Chapter I

Introduction

Values attributed to women have often been meant to debilitate the inborn sublime spirit of women. Irrespective of national and cultural boundaries, this ideal was universally acknowledged – the ideology that women are graceful in silence and that they are born to remain within an inferior, subordinate framework fabricated by society. Women have been more often than not mistaken for the weaker sex only because of the fact that their biological construction is so. It is true that her muscular strength is comparatively less, her red blood corpuscles are fewer, she has a lesser lung capacity and she cannot stand up to man in physical strain and strength. Apart from all this, there is the fragility related to reproduction, which has restricted her to a smaller world than man. This renders her world and individual life less rich than that of man and she is forced to lose much of the hues and colors of social life. But this does not mean that man is offered a privileged position of superiority for, woman bags autonomy of her own in maternity.

The question of woman’s position in a society as inferior or equal to man has always been settled by the values, rules and norms set up by man – the society itself being male. Thus the position of a woman in a society is determined by a male dominated society and the idea of “being” a woman itself, then, becomes a social construct. Since humanity
and society are male, the definitions of woman have been assigned to her according to his convenience. Man defines woman not as herself but as relative to him. She is never given an autonomous status. She is often considered as whatever man is not and hence she is the “Other”. Man has an existence and an identity of his own, and woman has no role to play in complementing his identity. But woman can never think of herself without relating herself to a man. According to the Indian concept, a woman exists in three different relations to man and her existence is defined in terms of these three relations – to that of her father, her husband and her son. Woman is always defined and differentiated with reference to man, but never the reverse. He always considers himself in the subject position; he is the sovereign, the supreme, the absolute. According to Aristotle, “[t]he female is a female by virtue of a certain ‘lack’ of qualities [and] . . . we should regard the female nature afflicted with a natural defectiveness” (Beauvoir, 1989, xxii).

Man has never been able to give a candid definition of woman since he has never been able to realize fully what she is and what her potentials are, and also he does not give her an opportunity to do it herself. Historical concepts about woman have described her as worlds apart from man. An aura of mystery has been attributed to her. Among the various myths related to woman, the most popular is that of woman as a mystery. It is man who has evolved these myths in order to suit his
pride. Whenever rational explanations fail to account for the female, instead of admitting his ignorance, he attributes it to the perennial mystery of femininity. What particularly signalizes the situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where man compels her to assume the status of the “Other.”

He conceives a feminine domain only in order to imprison woman therein. Condemned to play the part of the “Other,” woman was doomed to hold only uncertain power – slave or idol. But in either case, man enforced her lot on her. It was never she who chose her lot. Men have always held their monopoly over women and determined her destiny as to what it should be, not according to her interests, but rather, with emphasis on their own interests, their fears and their needs. History has often revealed that man has maintained the absolute power center in his hands and felt that woman should be confined in a state of dependence, setting up codes of law against her and establishes her as the “Other” and this “Other” is a necessity to him, for he attains himself only through that reality which he is not. In other words, the attributes of femininity or what a woman should be is imposed on her by the society around her, the society that is patriarchal: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. . . . it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir,
The boundaries of female domain have been marked by civilization that is patriarchal and defines woman as a marginalized creature. The patriarchal system develops a mystique which informs that the highest value and the only commitment for women is their fulfillment through men. An inadequate being in herself, her identity and self-fulfillment can be achieved only through the masculine. She should not exist spiritually. Her existence can be defined only in terms of her biological status. She is assigned to live in passivity and silence and the meaning of her life is to please her man. The patriarchal society not only reduces her to the “Other” position, but also looks upon her as a source of evil, contempt and inferiority. That has often been the picture provided through literature too, regarding women. Shakespeare’s famous and oft quoted line from *Hamlet* (1959) “Frailty thy name is woman” is an instance. Even Chaucer has tried to make fun of women in his “Prologue” through his portraits of women like the Wife of Bath. In all these cases women are portrayed as incapable of possessing internal and emotional strength and lack social skills. The picture they provide us is that women are just paragons of vanity and weakness and nothing else. Above all Eve, the mother of humanity, according to Christian ideology, is considered to be the source of evil in this world because sin entered the world through her. Thus we find that though there have been moments
when men idolized women, the general trend has been to illumine women in a negative light.

The female body and her sexuality that is so often exploited by man comes to be viewed negatively and her feminine self gains validity with the positive self which is assumed to be the phallic power which relegates woman to psychological dependency. Consequently woman is doomed to the same place which God, the arch patriarch, had assigned to Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was not a place, but a state of human condition characterized by dependency, absence of self-consciousness and self-power. The patriarchal society which is male-centered and male-controlled has organized and conducted the society in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains – familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic. He identifies and defines her by her lack of male organ, male powers and all the male character traits that are presumed to have been the causative force behind civilization, culture and progress of humanity. In order to add to his advantages, he has taught her to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology and they are mentally conditioned to derogate their own sex and willingly co-operate in their own subordination.

Since time immemorial subordination and enslavement (if not particularly physical) was the lot meted out to women and ever since antiquity, there have been women fighting to free their half of the total
population of the world from male oppression. The premises of feminist
concept seek to analyze and understand the material conditions through
which gender has been constructed within specific languages and bodies
of literature. It is one of the basic movements for human liberty and to
trivialize it or to ridicule present day feminism is to display a shocking
ignorance of the history of one half of the human race.

Tracing the history of feminism leads us to the assumption that the
first woman to make herself heard in defense of her sex was Christine de
Pisan and it happened as early as the fifteenth century. But the actual
organized movement for emancipation of women came in 1848 in the
traces a four hundred year old history of feminism in European society
before the French Revolution and Christine de Pisan had sparked off this
long tradition of feminist thoughts, debates and discourses. Feminism
that had been at work till the 1920’s is referred to as “Old Feminism.”
The early feminists’ defenses of women were responses to specific
published attacks on them and they also focused upon gender. The sexes,
according to them, are culturally and not just biologically formed and
they formed a social group.

In the 1630’s and 1650’s many of the radical English sects
supported religious equality for women. The feminism of the nineteenth
century and early twentieth century focused on the acquisition of a few
basic political rights and liberty for women such as the rights of married women to own property and enter into contracts, the right of defendants to have women on juries and the crucial right to vote. The inequities against which the feminists protest – legal, economic and social restrictions on the rights of women – have existed throughout history and when the right to vote for women was won in 1920, by American women, it was generally assumed to be the ultimate victory. But even in the subsequent years, social restrictions still continued to curb women’s freedom. Thus in the 1960’s, there came into being a new wave and reawakening of feminist feelings. This renewed fervor does not merely deal with elimination of differences based on sex, nor is it merely about the achievement of equal opportunity. It bases itself on the individual’s right to find out the kind of person he or she is and to strive to become that person.

The thread that binds contemporary feminist movement and the earlier nineteenth century feminism is that both the movements fostered equal status for women along with men. But the distinction lies in their arguments regarding the nature of the biological differences between the sexes. The latter saw far greater differences between “male” and “female” nature than the former. The earlier feminists held that a woman had distinct feminine characteristics and instincts, which suited them more for domestic activities. But they argue that such differences
do not provide reasonable causes to subject women to subordination. The contemporary feminists consider biological factors to be only a minor role in the observed difference between man and woman. For them this difference is caused by the conditioning of social and cultural constitution. According to Beauvoir’s view, a comparison between a human male and a human female can be made only from a human perspective. Man is defined as a being who is not fixed, who makes himself what he is. Merlau-Ponty has very well explained it as follows: “... man is not a natural species: he is a historical idea. Woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming, and it is in her becoming that she should be compared with man, that is to say, her possibilities should be defined” (Beauvoir, 1989, 34).

Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the earliest crusaders for the emancipation of women. Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is an important feminist document which anticipated virtually all the demands of the women’s movement – education, legal representation, the right to vote, the right to property, and admission to profession. The contributions made by John Stuart Mill to the arousal of feminine consciousness need a special mention too. He believed that the liberty of the individual is absolutely necessary for the development of the society:

... the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex
to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and . . . it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (Schneir, 1994, 163)

Since John Stuart Mill has very effectively augmented the cause of feminism and since he is a male, the question arises as to who actually is a feminist and should a feminist be necessarily a woman. To explain this, we first need to locate the factors that go into the making of feminism.

Ellen du Bois found in her research on feminism that the term “feminism” was in general use around 1910 and it was used to describe that political movement which sought to gain suffrage and emancipation of women. Feminism can also be considered a philosophy which seeks to discover and change the more subtle and inherent causes of women’s oppression by effecting changes in the traditional social structures such as the family, economic order, personal relationship and even power structures to achieve a just social order. Moreover, a feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization – a state which is enforced on them by the oppressive system of sex roles. On a broader canvas, a more elusive definition of feminism considered it a political theory and practice to “free” all women: women irrespective of color, class, wealth, privilege and age.
When we discuss feminism it is important to know what, then, is femininity. The lexical meaning of the term feminine is ‘of woman’ or ‘of a female’ and those who attempt to put forth a simple formula to describe a woman, says Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, as “... a womb, an ovary; she is a female – this word is sufficient to describe her” (1989, 3). In that case to be a female or womanhood is a matter of biology, a matter of sex. Biological construction of woman places her in a secondary status to that of man. If this is what to be a female means, then what is femininity? It is the cultural attributes of womanhood as opposed to the biological and it is temporal. It changes according to history and to cultural identity. It is a matter of culture. For example, Elizabeth Candy Stanton in her essay “Womanliness” says:

Some men tell us we must be patient and persuasive; that we must be womanly. . . . What is man’s idea of womanliness? It is to have a manner, which pleases him – quiet, differential, submissive, approaching him as a subject does a master. He wants no self-assertion on our part, no defiance, no vehement arraignment of him as a robber and a criminal. (Schneir, 1994, 155)

Kate Millet, the main theoretician of new feminism has contributed a key influence through her *Sexual Politics* (1976). In this work, she gives a detailed analysis of the political relationship between men and
women. She points out that the mythic image of the female as the cause of human suffering and sin is still the foundation of sexual attitudes, for it represents the crucial argument of the patriarchal tradition in the west. The new French feminists like Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous claim that language has become so much a legacy of male power that for women to keep operating within this power structure means a containing and intolerable compromise of their femininity. Both these feminists have tried to unveil the dark and shadowed area wherein lies the secret of female emancipation. Irigaray believes that since the physical and cognitive experiences differ considerably between the two sexes and also since they have a distinctive mental habits, this difference will be reflected in their writings too. She also points out that the discourse of men tends to be linear and lead to definitive conclusions while that of women, if left to develop freely would be more wide-ranging and diffuse. According to Cixous, writing is the focus of female revolution. To put it in her words: "Writing is the very possibility of change; the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (Marks and Courtivron, 1980, 246). Thus we find that women’s writing in general and also the feminist literatures by male authors have their own role to perform in the feminist movement.

In the 1960’s there was a self-aware and concerted approach
to literature in the name of feminist criticism. Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) can be taken up as a precursor of feminist criticism. She establishes the importance for women to have a space of their own in which to speak and express freely. The androcentric literary canon has often conveniently forgotten that contemporary women writers have a rich tradition of ancestors too. But most of them have disappeared into the oblivion except for a few of them like Jane Austen, Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot who very clearly portray the constraints within which their women protagonists act, and at the same time insist that their women are capable of significant moral action. From this point of view, these writers can be classified as feminists. They assert the full human value of their characters even though they may not make explicit pleas for legal and social reform. The first woman writer to enjoy universal acknowledgement and glory is Jane Austen. She has often insisted on the full moral existence of women and it is implicitly an insistence on the human equality of women with men. The rich lineage of women writers has been kept aloft by later and contemporary writers like Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Angela Carter, Maya Angelou, Mariamma Ba, Bharati Mukherjee, Alice Walker, Anita Desai and the Booker winning Arundhati Roy.

Feminist writings of 1970’s commonly sought to make women and their texts visible within patriarchal culture. It was done with the aim
of stressing the difference of women’s writing from men’s and procuring for women a position of full subjectivity on par with that which is seemed to be enjoyed by man. In *Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity* (1985), Alice Jardine observes that the master narratives that structure patriarchal culture have frequently shoved women to the periphery. They are positioned on the edge of truth, meaning and certainty. Jardine argues that the current post-modern crisis in legitimation . . . has brought within the master narratives in the west, a vast self-exploration, a questioning and turning back upon their own discourse, in an attempt to create a new space or spacing within themselves. (25)

And this space according to her “has been coded as ‘feminine,’ as ‘woman’” (25).

In America, modern feminist criticism began with Mary Ellman’s *Thinking about Women* (1968). One of the key interests of Anglo-American feminist critics has been to deconstruct and reconstitute the approaches to literature monopolized by the androcentric standards. They sought to do justice to female points of view, concerns and values. For this purpose they laid emphasis on altering the way a woman reads the literature of the past so that she does not acquiesce but resist the author’s intention by a “revisionary rereading” (Abrams, 1993, 236) to
bring to light and to counter the covert sexual bases written into a literary work. Many feminist critics have despised the literature by men for the very reason of depicting women as marginal, docile and subservient to men’s interests, catering to his emotional needs and fears. But they have also succeeded in identifying male writers who have managed to rise above the sexual prejudices sufficiently to understand and represent the cultural pressures that have shaped the character of women and thrust upon them the negative or subsidiary social roles. Samuel Richardson, Henrik Ibsen and G.B Shaw belong to this tradition.

Since the 1970’s the major concern of Anglo-American criticism has been concerned with the specificity of women’s writing, the tradition of women authors and also the exploration of women’s culture. This approach has been termed ‘gynocriticism’ by Elaine Showalter. The gynocritics identify the distinctively feminine subject matters in literatures by women. She dedicates herself to the female author and her work, and seeks to develop theories and methodologies based on female experience. She discerns in the authors and characters a coherent feminine identity – a realization of selfhood and realization of one’s autonomy over one’s own self.

According to gynocritics, the reading sequence progresses from reality to author to reader to reality once again. The author has a cognizance of an objective reality which she attempts to depict truthfully
in her text. She tries to authenticate her experiences. If we can recognize the experience and perceptions reflected in a literary work to be our own, or at least human, then we conclude that it is an authentic work. Often the experiences and responses, which have provided impetus for literary writing, are not common place. However there are some groups who are in need of sharing their experiences with others – they are the people who are looked down upon as not having any fundamental role to play in the normal functioning of the society and women belong to this category of the marginalized. And a female writer objectifies her experiences in her work, from the marginalized position. The reader on her part relates this objectified reality to her understanding of her own life. In this way, the author, the character and the reader are engaged in a collaborative exploration of meaning, of being a female. This leads to an assertion of a collective identity of sisterhood and a feeling of oneness.

Along with gynocriticism Alice Jardine has come up with the concept of gynesis:

... a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which has been the master narratives’ own ‘non knowledge,’ what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other-than-themselves is almost always a ‘space’ of some kind (over which the narrative has lost control) and this space has been coded as feminine, as woman. . . .[G]ynesis [is] the putting
into discourse of ‘woman’ as that ‘process’ diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman and her obligatory that is historical connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking. (1985, 25)

Gynesis does not argue the replacement of man by woman at the center of the humanist endeavor. Therefore it gives no special emphasis to female authors and characters. Most of the examples of feminine writing it considers are by men. It is not necessarily preoccupied with women’s achievements in history or with women’s groups. Jardine recognizes it as a space or an absence. Gynesis repudiates gynocriticism’s premises which lay stress on the control of the author on the text, and tries to discover her unique voice. It gives importance to the “author is dead” principle. It emphasizes the textual free play of meaning which cannot be bound by authorial intention or critical analysis. The French feminist concept of “l’écriture feminine” comes to relevance here. They insist on woman as a writing effect instead of an origin and assert the textuality of the sex instead of the sexuality of the text.

L’écriture feminine, according to the French, does not mean the tradition of women’s writing that Woolf and Showalter have labored to uncover, but a certain mode of writing which unsettles fixed meanings. And when Anglo-Americans use the term ‘feminine,’ they refer to the
cultural stereotype which, patriarchy tells us, is the appropriate, even natural form of behavior for women. Thus the concept of l’écriture feminine leads us to the assumption that it need not necessarily be a text written by a woman, but a text which takes us to a reality which, to quote the words of Peggy Kamuf, “phallocentrism hides within it with the help of masks of truth” (Eagleton, 1995, 65). She asserts that the definition of feminine writing as a woman writing, should be refused and stress should be laid on the figuration of resemblance, that is writing as a woman. This leads to the recognition of male writers who brings into question feminine problematics. Thus feminist criticism addresses itself not to the productions signed by biological women alone, but to all productions that put the feminine into play – the feminine then being a modality or process accessible to both men and women. But an argument that has often come up against male feminists is that they cannot produce an authentic voice, which speaks from the position of a woman. They can produce only an outsider’s version of feminine experience. It is a fact that he cannot speak but fictively of, for and from the female. But it cannot be overlooked that they too produce works which expose simple and harsh realities in relation to women’s experiences.

Feminism is a philosophy, which seeks to enlighten and argue the causes of women’s issues like oppression and seek to create an awareness and consciousness in an entire culture to reform the
traditional social structures to bring about a just social order. Any venture or any text, which shows an affinity and activation towards these causes, can be argued as part of l’écriture féminine. Then the true definition of a feminist is a person male or female who is concerned about the problems of women, especially their political, social and economic states and who is aware of their contributions to the advancement of the society and also their role in the making of history and above all who maneuvers to free women from oppression.

A number of men have made noteworthy, relevant contributions to feminism. John Stuart Mill, one of the earliest proponents of feminism, is a man and his contributions have been very much influential in the propaganda to arouse feminine consciousness. For him the liberty of the individual is absolutely necessary for the development of the society. He was of the view that women’s position is not natural but the result of political oppression by men. Mill maintains that the nature of women is artificial because it is the result of forced repression in some directions and unnatural stimulation in others. Their character has been subjected to distortion from its natural proportion by their relation to their masters. And the most important point that Mill has asserted is that the knowledge which men can acquire of women even as they have been, without reference to what they may be, is wretchedly imperfect and superficial and always will be so, until women themselves
had told all they have to tell. So the defining factor of femininity, according to him, should come from women themselves. Mill regarded women as a subject class and he recognized that the state of female bondage is a sort of refinement over that of the black slave where each man wants his woman to be a willing slave who is not merely a slave but a favorite one. And he recognized that the advancement of society can be attained only by ensuring equality for all sects.

Political leaders like Friedrich Engels and August Bebel were also interested in the relationship of the organized women’s movement to the international social movement. They believed that the complete emancipation of women would be possible only under socialism. Bebel argues that the woman question is a part of the general social question and its solution lies in overcoming the social extremes and the evils of which are a result of such extremes. Bebel questions the fact that men have played a decisive role in determining, framing and administering the laws to suit their own purposes and to hold woman in subjugation. He throws light on the double yoke that woman has to bear as a result of their social dependence on man and the relative inferior position allotted to them in society, and also as a result of their economic dependence. All women have been subjected to subjugation in the course of the evolution of society. This condition is co-related to the problem of the proletariat. Thus his contention is that the solution to the woman question can be
enjoined to the solution of the social question under the banner of the socialists. He declares that there can be no liberation of mankind without social independence and equality of the sexes.

According to Stephen Heath, women are not feminists just because of the fact they are women. It is a socio-political reality, a struggle and a commitment. He is of the opinion that feminism is a matter of concern for men too as it is for women. His observations read thus:

Feminism is a subject for women who are, precisely, its subjects, the people who make it, it is their affair. Feminism is also a subject for men, what it is about obviously concerns them; they have to learn to make it their affair to carry it through into our lives. Feminism speaks to me, not principally nor equally but too, to me too: the definitions and images and stories and laws and institutions oppressive of women that it challenges, ends, involves me since not only will I find myself playing some part in their reproduction but I too am caught up in them, given as ‘man’ in their reflection, confined in that place which is then presented as mine. (Eagleton, 1995, 201)

He affirms that one of the things men learn from feminism is that women have undergone enough of marginalization. The patriarchal
society has swept women off to the periphery of social and economic situations and asserts that women should cut across differences of all kinds – of class and race being the most important – and come together in a union of bondage. Thus we find that it is not only women who have felt the press-up need for voicing their protest against the oppressive patriarchal system but also a number of men who have ardently supported the cause of feminism. They recognized that the well being of the society lies in the establishment of a system that is edified on equality at all levels. Male feminism should strive to re-imagine the role of man in society and change the shape of patriarchy and of male discourses which seek to sub-ordinate the feminine experience.

Male feminists, who are actually a constitutive element of the patriarchal hierarchy of social order, attempt to occupy the position of an outsider in the homo-social patriarchy. Thereby, they question the traditional masculine networks of power. One of the prominent male feminist writers who has often been discussed is Ibsen. His *A Doll’s House* (1879) is regarded as an authentic piece of feminine experience as it has often been criticized from a feminist perspective. Even Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* (1848) has dealt with a feminine theme. Though in this work he picturises both the values and virtues of woman, the noteworthy point is that he is along with the women to express the cruelty meted out to them. But he does not enter into any presumptive solution to feminist
issues in his work. A number of European male writers have expressed empathy to feminist issues and taken up the causes in their works. But it is the African male who has been more in conformity to presenting a positive image of women.

According to Carole Boyce Davies, a positive image of woman is in line with African historical reality. It does not stereotype or fix woman within an engulfment of dependence or submergence. What an African writer would seek to insist is a portrayal, which suggests the possibility of transcendence. African male writers like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Sembene Ousmane and Nuruddin Farah are staunch supporters of feminist issues. They have challenged the social and political dominance of patriarchy. In their works, women are dealt with from a feminist perspective. They have sought to establish the self-actualization process outside the sexual roles and they have also sought to establish a black identity outside the ordains of sexual confinements. Thus they are celebrated as feminists in the true sense of the word. Though the most affirmative works of male feminism have come from blacks/Africa, it was only a long time after the establishment of feminism that the black feminists, male or female, could make their indigenous voices heard on the platform of western mainstream feminism.

Many mainstream western feminist perspectives have been criticized by third world feminists for overlooking the interests and concerns
of those women who are additionally or doubly marginalized in terms of class, race and ethnicity. The early white women’s rights advocates were never seeking social equality for all women. In fact their primary interest lay in the social equality for white women. From the time the institution of colonization took its roots in the African soil, it adopted the strategy of enslavement of the colonized in order to legitimize the system of colonial power. Their land, the power, identity, and even the name of the colonized were snatched away and erased by the colonizer in such a way as to suit the dictates of white colonial rule. This was done with the purpose of de-humanizing, de-moralizing and disempowering the indigenous power-structure and doing the same to individual potentials too. Under abominable and deplorable conditions the Africans were traded as slaves to the US. Ever since the whites set foot on the African soil began the bitter era of apartheid. The white slaves adopted methods of terrorization to force African people to repress their awareness of themselves as free people and to adopt a slave identity which was imposed on them. For centuries together imperialist powers structured the slave society according to their dictates in order to intimidate the blacks to silence and animal existence.

The question of racism had come up as a dogma of social reformation owing to the impact of feminism. But initially it was the impact of slavery on black male consciousness that was emphasized.
The early abolitionists who fought against racism considered that the real victims of slavery were men. Oppression of black men during slavery has been referred to as de-masculinisation. Black men were deprived of their traditional patriarchal status, the only anchor of self-affirmation and self-perception for them was the subjugation of black women. The cause of black sexism had been back-grounded by the general interest diverted to racism. This was a derivative of the sexist assumption that the experiences of men are more important than those of women. Then the fact that goes overlooked is that while enslaved black men were subjected to racism, black slave women were exposed to a double oppression of sexism and racism. This intensified the magnitude of the sufferings of black women. But no positive move towards the retrieval of black femininity was undertaken by any mainstream activists, even the feminists.

While feminists of America and the abolitionists had made it a point to liberate the enslaved black community, the cause of the black women never came upon their platform, which hailed the end of racism and sexism. The grievance of black women was against racist sexism. White Suffragists like Abby Kelly Elizabeth, Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony had announced, along with feminism, the need to end racism. For them the prejudice against color is on par with the prejudice against sex. The white women suffragists identified the experiences of white
woman with that of black slaves’ – the causes are the same and it is manifested in the same way. In Stanton’s words, “[t]he Negro’s skin and the woman’s sex are both “prima facia” evidence that they were intended to be in subjection to the white Saxon man” (Schneir, 1994, 119). Though the white women suffragists undertook anti-slavery work, the fact that they held no solidarity with black people on account of their racial superiority, is most evident in the words of Stanton. The enfranchisement of black men enraged her not merely over the fact that their propaganda for sexual equality had been curtailed, but over the betrayal of white men who were more committed to maintaining sexual hierarchies than racial hierarchies. Stanton who had never argued for women’s rights based on racial grounds burst out in rage that inferior “niggers” should be granted the vote while “superior” white women remained disenfranchised.

The white suffragists have taken up the cause of black anti-slavery only on grounds of social reform. They did not want to see the blacks enslaved. But they didn’t either want to see their status improved. They desired to sustain the racial superiority of whites over black at any cost. Thus even when enfranchisement was won for women, irrespective of color, the white women who have been supporters of feminist movement took measures to chain black women to an inferior social status. The sect in America who was the most aware of sexist oppression, in
nineteenth century was black women. They were victimized by sexist
discrimination and sexist oppression. Their grievances could find no
access to call public attention because of white female racism. This
situation very well elucidates the immediacy to eliminate racism because
black women could afford to make themselves heard along with white
women only in a non-racial system.

In the eyes of the nineteenth century white public, the black
female was despised and condemned. They were considered unworthy of
the title of woman. She was a mere chattel, an object worthy of only a
beastly existence. In America, white racist ideology has always
encouraged white women to the assumption that the word woman is
synonymous with white woman. Women of any other race were always
perceived as “Others,” as de-humanized beings who do not fall under the
category of woman. Their ideology and language have always failed to
recognize and acknowledge the existence of black women. From their
point of view, ‘women’ meant white women and blacks are often black
men. They chose to exclude the black female slave experience from their
propaganda. Many black women felt excluded from the movement
wherever they heard white women draw analogies between ‘women’ and
‘blacks.’ If white feminists had decided to take up the cause of the
doubly oppressed black women, they would have acknowledged the
impact of sexism on the status of black women and duly launched a
movement which would have been inclusive of black female experience too. Despite the talk about universal sisterhood, white women were not ready to bond with black women and other such racial groups of women. The interests of white feminists were drawn to a reconstitution of their position as white women.

From Maria Stewart’s 1832 Boston speech to Afro-American Female Intelligence Society and beyond, black feminists urged their sisters to think, act and speak like women worthy of respect denied them by white enslavement. Some black women who were interested in women’s liberation responded to the racism of white female participants by forming separate “black feminist” groups in the twentieth century. The clarion call for the liberation of black women had come from Sojourner Truth when she stood up to address the annual convention of Women’s Rights Movement in Akron, Ohio in 1852. She is one of the first feminists to call attention to the plight of the black slave woman. She, compelled by circumstances to labor alongside black man, was a living embodiment of the bare truth that women could be work-equals of men. She questioned the white tendency to refuse femininity to black females and also the patriarchal tendency to refuse equality with them. Sojourner Truth could refer to her own personal experience as evidence of woman’s ability to function as a parent, to be the work equal of man, to undergo persecution, physical abuse, rape, torture and to not only
survive but emerge triumphant. Joyce Ladner in *Tomorrow's Tomorrow* (1971) contends that the only rational way to assess the black woman is by examining the historical conditions that have shaped her. Centuries of oppression that had erased their identity as human beings is the driving force behind their clamor for justice.

Sojourner Truth was not the only black woman to advocate social equality for women. Her enthusiasm to bring up the cause of black women into a public platform in the face of disapproval and resistance initiated other politically motivated black women to express their views. Black activist Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin made an attempt to collaborate with white women's organizations, but was disappointed. She understood that black women could not depend on racist women to enhance the cause of black women. Thus she called upon black women for an organized movement to address their issues for themselves. Ruffin’s advocacy of feminist ideology was not confined to the improvement of the lot of black women, but was inclusive of the concerns of all women. In her view, black women’s movement should stand for the good of women and men. Its working should be directed to the benefit of all humanity.

Of those black women who advocated social equality for black women, the name that claims special attention is that of Anna Julia Cooper. She was one of the earliest outstanding activists to urge black
women to articulate their own experiences and to make the public aware of the way in which racism and sexism together affected their social status. Cooper entreated the public to recognize the double sex role played by black women in the society – as spokespersons for their race and as advocates of rights of women. The black women underwent double oppression under the whites and the black males. The frustration that developed in black men as a result of their emasculation by whites created tension between the black males and females. As mentioned earlier, black women were forced to own a status while on black men was thrust an effeminate status. The masculine status was thrust upon black women by making them undertake masculine tasks like ploughing and also other hideous tasks along with domestic chores. This situation created in black man a fear that they would lose the only anchor to patriarchy which ensured their supremacy over black women. Any activity to gain freedom for black women thus did not have the support of black males in the beginning. In *A Voice from the South* (1892), which is the first scholarly publication in the area of black women’s studies, Cooper reiterated her belief that black women should not assume a passive subordinate position in relationship to black man. Cooper’s view explains that social equality of the sexes would mean that black women would be able to serve as leaders in the struggle against racism. She maintained that women could play an Important role in the
black liberation struggle as a black man would.

The black feminists could never segregate sexism from racism. As in the nineteenth century struggle over the issue of women’s suffrage, in the twentieth century struggle race and sex became interlocking issues. From 1920s black feminists are seen to have put aside the advocacy of women’s rights to concentrate themselves upon the struggle for black liberation. They made black liberation synonymous with gaining full participation in the existing patriarchal nation state and their demands were for the elimination of racism, not capitalism or patriarchy. They believed that they should give priority to black liberation struggle and when freedom was earned, they could revive their struggle for women’s rights.

Although early twentieth century Black Suffragettes saw women’s rights as essential to putting an end to social ills, they repeatedly drew attention to issues of race. Thus the Afro-American women were able to develop a consciousness of feminism within racism and racism within feminism. Thus in the case of black feminists gender and race are intrinsically co-related. A feminist historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham notes:

Like gender and class, then, race must be seen as a social construction predicated upon the recognition of difference and signifying the simultaneous distinguishing and
positioning of groups vis-a-vis one another. More than this, race is a highly contested representation of relations of power between social categories by which individuals are identified and identity themselves. (1992, 254)

She observes that gender and race are embedded within the context of each other. Thus gender acquires meaning in terms of racial and class order and is embedded institutionally within this context. Thus for black feminists, racism and sexism are not separate entities, but are interdependent modes of domination which affect all the blacks in general. In brief racism expresses itself in sexist terms and sexism in racist terms.

The black woman’s rights movements have been articulated in different arenas, out of which literature has been an important medium of expression of the solidarity of black women and also bring into question the plight of black women in the face of multiple oppression. The white men and women, in their works, produced a tainted picture of black women as often demoniac, barbaric and erotic. From the sixteenth century onwards, in Western culture, the black woman has been the object of forbidden attention as the symbol of devilish sensuality. A study of ancient Western culture would reveal that white skin and Europeanized features were not norms of beauty. In fact, both African and Eastern women were set forth as exquisite models of past and
contemporary reality. Thus black woman was exhibited as a glorious archetype in ancient Western culture. But from fourteenth century onwards the image of black woman too, as paragons of beauty, began to diminish. Through pejorative connotations in literature and art created to accommodate the emerging slave trade, black women were presented in societal media as icons of evil rather than examples of divine beauty. While a white woman has often been portrayed as ideals of femininity both by male and female writers of West, black women had been perceived as anti-type of femininity.

The mulatto figure is the most discussed black female character in American literature. The “tragic” mulatto “stereotype” is the homage that white male authors have paid to the black female character. The counter type has always been the loutish “mammy” whose ignorance and religiosity serve to allay his suspicions of his own banality. The third type cast is black woman as whore. This character type depicts the most frightening aspects of uninhibited, animal like sexuality. Such portraits can be found in Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926), Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1941) and John Wideman’s *The Lynchers* (1986). But the usual sketch of black female characters presented by black men is that of mammies. The mammy figure was first introduced by Washington Irving. She is usually drawn as fat mindless, enamored, with an important part in white family home life but absent and powerless in
her own home. Like most white writers, both male and female, most black male writers have often shown a tendency to avoid creating black female characters who authentically reflect the experience of most black women.

Black male writers during the Harlem Renaissance continued to idolize the mulatto female in their works. The tragic mulatto had appeared in fiction by black women too, as early as the first novel by Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy or The Shadows Unlifted* (1899). This image continued to be the central focus in the black women’s literature to the Harlem Renaissance and even beyond to the 1970’s. She is the female heroine in the novels by Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset and Dorothy West, the major women novelists of the Harlem Renaissance. Even Zora Neale Hurston, who is considered the mother of black women’s literature, elaborates the figure of the mulatto heroine. The obsidian woman character remained in a state of neglect with Gwendolyn Brooks’ novel *Maud Martha* (1953). It was not until the fifties that the pain the society can inflict on the non-mulatto, the unlovely black women, articulated.

Until the former half of the twentieth century, the black women writers had not yet really started tackling the issue of black women as the “unlovely” women in American culture. The Harlem Renaissance of the enter-war period seemed to provide a greater impetus to artistic
expression than feminism. The Harlem Renaissance is an important phase in the black literary tradition because they began to realize the possibility of gaining acceptance, equality, advancement and power through cultural expression. Thus it was characterized by a proliferation of black and white authored novels about black life and a proliferation of responses to them. Though this period saw that a black tradition was solidified in these years, very few artists came up with innovative techniques. Artistic inventiveness seems possible only in a context of artistic tradition. Few blacks recognized a black artistic tradition within and against which they could function. Hurston drew on such traditions as sermons, call-and-response patterns, dialect and folk culture in her works.

The name of Hurston is a landmark in the history of black women's literature. She was part of the Renaissance and even after her death in 1960, she remains an important force in black literature. Many contemporary black women writers have acknowledged her influence in their works. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) has been looked upon as a brilliant novel of black female independence. Most critics recognize it as the best novel by any black woman and also an American literary classic. Though the tradition of black women writers had taken shape within the Harlem Renaissance, it has become solidified only recently. The second black literary Renaissance that ensued black
liberation movement spanning from mid 1950’s to early 1970’s enabled women to occupy a significant role in many walks of life including literature. The Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetics, which according to Addison Gayle, Jr. is an effort at de-Americanizing black consciousness and literature, gained momentum in the 1960s.

One of the exponents of the black power movement, Malcolm X, asserts that black artists emerged from and were responsible to the black community. The standards for all black arts were rooted in and derived from black communal life. Thus there was the suggestion for a distinctively Black Aesthetic in 1960’s. One of the proponents of Black Aesthetic, Hoyt W. Fuller, insisted that there should be the emergence of new black critics who will be able to articulate and expound the new aesthetic and eventually try to free it from the restrictive assumptions of white critics. Larry Neal, in his essay, “Black Arts Movement” (1960) reviewed the efforts of new black artists both to break away from the dominant white artistic modes and to pioneer in African based modes of creativity, and also an artistic mode in search of lost native traditions. Other exponents of Black Aesthetics are Amiri Baraka, Stephen Henderson and Addison Gayle, Jr.. Gayle’s contention is that since Black Aesthetics is rooted deep in Afro-American tradition, all black artists should try to retrieve and rely on their special heritage and culture and resist the temptations of assimilation, which undermined earlier black
writers like James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison.

One argument directed against Black Aesthetic is that it did not encourage any literary exploration of gender and other differences that might complicate a unitary conception of the black experience. Black feminist literary criticism, which emerged in the wake of Black Aesthetics movement, sought to comprehend this creative function of difference in black women’s literature and to render this literature readable in ways that both restructure and supplement the ideological programs of cultural nationalism. The question of stereotypes versus full characterization of black women in fiction has been the central concern of early black feminist critics like Barbara Christian and Mary Helen Washington. They argue that black women novelists have progressed from creating mere types to the creation of characters i.e., from flat stereotypes to three-dimensional depiction of authentic black womanhood, the recent black feminist writing is related to Black Aesthetic premises in that both insist that black writers should offer only positive images of black identity.

The new Renaissance of 1970’s enabled black feminists also to come together in an organized movement and black feminist literary critics also started to appear in the mid and late seventies. Black feminists in the 70’s felt themselves to be isolated and marginalized in American society. Among American black literary women active in the
seventies and eighties were Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Christian, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Gloria Naylor, Barbara Smith, Gloria T. Hull and Gayl Jones. The voice of black feminist discourse began to be heard along with other aesthetic discourses only during the last couple of decades. And with the exception of Zora Neale Hurston, all the black women novelists who have been able to make an impression belong to the “second renaissance” of the 1970’s – the two major ones being Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.

The black women novelists’ effort to deconstruct the existing image of black women and to inscribe a black feminine subject other than the discrete individual has been done by an appropriation of black folk cultural forms. In 1960’s black folk culture was assigned an ideological value in order to suit nationalist intentions. This assertion on oral forms had proved useful for black women’s fiction. The black folk cultural forms were used to subvert the dominant white literate culture. But in black women’s novels the folk culture employed has been subjected to a sharp scrutiny and exposes its often-damaging consequences for black woman. Instances can be cited: the masculine will to power enacted in Soaphead Church’s conjuring on Pecola in The Bluest Eye (1970) and the naturalistic folk philosophy of the Bottom community in Sula (1973), which entails a reproductive definition of black femininity, both the novels are by Morrison; in Gayl Jones’ Eva’s
Man (1987) with is relentless derogatory naming of black women as “bitches” and “whores”; and the deconstructive effects on women and children of the folk figure of the bad man upon whom Brownfield in The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), by Walker, is modeled. The novel that emerged as a predominant genre in 1970’s experimented with black oral forms in an attempt to liberate a uniquely black narrative voice. Folk story telling devices animate the narrative medium of Carlene Polite’s Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play (1975) and Alice Walker’s Meridian (1976) and the blues determine the narrative voice and structure of Gayl Jone’s Corregidora (1986).

The industry of black women novelists has been to establish a black feminine identity that stands on an equal footing with the established norms of white feminine identity which contrived to denigrate black female existence itself. The intention of the narratives of black women writers has been captured aptly in the words of Abena P.B. Busia as follows:

As black women we have recognized the need to rewrite or to reclaim our own herstories and to define ourselves. We are not reaffirming our presence or “actualizing” ourselves as if we have been absent, we know we never left, we are simple but quite radically reclaiming our own stories which have for so long been told for us, and been told wrong. . . .
Our literature has, therefore, become a drive for self-definition and redefinition. (1988, 1-2)

Exploration of a sense of self through both personal and group history is a central motif in many of the works by Afro-American women. The works of black women involve collective self-definition and cultural definition. The novels of black women contain common organizational strategies out of which four chief strategies are most evident. The first one is the revalidation of Africa by the incorporation of elements of folk culture, oral tradition in particular, into written text. The second is the creation of a protagonist who can tell her own story. The third one re-examines the role of women in society through the exploration of the role and nature of female bonding and the creation of families of choice. The last one is the conquering physical space as a metaphor for autonomy and personal responsibility.

Apart from black nationalist issues, the central theme of the Black women’s writings is that of female bonding. Their novels explore the idea that their dreams of love and acceptance need not be fulfilled by sex or answered only by men. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) is an exemplary instance. The lesbian relationship between Shug Avery and Celie reveals how self definition is attained through that relationship of love and acceptance. The multiple jeopardy faced by women of color and the liberation from this oppression in a political, social, economic
and cultural context are the dominant themes of the black women writers. They provide a realistic expression of the lives of these oppressed women and also how they begin to define themselves from the point of view of what they have to do with their lives rather than the point of view of what they lack or must not do. They try to recover the black feminine identity from the position of the “Other” and thus they have extended a full significance to the feminist movement, which is usually considered a movement of white women. Thus we can say that just as the name “black feminism” suggests, it is that branch of feminism that has remained blackened out, in fact, eclipsed by mainstream white feminism.

Within the black feminist movement, the concept of “womanism” employed by Alice Walker is very significant. The plight of black woman as “black” is symbolically dramatized by Alice Walker’s insistence on the word womanism as distinct from feminism. The word “feminist” has come to be connotative of radical white woman. Hence Walker felt the need for a different and a new terminology to adequately convey black women’s feminism and recognize the limitation of the term “feminism” in the context of black women. A womanist, according to Walker, is “[a] black feminist or feminist of color . . . committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people male and female . . . (but who) loves herself regardless” (1983, xi-xii).
Till now, though we have been tracing the Afro-American activities of feminism, it is equally applicable to African feminism too. Black feminism, in fact, is not merely Afro-American feminism, but African too. Defining an indigenous African feminist position Carole Boyce Davies notes that Afro-American feminism is:

... not antagonistic to African men, but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women’s abjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all American people. ... [It] examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment and does not simply import Western women’s agendas. ... [It] looks at traditional and contemporary awareness of choice for women. (Davies and Graves, 1986, 9-10)

Indigenous feminism reclaims women’s significance in the society as it simultaneously acknowledges the need for change. For African women, the feminist consciousness is linked to those traditional forces that include the family’s importance and the woman’s sustaining relationship to her children. The meaning of family continues to hold intrinsic values that can insure survival and self-reliance. The ancient history of Africa reveals that the majority of the diverse African societies had been matrilineal. But colonization usurped and demolished
the matriarchal social structures and replaced it by an oppressive patriarchy which suited the self-promoting interests of the colonizers. And the spirit of nationalism working towards liberation undertook to enhance the development of patriarchal power structures. The nationalist ideology and the spirit of nationalism in African literature have often sought allegiance to male centered nationalism, thereby working to limit the representations of and by woman. Nationalism, in its manifestations in the earlier phase, has become the venue for the development of gendered power. But in the struggle against colonialism women too began to be mobilized as political actors even in those societies in which participation in the political sphere had hitherto been restricted to men.

The brutal and exploitative enterprise of colonialism had occasioned the destruction of Africa and African social organization. In different parts of Africa like the Kenyan “highlands” and South Africa, the social life began to undergo distortion, taking it to the finale of a complete displacement of the fabric of social life. But colonialism did not succeed in completely wiping out the form of indigenous social existence. Though the African cultures and cultural institutions were driven to an incorporation within and subordinated to an imperial economy, they could resist a complete assimilation that would have resulted in its total disappearance. They were able to retain their language and other indigenous modes of cultural production and
expression which constituted an integral part of their social life. Women had, then, most evidently contributed to its elaboration. The oral tradition, which is an inextricable part of African culture, has always been marked by the enthusiastic voice of women. They are active as singers of praise songs, dancers, community poets and storytellers. African women have characteristically assumed a plural voice, speaking representatively as mothers, lovers, wives, cultivators and housekeepers.

The portrait of African women that has been generally drawn is either tainted or sacrosanct. She usually receives the image of ‘mother’ which invites a number of connotations of origins – birth, hearth, home, roots and the umbilical root. This rests upon the identification of mother with earth, the national territory, language and the national tongue. Kofi Awanoor, the Ghanian writer in *The Breast of the Earth* (1975) considers ‘mother’ as the presiding genius of the home and the community. Though she is the provider, who safeguards the earth and who becomes responsible for production due to socio-economic pressures of urban migration, on occasions of spiritual activities, she is considered to be an ill-omen. On such occasions her presence is considered profane. When important rituals are observed, she is forbidden entrance. She is the image of the most revered Mother Africa, but she finds herself in a position of binary opposition. She is at once idolized and demonized.

In the post World War years, anti-colonial movement gathered
momentum and an increasing number of compositions in African literature began to appear in English, French and Portugese. Besides, a number of women too rose into prominence, especially in West Africa. Two significant names are Efua Sutherland of Ghana and Flora Nwapa of Nigeria. In the works of both these writers, we witness the expression of the vitality of indigenous cultural forms. What makes Nwapa more important is that she is an ardent feminist and a champion of women’s rights. Her first novel *Efuru* (1986) was the first novel by an African woman to be published and the first novel by an African woman to be published in Britain. Her novels like *Efuru* and *Idu* (1970), which focus upon patriarchal rural communities, offer a searching critique of the works of such Nigerian male writers like Chinua Achebe and Onuora Nzekwu, in which the exploitation of women in the domestic sphere and the work-place is represented uncritically. In *This Is Lagos and Other Stories* (1992), Nwapa is seen to be offering a repudiation of the masculinist depiction of women presented by Nigerian writers like Cyprian Ekwensi and Nkem Nwankwo.

The subsequent women writers whose works can be regarded as milestones in African women’s literature are Buchi Amechta, Zulu Sofola, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariamma Ba and Bessie Head. The novel in Africa has been predominated by historical and nationalistic themes and women had little role to play as heroines of feminine value. Emechta, in
her works, has made active attempts to counter the stereotypic images of women in African literature. Her novel, *The Double Yoke* (1983) is about the contradictory demands placed upon contemporary Nigerian women attempting to advance socially in a hierarchical and male dominated society. Here she explores the complex issues surrounding women’s experience of western influences in colonial and post-colonial Africa. On most occasions, Emechta is seen to assume a self-consciously metropolitan stance. But she has not failed to draw from the memories of her Nigerian past and of her mother’s tales, emblems of women’s experiences which may be counter-posed to iconic images in male nationalistic texts. Her metaphors for the condition of woman in pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary societies are those of the slave girl – the woman bought and sold, of the deeply ironic joys of ‘motherhood’ and of the double yoke, the interlocking forms of oppression to which women are subject.

The works of Aidoo and Sofola expose the shortcomings of post-colonial society. They suggest that the end of British colonialism had given birth to an internal colonialism wherein the elite that came to power on the withdrawal of the colonizers, struck a familiar note with the departing British colonizers. The nation that was set up was nominally independent, but, in fact, was still overwhelmingly colonial in its organic structures. *So Long a Letter* (1980), by Mariamma Ba, centers on the
lives of two privileged Senegalese women, juxtaposing their experiences as members of a clan that gains power at independence, with their experiences as women still subordinated to male power. Bessie Head’s *Serowe, Village of the Rain Wind* (1981) engages with history, the experience of a community under political and climatic change. She has engaged multi-vocality as her method and form. By commemorating and foregrounding the voice of women, the women writers have been able to make their way into the national community.

The voices and experiences of women have been fore-grounded not only by women writers but also male writers like Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi wa Thion’o and Nuruddin Farah. The works of these writers make an evident attempt to restore to women their freedom and dignity. Through narrative images, they provide truthful assessments of women’s life. Sembene Ousmane in his *God’s Bits of Wood* (1957) focuses explicitly on the contribution of women to the success of the heroic strike undertaken by African rail workers in French West Africa in 1947-1948. The women, through their resourcefulness in fending for the community at large during the last months of hunger and deprivation, not only made victory possible, but also forged a new self-awareness of the social power they wielded as women. Ngugi in his *The River Between* (1965) shows how Kenyan highlands are affected by colonialism. In the novel, only two female characters of importance appear, and their role seems to
enhance the development of the character of the hero. These two characters appear on the scene only for a very short span, but their presence is pervasive and their role influential in the novel. Skills of passivity attributed to womanhood is made to overcome in these women. They are seen to refuse the shackles of patriarchy and move into liberation. Waringa, the symbol of justice and a new order, is the central figure of Ngugi’s *Devil on the Cross* (1980). The behavioral patterns usually attributed to a hero is here assigned to the heroine. Criticism has come against this portrayal saying that Waringa acquires male characteristics. But from another point of view, we can repudiate this because she can be called a soldier of justice who wages war against injustice. She marches towards liberation. It is a prejudice to call anybody who acts or takes up arms as male and those who don’t as women. In the novels of Nuruddin Farah too women emerge as strong characters, capable, self-reliant and dignified. Farah’s novels are mostly centered on female characters who are dynamic, self-willed and manipulators of their own life and we witness their development from submissiveness to a state of independence through the development of the novel. His *From a Crooked Rib* (1970) and *Sardines* (1981) are instances.

As seen earlier feminism provided an impetus in creating the female literary Renaissance in 1970s. Drawing on a newly politicized and
woman identified sub-culture, women exuberantly celebrated their “differences” and gained mastery over a chaotic history/“her story.” One of the major trends of the period is the movement of the ethnic writer from the margins to the mainstream of women’s literary history. Imbibing energy from the Black Power movement, the native American movement and the re-politicization of the Chicano-Puerto Rican and Asian-American communities as well as from the feminist movement, ethnic artists reclaimed the traditions of their communities. The black literary artists, especially women and feminists articulate cultural traditions in their works so as to regain an authentic indigenous voice which speaks for the marginalized. The retrieval of culture is then the retrieval of their identity, be it the male or the female. They invoked older folklores and indigenous motifs and symbols and mixed poetic and prose genres that were part of those traditions. Since storytellers and legendary figures symbolizing artistic creativity were frequently female, ethnic writers saw the recuperation of their ethnic tradition as another means of reclaiming their matrilineal heritage. The major ethnic groups who have contributed to the development of the new stream of ethnicity in America are Afro-Americans, Amer-Indians, Chicanas, Jewish-Americans etc. The writers from the African continent have also made an impressive contribution towards this canon.

In order to comprehend the significance of ethnic writers in the
literary canon, we need to understand above all, what is meant by
ethnicity and then place the writers within the context of ethno-centrism.
So the ensuing part of this chapter is devoted to a study of what ethnicity
is and the placing of gender within ethnocentrism.

Focus on ethnic studies came into vogue in the 1960’s. The
Vietnam War and the Civil rights Movement in the United States
occasioned the development of programs, centers and departments in
colleges and universities, devoted to the study of particular racial and
ethnic groups. Thus ethnic studies began to stimulate a new momentum
in socio-cultural, literary and political fields, thereby acquiring a new
significance. This development has been largely a response to the
heightened levels of political awareness regarding ethnic conflicts
worldwide and as a program for the recognition of multiculturalism.

The term ethnicity is believed to have been used for the first time
in “Yankee City Series.” As a concept, ethnicity holds within it a whole
range of social, national, tribal, religious, linguistic or cultural features.
Ethnicity is a composite fusion of numerous traits that belong to the
nature of any ethnic group: the shared beliefs, values, norms, tastes,
behaviors, experiences, etc. Remaining within an ethnic group, the
person possesses a powerful identity that cannot be denied, rejected or
snatched away by others.

The word ethnicity encompasses a variety of definitions. The
reason is that ethnic groups are distinguished with respect to their cultural criteria and the defining characteristics of “ethnicity” are dependent on the defining traits which identify a group. Furthermore its components are related to time and place and thus like any social phenomenon, are prone to change. Thus the possible definition that can be offered regarding an ethnic group will be this: a group that is socially distinct in terms of cultural or national characteristics. Though what is ethnic is sometimes identifiable with national credentials, ethnicity is not absolutely identifiable with nationality. But the name by which an ethnic group understands itself is still most often the name of an originating nation, whether that nation still exists or not.

Though ethnicity cannot have a total identification with nationality, the term invites relevance when placed in relation to the nationality of a particular group. When national groups are located as minorities within a larger national group, the concept of ethnicity achieves wider currency. Such instances can be quoted from the cases of Afro-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Black-British, etc. The significance of the concept is situated not only within the context of migration of a national group into another, but also in the case of colonization, the most conspicuous instance being that of the Africans whose very culture is destabilized, deliberated and dilapidated by the colonizers.

Taking into account the fact that ethnicity attains higher
performance in the context of migration, a further definition of ethnicity has been provided by W.W. Isajaw as follows:

A group or category of persons who have a common ancestral origin and the same cultural traits, who have a sense of peoplehood and group belonging, who are of immigrant background and have either minority or majority status within a larger society. (1974, 118)

Max Weber’s perception of ethnic group is also based on a similar perspective and can be stated as follows:

. . . human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent – because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization or migration – in such a way that this belief is important for the continuation of the non-kinship communal relationship. (1968(a), 389)

A study of ethnicity includes a number of traits like immigrant group’s common national or geographic origin, same culture or customs, race or physical characteristics, religion, language, customs and even cuisines. However, now in majority of ethnic groups, religion is no more a defining factor in determining the characteristics of that group. And in a number of cases, the practical and social implications of a group’s status have been influenced by the memories of a past, of a common national
origin. Thus they remain inter-related by a sense of solidarity, which arises from recognition of a lineage that can be traced back to a homeland. They share myths of common ancestry, historical memories and elements of common culture. These cultural elements are the symbolic insignia of their people hood. A few of those elements can be identified as follows: kinship patterns, physical contiguity, religious affiliation, nationality, phenotypical features or any combination of these.

Landing on a more specific definition, to be ethnic means to be native and indigenous. This definition receives an interpretation that is deeper when we observe it from a contemporaneous point of view, relating it to the dynamics of migration. Colonization has resulted in the immigration to settled colonies like United States, Canada and Australia – there is the migration of the colonized people to the colonizing center. Consequently, we find that Canada possesses a mosaic culture and the older European nations can no longer claim to have a common ethnic identity. They are in themselves a heterogeneous group and hybridized in time. On a subject people colonial domination may be imposed by way of suppressing traditional ways of living and thinking, together with the introduction of alien ideas and values, since the essential feature of colonization is the destruction of a people’s identity. This may be done through various agencies of the colonial power.
Many Africans became alienated from their cultural background either through slave trade or through the process of colonization. If they are so uprooted that they dare not assert it openly any longer, this background never dies out completely. It remains dormant within the tribal structures to be used again as a basis for future development. The colonial power cannot ensure itself the imposition of a complete cultural occupation of the colonized. The majority of the people retains their identity and preserves it to recreate it and make a history of their own. Black Americans are now redefining themselves in ethnic terms. Among blacks brought in as slaves, African ethnic traditions only persisted as submerged fragments. Now they are reaching back to pan-African heritage to create on ethnic tradition of their own. They are trying to recreate their identity on the basis of cultural continuities rather than on simplistic caste-racial criteria used in oppressing them. They are also now seeking means of amplifying all the criteria comprising ethnicity. Territorial origins in Africa and its economic strongholds in present American settings, old folk and religious practices, and features of lifestyle, family relationships, and artistic traditions are being scrutinized for their Afro-American flavor.

The formation of an ethnic group is something like the formation of identity. The need for manifestations of one's identity is of no relevance in a context where there is only one identity. Thus the
inevitability of the formation of a particular identity becomes a historical construct, which is occasioned by an intermingling of more than one cultural or linguistic group. Though the anthropological definition of an ethnic group takes shape from their distinctive beliefs, folk arts, dress, cuisines, etc., it is the possession of a common language or dialect that insists in them a community sense. This language is the hallmark of an ethnic identity. The multifarious linguistic features represent tenable traditions that are singular to the members of the ethnic group and the linguistic variants used by them will also be of their own inventions. Ethnicity thus involves both identity and culture.

The phrase “ethnic group” has not yet found a single word equivalent. An ethnic group is a self-perceived inclusion of those who hold in common, set of traditions not shared by others with whom they are in contact. Such traditions typically include “folk” religious beliefs and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity and common ancestry or place of origin. The group’s actual history often trails off into legend or mythology, which includes some concept of an unbroken biological-genetic generational continuity, sometimes regarded as giving special inherited characteristics to the group. Ashley Montagu defines an ethnic group as follows:

An ethnic group represents one of a number of populations, which together comprise the species Homo sapiens, but
individually maintain their differences, physical and cultural, by means of isolating mechanisms such as geographic and social barriers. These differences will vary as the power of the geographic and social barriers vary. Where these barriers are of low power, neighboring ethnic group will integrate or hybridize with one another. Where these barriers are of high power, such ethnic groups will tend to remain distinct from each other or replace each other geographically or ecologically. (1952, 87-88)

A sense of common origin, of common beliefs and values, and of a common feeling of survival – in brief, a “common cause” – has been important in uniting people into self-defining groups growing up together in a social unit and sharing a common verbal and gestural language allows humans to develop mutually understood accommodation, which radically diminish situations of possible confrontation and conflict. The cultural bases for social groupings in society are varied. Some groupings like lineage systems are defined reciprocally and horizontally. Kinship networks operate horizontally as forms of reciprocal material exchange. Other groupings, such as class and caste, are stratified vertically, with emphasis on the status of an individual or a group with respect to other persons or groups.

Ethnicity can be a source of considerable conflict owing to the
reason that ethnic groups do not remain fixed within a stratified system. A separate ethnic identity, when it persists in a group, tends to maintain boundaries like territory, religion, language, and aesthetic cultural patterns define a group’s identity. Most ethnic groups have a tradition of territorial or political independence, even though the present members have become part of another, or several political entities. In numerically large, politically independent groups, ethnic identity tends to be coextensive with national or regional identity. Social and political problems resulting from continual attempts by groups to extend their territory account for much of the world’s political history. Some ethnic minorities maintain themselves, to an extent, by sustaining hope for political independence or for the recapturing of lost national territory. Some other groups inhabit a territory that is difficult to penetrate and that, therefore, enables them to maintain the flavor of ethnic identity.

Economic factors too contribute towards defining the identity of an ethnic group. They may be consumed into another larger dominant population, but they resist assimilation by maintaining a certain amount of economic autonomy. Religion also plays a determining role in defining the boundaries of an ethnic group. For some ethnic groups, religious beliefs about their historical origin and past tribulations provide the vital definition of who they are. When a native religion is destroyed by the imposition of a conquering people’s beliefs, the group identity
then receives a severe blow. When sustaining beliefs are undermined by this type of cultural contact, then individual and collective will to survive is weakened, leading to a collective anomie.

Particular cultures afford particular patterns related to aesthetic traditions used symbolically as a basis of self and social identity. Tastes in food, dance traditions, style of clothing and definitions of physical beauty are ways in which cultures identify themselves by aesthetic patterns. In times of ethnic resurgence, greater emphasis is put on aesthetic features related to communication and social communion. Their patterns of communication form a basis for mutual acceptance and identity, and include a vocabulary of gestures and formal language characteristics. A new holiday can be fabricated or new styles of dress can be defined as ethnic to signify an ethnic belonging based on “authentic” African culture. Modes of ethnic persistence depend on the capacity to maintain art forms distinctive of a group rather than of an individual. Language is often cited as a major component in the maintenance of a separate ethnic identity, and language undoubtedly constitutes the single most characteristic feature of ethnic identity. But ethnicity is frequently related more to the symbolism of a separate language than to its actual use by all members of a group. The Irish Gaelic is a symbol of their Celtic ethnicity, as do the Scots, but speaking Gaelic or Scottish is not essential to group membership in either case.
But when language has transcended national frontiers, as in the case of English, French and Spanish, ethnicity does not encompass all speakers of the language.

The emergence of the idea of soul food during the inter-cultural revitalization of Afro-American in the 1960's suggested an exclusive ethnic dietary system. Soul food is a reference not only to the content of southern Afro-American diet, but also to its preparation styles. Pork is a favorite soul food meat that must be prepared in a particular way. In addition, soul food requires the use of pork fat as a seasoning in the cooking of vegetables in a slow stewing manner and in the frying of other favorite foods such as chicken, fish and potatoes. The soul food also includes various uses of corn and sweet potatoes. During the 1960s older Afro-Americans having roots in the South would included various wild games in the soul food menu, such as squirrel, rabbit, possum and deer. Just as ethnic or regional identity is a cognitive construct, ethnic food way is a symbolism and a state of mind. Afro-American food ways are Afro-American because they recognize them to be so. Though immigrant ethnic groups adopt new food ways, the old food ways endure, particularly in the form of communal feasts, when social group members come together to reconfirm their group identity.

We have already seen that ethnicity is based on common ancestry deriving from race, religion or national origin. A closer examination of
ethnic identity will show that in a given society, one or more of these three criteria of ethnicity may be emphasized at the expense of the others. Sometimes, the three reinforce one another and provide a conception of peoplehood that is at once racial, religious and national. The case of white "Anglo-Saxon Protestant" is an instance. An important question about ethnicity in any society, then, is the relative importance placed upon racial, religious and nationality bases of ethnic identity.

As long as the life of ethnic people is not corrupted by any casual or intermittent contacts with outsiders, as long as they live in isolation, the ethnic life styles evolved over long years of reinforcement to the rightness of "the way," will be maintained from generation to generation. When the outside contacts become more penetrating, either through invasion or by the process of migration with the intention of permanent residence in territories dominated by other ethnic groups, radical changes in traditional life styles may occur. This adoption of the alien ways is called "acculturation." The languages, style of dress, and public "manners" of the dominant groups are imitated by the subordinate ones. Nevertheless, they do retain important elements of ethnic life style in the matter of basic values, values that are expressed in the privacy of relations with others of their own ethnic group. Outsiders are often unaware of these subtleties of unacculturated ethnic life styles. Such acculturation, wherein there is an adoption of the dominant life style
while retaining the subtleties of their ethnic identity, produces “biculural” individuals who can get along quite well in either group by shifting their behavior in one group or the other.

Three major experiences, that have been dealt with earlier, stand out for their potential to provide ethnicity with a cultural “substance” composed of behaviors and ritual distinguishing group members from others and helping to define an ethnic uniqueness worth maintaining. These are the eating of ethnic foods, the use of words and phrases from a mother tongue, and the upholding of ethnic customs and traditions. To these can be added a fourth – the participation in ethnic festivals. These festivals generally celebrate ethnic cultures and thereby help to preserve a sense of their special values. The mundane rituals and practices involved in cultural maintenance are potentially of greater significance as carriers of subtle ethnic attitudes and values, as markers of ethnic boundaries and as ceremonies for the building of ethnic solidarity. This potential is illustrated by the use of a mother tongue. The important feature of an ethnic culture is defined within language and is accessible to only those who know the mother tongue. Speech in a mother tongue eliminates anyone who does not know the language and thus provides a way of communicating things intended to be understood only by those who share an ethnic bond. This enables the demarcation of an ethnic boundary.

A valuable indicator of the role of food in maintaining a sense of
ethnic tradition is its use in celebrations, which raises it out of the realm of the mundane and may be particularly likely to call forth pristine culinary traditions, enhancing the ritual and boundary demarcating significance of food. Food or language can provide the basis for celebrating and renewing the solidarity of common ethnic background, but they can also allow the descendants of alien cultures to appreciate an ethnic heritage. This fosters a solidarity that transcends conventional ethnic confines and is based on a mutual appreciation of ethnic heritage, a recognition of the shared experience of being the descendants of ethnics whatever their specific origins may be.

In brief, the ethnic identity of a group consists of its subjective, symbolic or emblematic use of any aspect of a culture, or a perceived separate origin and continuity in order to differentiate themselves from other groups. In time, these emblems can be imposed from outside or embraced from within. Ethnic features such as language, clothing or food can become emblems, for they express who one is and to what group one’s loyalty belongs. As a subjective sense of belonging, ethnicity cannot be determined by what one feels about oneself, not by how one is observed to behave. In a simple independent culture, the sense of self is relatively uncomplicated. One’s sense of belonging and social meaning – past, present and future – are defined without contradiction in a unified belief system. This unified sense of belonging is disrupted when the state
emerges as an institution for governing – when several ethnic groups are coercively unified within a single political framework.

In terms of identity, ethnic groups are marked on the basis of certain social elements, which offer a distinction between “us” and “them” – the various groups within a larger group. Along with the individual and group level aspects, ethnicity also includes inter-group elements. The difference that marks the ethnic minorities as a separate group is considered to reside in them and not in their relation to the dominant group. Their ethnic identity is seen as added to or combined with the larger national identity. In addition to identity, culture is also an important aspect of ethnicity. A group’s culture and its manifestation through individuals are not in a stable state. It is prone to mutative elements. At the group level and from a psychological perspective, it can be seen to consist of shared lenses for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating and acting. Apart from the features attributed to the group in general, culture may also be attended to in terms of its impact on the individual members, that is, how it is constructed or represented for them. Bernard M. Ferdman has described the construct of cultural identity as referring to one’s individual images of the cultural features characteristic of one’s group together with both one’s feelings about these features and one’s understanding of their location in oneself.
It has often been assumed that loss of identity within a dominant group is often the causative force behind the search for ethnicity. The formation of an ethnic group is something like the formation of identity and the question of loss or manifestation of one’s identity is of no concern in a context where there is only one identity. Thus the quest for identity and the creation of identity is occasioned by the multiplicity of cultural or linguistic groups interacting within a framework. This renders the inevitability of the formation of a particular identity to be the product of a peculiar historical circumstance. A frequent and constant contact between cultural groups does not ensure the melting of the boundaries. Instead as the modern theorists assert, the members of each group nurture sentimental flavors of community life. This makes the distinctions and the demarcating elements to be very conspicuous, thereby, conferring a distinguishing identity on these groups. Such a context necessitated by the historical demands of the present implements a regeneration of the credentials of the past.

The loss and retrieval strategy of identity crisis is often coupled with the problem of marginalization. Elements of marginalization have been evident in the uses of the term “ethnic,” and have acquired much significance in the contemporary context of immigration. Originally, the term has been used to refer to heathen nations. Later on, it came to suggest those groups that are not part of the mainstream – the groups that
are not identified with the dominant national mythology. Usually the dominant group is not regarded as an ethnic group because the national identity and its mythology have been constructed by its identity. Of late, studies have revealed that an ethnic group does not necessarily refer to marginalized groups, but all the groups that are culturally distinctive. This has endowed the concept of ethnicity with a powerful political function.

The ethnicity of a group assumes a dominant role in the enhancement of the political interests of the group, no matter what the status of the ethnic group is. The individual powerlessness within a group often finds a solution in group power. Likewise, an ethnic group plays a significant role in the acquisition of political power within a society. But what makes ethnic group stand out from political parties and similar institutions is that the boundaries of an ethnic group is strictly specified and impenetrable, and allows no movement into and out of the group. But it cuts across class boundaries creating a unified sensibility and sense of identity. The process is often found to be not a deliberation but an unconscious eventuality. The sense of unity is often seen to ignite a strong urge for liberation from servitude amongst the marginalized or the subjugated and has led to the establishment of an ethnic identity that is substantial, clearly defined and conclusive.

To a large extent, migration has been the cause that motivated the
emergence of ethnic groups as prominent groups marked by individualizing traits, emancipating and settling themselves apart from the dominant power factors, and from each other, claiming an equal status in the society. The case of the United States is an important example. They have multiple categories of immigrant groups who constitute various ethnic groups. Those who have migrated to America from Spain and its related nations are generally called Hispanics. Then there are the other European immigrant groups such as the Scotts, Germans, Jews, English, French and Italians and the slave immigrants from Africa, the Afro-Americans. The most pronounced and conspicuous problems of race and ethnicity that have received universal attention are those of the blacks – namely the Africans and the Afro-Americans.

Colonization on the part of European colonists has resulted in the suppression and subjugation of various races and ethnic groups worldwide. Colonization is a consuming process – the culture, tradition, beliefs, creeds, language and the history itself of a nation is imbibed into that of the invading dominant white imperialist power, resulting in the total subjugation of the colonized. This created in the colonized the dilemma of identity and displacement, a total alienation from the self and from the surroundings. From the undisputed status of the master they have been pulled down to the derogatory status of a slave. They have been displaced from the peak of the pyramid of authority, from their land
and all other possessions and supplanted by the all-powerful whites who established themselves as the privileged, cultured, superior “self” and the blacks as the uncivilized, barbarous self. In the sixteenth century, a picture painted by Leo Africanus portrays the blacks as rustic people without reason, skills, or wit and live a beastly, chaotic life, devoid of law and order. This view rendered an inferior status to the blacks under the whites. Under the pretext of missionary activities and trade – the most effective tools of conquest employed by the colonizers to overpower and tame the Dark Continent and the Orient Land – there was a gradual but total subjugation and victimization along with attempts at assimilation. This proved detrimental to the social, moral, political and economic edifice of each and every enslaved community. Their enterprise was to effectuate a total absorption of the colonized into the colonizing group enforcing on them a secondary position in the society. The culture, the tradition, language and all such formative aspects of the colonized were in constant threat of obliteration under the pervading, hegemonic, imposing, dominant culture.

While the newfound land of America provided bright new horizons for the aspiring tyrants of Europe, it was a newfound darkness for the inhabitants of Africa. While the blacks within Africa were displaced within their own geographic boundaries, the plight of the blacks displaced in slave trade and exported to America was abominable. They
faced serious problems of class and race and had to find an existence in a society that nullified their very identity and they had to lead an alienated life in an alien land. All the distinguishing traits that rendered them a specific ethnic identity were attempted to be erased and replaced by those of the dominant ruling group. But they still held on to the memories of their past and, in spite of the hostile situations, nurtured and fondled their long lost culture and identity, their long lost roots in the land of their fore-fathers. All these feelings finally gave way to struggles, revolutions and calls for renaissance. There came the clarion call from different parts of the African continent for national independence and in America there started the struggle for emancipation and equal rights. The demand for national independence has always been accompanied by a demand for cultural revival. Thus a number of the African intellectuals have become ethnologists. One such key figure in African ethnology is Jomo Kenyatta. His *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938) is an authentic and powerful political agenda. In this work he denounces the injustices related to the distribution of the fertile land in White Highlands to European colonists. This was the source of a contention, which has dominated the history of his country ever since it was colonized. In his conclusion to the book he has explicitly stated thus:

> When the European comes to the Gikuyu country and robs the people of their land, he is taking away not only their
livelihood, but the material symbol that holds family and tribe together. In doing this he gives one blow, which cuts away the foundations from the whole of Gikuyu life – social, moral and economic. When he explains, to his satisfaction and after the most superficial glance at the issues involved, that he is doing this for the sake of the Africans, to ‘civilize them,’ ‘teach them the disciplinary value of regular work’ and ‘give them the benefit of European progressive ideas,’ he is adding insult to injury, and need expect to convince no one but himself. (1938, 317)

Throughout his book we can witness an ardent spirit of nationalism while all the time adhering to the ancestral traditions of his tribe.

As we have seen that the impact of various dominant institutions of the colonizer have caused the absence or loss of a native language, as in the case of colonies, or have resulted in an alienation, as is the case with the immigrants, the absence or loss of a distinctive language has not prevented the blacks, the non-Hebrew speaking Jews, and such other minority groups from maintaining a sense of ethnic identity. In fact, these groups have made use of the acquired foreign language like English or French or any other European language as a medium for the expression of themselves and their thoughts and also as a means of national expression. It is in so doing that they have been able to reach out to their
brethren elsewhere. Men/women of literary creativity have made use of the universal language as a means to express their problems to secure a universal platform for the discussion of their problems. In spite of having to resort to an acquired language, they have been able to establish their ethnic identity through that language. In black fiction, from Richard Wright onwards, the black is depicted as the dark “Other” in American culture. Ralph Ellison, in his works, have captured the double consciousness in a black American, the presence of two souls – that of an American and of a Negro – two conflicting ideals within one dark body. His attempt is to portray the lack of identity, the namelessness and expose the insecurity suffered by the blacks. Jewish-American writers like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth portray man’s place as in exile or as a beneficiary in the modern world. Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud deal with themes that serve to retrieve Jewish morals. The ethnic tribe of Kiowa Indians is the most hostile towards the white Americans and their writers are chiefly occupied with their lost Eden. Navare Scott Momaday is haunted by the memories of this lost Eden. He is a typical ethnic novelist and best knows who the Kiowa Indians are and why. His works often capture the patterns of their myths and history. The ban on their Sun dance, the image of the Kiowa people’s survival, is central to Momaday’s themes. Thus ethnic writings, more often than not, exhibit aspirations for recognition, well-being, civil rights and educational
opportunities.

The people of color have been placed within a framework of values dominated by the mainstream culture of whites who tended to assume that the identity of the slaves could be defined according to the whims and fancies of the whites. The 'master culture,' like the master of the plantation who sought to rule the lives of the slaves, tried to impose its norms and values on the minority group who were derided because of their color and because of an inherited European view of the African as barbaric, heathen and inferior.

The African was . . . defined as an inferior human being. The representation of the African as Other signified phenotypical and cultural characteristics as evidence of this inferiority and the attributed condition of Africans therefore constituted a measure of European progress and civilization. (Miles, 1989, 30)

This delimiting representation of the Africans was effected to increase the power and status of the master. The slave was only a mirror against which the whites measured themselves and their value systems and to assume the inferiority of the African thus bolstered the power of the whites. The master slave system was grounded in denials of black history, identity, humanity, community, knowledge and language. These were all seen as means through which slaves might assert themselves and
ultimately question their condition in relation to the dominant group. To deny these was a method of control used by the masters, a device to deny the slaves identity and history and enforce an impression of being adrift, worthless and devoid of ancestry. James Baldwin’s writings sought to construct a place in America for the black man and to defy being positioned by challenging the white world’s assumptions:

[T]he truth about a black man, as a historical entity and as a human being, has been hidden from him, deliberately and cruelly; the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world’s definitions.

(1985, 62)

The denials, brutality and restraints of slavery could not destroy completely the persistent desire in the slave community to maintain their own identities and their own sense of culture. In spite of the subjugating institutions, the colonized blacks and the slave communities of America were able to create an independent art form and a distinctive ‘voice’ through channels of expression outside the control of the master-culture. In response to dismissal of ‘native culture’ by the colonizers, many cultural nationalists tended to assert the existence of a culture which was the antithesis of the colonial one. Where the colonizer has contemptuously dismissed the native as belonging to the natural rather than the human world, cultural nationalists affirmed their people’s
closeness to nature and declared their culture essentially agrarian or peasant in contrast to the urban and mechanistic civilization of the colonizer. The colonizer insisted that the natives had no history and the cultural nationalists pointed to an unchanging tradition, a timelessness, or a circular history which would reinstall the pre-colonial past. This history, tradition and culture of the pre-colonial past had been maintained by subjugated blacks especially through songs and storytelling. Where the colonizer celebrated his literature as a mark of his superior and developing civilization, the colonized intellectual emphasized oral traditions which were claimed to preserve the past and celebrated the language and voice of the non-literature folks.

The literature produced as part of a cultural nationalist project is a literature produced in opposition to the narratives and representations, which deny dignity and autonomy to those who have been colonized. This opposition is addressed not just to the colonizing power, but to the people of the emerging nation and seeks to engage them in their own project of self-definition. The move towards the assertion of the political independence in Africa was accompanied by an extraordinary efflorescence of literary creation and cultural assertion in these nations. For the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o literary creativity as well as literary criticism is irrevocably caught in issues of representation and power which forces any discussion of “African literature” into an
examination of colonial domination. In his *Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), he states that “... the domination of our languages and cultures by those of imperialist Europe” (6) is the crux of the issue for African literature. African languages and cultures have been and are at the point of attack and displacement in the imperialist confrontation between Europe and Africa. In his *Decolonizing the Mind* (1987) too Ngugi associates language very closely with culture so that the two almost work on an axis of interchangeability. Both language and culture are the blueprints of identity and value for a nation or a people. Quoting his words: “Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history” (1987, 15).

The Bolekaja critics (Chinweizu, Onwuchekwu Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike) claim that African literature is an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literatures. It has its own traditions, models and norms and it is separate and radically different from that of the European even when it is written in a European language. African culture is an indispensable part of African literature because it is a reservoir of the values, sensibilities, aesthetics and achievements of traditional African thought and imagination outside plastic arts. As to the question ‘what is African literature?’ the most accepted definition was put forward by the Canadian critic T.R.M Creighton that “African literature is any work in which an African setting
is authentically handled or to which experiences which originate in Africa are integral” (Kanneh, 1998, 41). Cyprian Ekwensi’s claim is also similar in tone: “[T]he main theme may be anthropological, traditional or modern, but the traits, temperaments and reactions of the characters will be peculiarly African due to influences of tribe culture and history” (Kanneh, 1998, 41). Thus African literature is a repository of the traditional, tribal and cultural history. In order to reclaim the identity of blacks, the African literary artists articulate these elements in their works. They maintain the importance of their ethnic values and culture.

In the late 1930’s there came up a literary movement called the Negritude. In its restricted sense, it represents the use of the techniques of French impressionism by black French speaking poets to break away from French culture and to give creative expression to an inner, African self that had been hidden away. But in a broader sense, it is the process by which black people, who have been cut off from and made to despise their own African heritage, learn to know themselves again, come to accept themselves again, and begin to believe in themselves again. Knowing who you are and accepting who you are makes it possible for you to function as a valued and effective human being. Slavery and colonization placed blacks in settings where the validity of their being was attacked. They were forced to learn alien values and were forced to perform rituals which were outside the framework of their cultural
heritage. They were given a distorted view of what they are. In short blacks had no opportunity to value themselves and the black value. Negritude undertook to reclaim his self for the black man, wherever he is, in Africa, Europe, America, Canada or in whichever part of the world.

Representation of Africa in Afro-American texts is conditioned by the histories of exile. The Afro-American connection with Africa is not new. “African consciousness” has always been a part of the psyche of the African people, in forced exile in South America, the Carribean Islands and in the United States, though in varying degrees. Most of the literate Africans in exile have always had a positive view towards Africa. They have rejected the image of Africa as a backward and barbarous land. The early black writers and thinkers made every attempt to locate Africa on the map of human geography.

In a culture whose dominant historical voice has been white, there is a vital need for African Americans to present their lives, past and future, as of equal importance in the ‘American story.’ For this purpose, they make use of the “memories of their past” and make their voices heard along with the reigning historical voice. Modes of expressing ‘voices’ take a variety of forms: slave songs, autobiography, fiction, political speech, rap music and films. They create an alternative mode of communication through which the Afro-Americans state both their own culture and assert their difference, while positioning themselves
alongside the often more dominant voices of white mainstream culture. The repositories of individual memories taken together create a collective communal memory that represents a counter historical identity. The ‘collective construction’ of an identity began with the vital oral culture from Africa sustained through expressive modes such as song and story.

The slave songs and the slave narratives express an effective representation of the feelings of blacks, the songs of the slaves represent the sorrows of their hearts and these songs relieve him of his pains just as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. We have seen earlier that the white masters employed devices of denial and containment in order to check the voices of the slave. But the slaves continued the rituals of telling and passing on of their histories despite the ever-watchful eyes of the overseers. Houston Baker has written that

... blacks lay veiled in shroud of silence, invisible not because they had no face, but rather because they had no voice. Voice, after all, presupposes face. ... Without a voice, the African is absent, or defaced from history. (1987, 104)

The slave narrative was an essential expressive effort to break this silence, because they could inscribe their selves only in language. Expression through speech, songs, and later, writing was a means of resistance – “an act of creating a public historical self” (Baker, 1987, 108).
Songs played an important part in the preservation of African culture for slaves and that tradition was passed on, as musical forms developed. Lawrence Levine asserts that

\[(b)lack secular song, along with other forms of oral tradition, allowed them to express themselves communally and individually, to derive pleasure, to perpetuate traditions, to keep values from eroding, and to begin to create new expressive moods . . . which continues a rich internal life.\]

(1977, 297)

Jazz and blues music are indigenous forms of black art. For Ralph Ellison, Jazz was a definition of identity as an individual, as a member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. It allows full creative outlet to the expression of the self in combination with others responding to their energy. Blues was a way of solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of black life in America. If other routes of communication are not available, then the Afro-American has learned to use those that are – the song, the pulpit and the written word – methods of resistance and self-definition.

The need for self-definition is corollary to the need for the definition of a “self” of black people. Alice Walker, in her Meridian (1976) depicts the struggle of Meridian Hill for self-definition, both as a woman and an Afro-American, in a white, male-dominated society. She
also presents her growing awareness of the importance of community to
the wider struggle. The creation of an Afro-American identity is not a
linear process that directly leads to that of the race. Quoting the words of
Manning Marable is significant in this context:

African American identity is much more than race. It is also
the traditions, rituals, values, and belief systems of African—
American people . . . . our culture, history, art and pride in
our heritage of resistance against racism. (Dent, 1992, 295)

Most nationalists and theorists of the origins of nationalism and
nation-states have overlooked the interrelatedness of gender and
ethnicity. They have focused on ethnicity as the basis for national
identity. But G. Mosse in his *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-class
Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (1985) argues that the
nationalist ideologies which emerged in late eighteenth century and early
nineteenth century Europe were associated with attempts on the part of
national bourgeoisies to create national collectivities in their own image.
Men were considered the foundation of the nation and the society, and
women were the guardians of the traditional order. The gender order
imagined by nationalism is generally rooted in an idealized past wherein
women’s role as mothers and guardians of cultural identity, symbolizing
stability in the face of change, is paramount. Men are active in the public
sphere while women are centered in the private domain where cultural
continuity is guaranteed along with the identity of the family, community and nation. The role of women is confined to that of producing sons who can defend the nation and daughters who can carry on its traditions. Women's sexuality is to be put to use for the cultural community – nation or ethnic group – to which they belong.

Images of women as mothers, as well as representing the nation, can also unify disparate ethnic groups. In South Africa, the Nationalist Party and the African National Congress have made use of the symbolic representation of women as mothers for uniting women across different ethnic groups in attempting to forge a national identity which can override ethnic divisions. This symbolism challenges the ethnic basis of national identity and points to the importance of representations of women in the creation of a national identity. It also points to women's potential for uniting across national boundaries and women's problematic relation to nationalism. In the early nineteenth century images of women as chaste, modest mothers and preserver of tradition were central to the ideology of nationalism. Women who deviated from this role were despised as transgressing the bounds of respectable womanhood. In the twentieth century, nationalism has been associated with movements for independence, liberation and revolution in different parts of the world. The gender and sexual order they envisage varies considerably, depending in large part on their class nature, but for many the
mobilization of women in support of social charge has been important. Most of them define a public, productive role for women as well as a private and reproductive one.

The central feature of the American identity is the experience of migration. The immigrants and their descendants have made an important contribution to the making of American history. As Americans they partake of a national identity, a communally determined and accepted sense of self and at the same time, as Americans and ethnics, they define themselves in terms of their ancestry. This inherent tension in American identity accounts for the richness and complexity of the American literature and culture, which simultaneously reflects and questions notions of national and individual identity, interrogating the relationship of the self and society, the private and the public. Ethnicity allows us to see in a new light the ways in which difference or “Otherness” has always been an integral part of American culture. Werner Sollors has maintained that as a tenuous ancestry and the interplay of different ancestries, ethnicity may be regarded as the most crucial aspect of American national character. In order to understand American identity, it is necessary to look to factors of “Otherness” such as gender and ethnicity. A study of ethnic women can reveal the female version of the American “national character.” Literature by and about those who are marginalized can best represent what happens within that literature. Thus
literature produced by American ethnic women presents not only the female or ethnic experience in America, but of American culture itself. Under a broad definition of ethnicity, which recognizes the essentially ethnic quality of American life, we will be able to see the connections between the female and ethnic experiences in America. Since both ethnicity and feminism deal with problems of marginalization, both are inter-related from similar perspective.

As discussed earlier, the position of black women in black societies – be it in Africa, the United States or elsewhere – had often relegated them not just to the periphery, but even beyond that. This is because the black men were on the periphery and these men pushed the black women away even from this marginalized position effecting a negation of their selfhood. And we have also seen that black feminism has been instrumental in retrieving this selfhood, along with an attempt to foreground their ethnic identity. For this purpose, the black women writers have resorted to the incorporation of elements of folk tradition as a deliberate form of Cultural Revolution. In Africa too, the literary creators sought to retrieve their ethnic identity in the colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial context. And along with it, they fore-grounded the issues of women too. In the ensuing chapters, two major Afro-American women writers and two major African writers – Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Nuruddin Farah – are studied in this perspective.