed into fictional experience in her books. In the process, she succeeds in portraying African women as suffering, enduring, questioning, fighting, winning, losing and forgiving creatures, all in flesh and blood. And she does it on a broad canvas which accommodates a variety of dramatis personae and a wide range of emotions.

Emecheta began writing after her marriage ended. Most of her fiction is autobiographical. Her novels centre upon the theme of African women's world and her life and focus on identity and selfhood of African woman.

The first two novels, In the Ditch and Second Class Citizen, are basically her own life, presented in a fictional format with the names, including her own,
changed. The former describes Adah Obi’s struggle to survive in London’s slums, living on public welfare doles with five children after separating from her husband. The autobiographical impulse and the art of fiction have a bearing on each other. Adah Obi is the alter ego of Buchi Emecheta. Second Class Citizen deals with the discrepant awareness of woman in the society. It starts with Adah’s childhood. Adah emerges as the most autonomous and fulfilled heroine: her triumph is the triumph of all women and all second-class citizens the world over.

The Bride Price, the third novel exposes the tyranny of custom. It is Emecheta’s first bona-fide fictional work wherein she put to ironic use the African tradition of the payment of a pre-arranged sum by the groom to the bride’s parents or close kin in order to be eligible to many the girl. Aku-enna defies the tradition and runs away from home to marry Chike, a descendant of slaves, whom she loves, thereby attracting a double guilt for breaking the tradition and defying the taboo. There is tragedy built into the drama of human emotions as the story reaches its ironical conclusion.

The main theme of the novel The Slave Girl, which was awarded the Jock Campbell Award, is captivity and freedom. It is the story of woman’s quest for freedom set against the backdrop of early 20th century. Through the character of Ojebeta, Emecheta explores her central vision of female bondage and the underlying metaphor of African Womanhood as a state of victimization and unrelieved servitude. Ojebeta, sold into slavery, takes the steps needed and emerges triumphant. She progresses from bondage to freedom through the liberating influence of education however
The Joys of Motherhood is the most popular novel. Positive identity, aspiration and fulfillment are the main aspects of the novel. It is the searing story of Nnu Ego, a strong, optimistic Nigerian Woman and mother, who struggles with many dramatic changes in her life. Her passion for motherhood, her heroic though silent struggle for self-hood and identity, economic independence and security are sensitively recorded in the novel. She does attain motherhood but she is denied its promised taste of joy. Emecheta traces the sad and tragic lot of life of an African woman from the cradle to the grave with meticulous care and skill. It is also the story of Nigeria, a country destabilized by colonialism.

The sixth novel Destination Biafra deals with the Biafran War and its aftermath. Debbi Ogedemgbe, the heroine, is a fiercely independent, spirited and highly educated girl. She rejects marriage and motherhood, traditionally the first choices of any African female, in favour of independence. Emecheta has clearly destined her to be the very image of the new African Woman who departs radically from the roles and values cherished by the tradition-bound. Debbie's character is a bold and radical departure from the characters of generations of women who have gone before her.

Emecheta's seventh novel The Rape of Shavi is entirely different from her earlier works. It is about the encounter between Africa and the West. In this novel, the residents of Shavi are visited by a group of Whites who survive a plane crash.
When they arrive in Shavi, they discover a world which is undisturbed by external political disputes or Western influence. The Shavians give the refugees food, shelter and medical attention. Unfortunately, things take a hard turn when one of the Europeans rapes Ayoke, the queen-to-be of the Shavian empire. This idyllic fantasy ends in abrupt explosion and Shavi is ruined. The grace and majesty of life of the people of Shavi is destroyed. The Rape of Shavi indicates a new direction in Emecheta's writing.

Double Yoke is focused on the moral disintegration of post-colonial Nigeria. It is set on the campus of a Nigerian University and the story is about two undergraduates, confronting the demands of tradition and modernity. The next novel Naira Power deals with the polygamous households. It is about the suffering, problems and pains of women in a traditional society. Both Gwendolen and Kehinde are heroine-oriented novels, where the narrative runs through the life of these two protagonists. Gwendolen is a young West Indian girl who immigrates to London with her family. The novel is filled with various incidents, which disturb and ruin the life of this young girl. Kehinde is a Nigerian woman. With her husband Albert, she has made a home in London and has a promising career when Albert decides they should return to Nigeria. Later she joins him only to discover that he has taken a second wife. Her years in England have left Kehinde unwilling to re-embrace Nigerian social mores. Unable to accept the changes in her home, she returns to London to lead a lonely and independent life.

Thus Emecheta's works concern themselves with the portrait of the African
Woman. Her protagonists show what it means to be a woman and a mother in Nigerian society. She looks at how sexuality and the ability to bear children could sometimes be the only way by which femininity and womanhood may be defined.

These heroines are by and large rebels against the old and established traditions. Though they conform enough to the role reserved for an African woman by tradition seeking marriage and fulfillment for their womanhood in motherhood, they do often show a marked proclivity to the society and tend to assert themselves in choosing their mates. They are the new African Women. The war of the genders for domination has thus come to be the major theme in Emecheta's writings and her sympathies are clearly with women. Her themes range from the consolations of motherhood as a female prerogative to the protestations of feminist activism in favour of a more autonomous and creative role for women in society. The theme of 'identity and selfhood' is the chief motifs of her novels; all her protagonists are shown as rebelling against the 'degrading' traditional values, and search for their self and their identity. Even if they do not emerge successful, still they are seen as voicing the urge of the African woman for self-expression and self-realisation. In the words of Olade Taiwo:

Buchi Emecheta writes to fulfill the urge for women to speak for themselves. Although other African women are writing novels, her attempt must be considered a significant literary intervention whose content and approach deserve attention.  

The action of Emecheta's novels is neatly plotted and meticulously designed. Her plots have structural cohesion and organic consistency. The simple symmetry of

narrative organization lends a lyric charm to the novels. The reader is thrilled by the refreshing simplicity of Emecheta’s expression. Structural language would certainly have been counter-productive to the primary intentions of Emecheta who is telling a simple story of the predicament of African Woman and her heroic stance against the odds of life, which consign her to an undeserved and unwanted inferior status in a traditional society.

Emecheta’s canvas is broad and incisive, as she talks about African Woman and her predicament in a man-made world in the beginning and about women in general. She attempts to make an in-depth study of the West African Nigerian Tribal Social setup, its traditions, customs, and the place of women in it. Her novels are realistic portrayal of women’s position in the society. In Emecheta one can detect an increasing emphasis on the women’s sense of self. She has become a progressively more effective writer because she has learnt to successfully blend the rhetoric of impassioned protest with her maturing talent for characterization. Her social vision is focused on matters of immediate and concrete African significance. And at the same time she raised questions about the nature of female self-awareness, about the need for female self-help and inner strength, that carry implications for women everywhere. She has the advantage of close familiarity with and psychological insights of the feminist context. Her novels are concerned with the predicament of her heroines who represent African Womanhood under the stress of social change.