CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

WHY DEBBIE IS A 'FLAT' CHARACTER; OR,
THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

"If you shut your door to all errors,
truth is also shut out!"

- Nepalese proverb
In her essay titled "Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa", Katherine Frank talks of Debbie Ogedemgbe, the feminist heroine in Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, as a 'flat' character. In her own words:

Debbie unfortunately is a flat, unchanging figure - something even of a puppet at times - in contrast to Ramatoulaye, Amaka, and figures from Emecheta's other novels like Ojebeta in *The Slave Girl*, and Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Debbie does not grow or develop. There is no depth or complexity in her characterization because she merely personifies an ideology, with the result that her behaviour is consistently static and predictable.¹

Frank's judgement is associated with an almost universal trend - some sort of a colour blindness, one may say - in literary assessment of fiction that essentially highlights social and/or political issues. The quality of characterization in such fiction often disappoints a critic's thirst for literary ornamentation, as agit-prop theatre disappointed drama critics who were so used to the luxuries of proscenium play. Because in such novels the political consciousness of the writer or, of the people about whom she/he writes, takes the centre-stage, they often lack the standard literary finesse that is generally expected in a 'good' fiction.
But through a sociological approach, novels like Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* appear to have a much wider significance, especially in terms of recording rapidly changing social and political scenario against the backdrop of historical events like civil war, famine, struggle for independence, military coups and so on. But it is perhaps more important to notice why a writer like Emecheta -- so gifted in the art of characterization -- creates a 'flat' character like Debbie in the middle of her illustrious writing career. For in this case, apart from the point of view of having a very obvious political consciousness, the writer also indulges in the politics of representation. In Emecheta's case, she does it very consciously and, even at the risk of having to bear the burden of a 'flat' character like Debbie Ogedemgbe.

Frank, however, provides her clarifications regarding the reasons -- need, perhaps, would be a better word -- for a writer to create such a character who would appear to the reader and critics as 'politically admirable' but aesthetically 'simplistic or boring'. "Because so much of African literature is firmly rooted in social and political struggles and because most African writers -- women as well as men -- embrace a moral function for their work, it seems
inappropriate, even pointless, to invoke 'pure' aesthetic standards by which to judge their writing."

In a related instance during the recent past, Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen's controversial novel Lajja also invited -- besides threats to her life by fundamentalists -- a similar assessment from the critics. By accepted standards, Ms. Nasreen's novel, with a hapless minority community as its central focus, is 'aesthetically' poor. But politically speaking, the narrative couldn't possibly have been a better success.

Why is it that a 'politically' successful character is often 'aesthetically' poor; or, does the creation of such a character by any conscious writer involve an inevitability, that makes the character suffer from what Frank calls an obvious transparency and predictability? In other words, is Debbie Ogedemgbe, by far Emecheta's most favourite heroine, so predictable and transparent? Is Destination Biafra something between 'a manifesto and a fiction'? 3

There could be more than one approach to find answers to the above question as far as women's writing is concerned. The arguments could always involve things like a
writer's commitment, her social responsibility as a creative person, her political consciousness, her awareness of being a woman in a 'man's' world -- the list could go on and on. In fact what Frank observes about Debbie Ogedemgbé is nothing but a reflection of Eurocentric criticism of African life and literature. It is not a surprise that often the manifestation of an African writer's political consciousness in his/her writing has invited bitter reviews by critics from the west. So, for a long time characters in the novels of celebrated writers like Achebe, Amadi, Ngugi, Tutuola and many others were said to be lacking in "deep psychic insight", or suffering from a high degree of "predictability" as modern African fiction came to draw attention in the arena of world literature. This was so because under the long-tradition of literary colonialism, any Third World writer would be considered as worthwhile depending on whether he/she was known in the west. So the art of characterization must conform to the western paradigms, failing which the products were bound to lack in literary attributes.

Writing by Black women -- especially from Africa -- only added to the dilemma of western literary critics. Because as women writers, African female novelists and playwrights tried to stand apart even from the feminist traditions in
the west, by making new approaches to African woman's predicaments. Therefore, the socio-political trends that they highlighted in their writing make African women writers' assessment a complex process. To bring down the issue to its basics, what should be looked into first of all is whether the sex of the writer is important at all. According to Rosalind Miles:

The sex of a novelist is always in question somewhere, sometimes, in the course of the critical response - the sex of a woman novelist, that is. (...

For the last hundred years or so the awareness of a woman writer's sex has been so important as to form the basis of any committed critical observation. This tension originated with the origins of the novel in the eighteenth century, and was an entrenched practice by the nineteenth, when many women had to deny or disguise their female identity in the struggle to secure a fair hearing for their writings. 4

There is no gainsaying that, for a woman to acquire the label of being creative under dominant patriarchy is always a difficult job. The acclaim comes through a patriarchy controlled standard that has its overwhelming grip over the process of defining creativity and, to be more precise, literary sensibility. The psychological act of creation, as Miles explains, becomes the central metaphor in any of the existing art forms. Ironically, then, is reproduction
accepted as a kind of 'psychological' creativity (apart from being a biological one) that comes to women by sheer force of nature? To be a mother is more of a social acceptance under the patriarchy than being anything else. A woman may enhance her social status and recognition by becoming a mother of many children, but will she ever be considered 'creative' in the strictest sense of the term?

So when a man can write plays or poems to establish himself as a creative individual, the woman would go nowhere by only being 'naturally' creative. She must find her own 'voice', her own paradigm of relating to the woman specific phenomena as well as, the universal. But more significantly, the 'voice' would not only be a record of her creativity - both physical (read natural) and psychological - but a reminder of her very existence under patriarchy.

In the first two chapters of this thesis, it has been demonstrated that there does exist a 'sex difference' in the realm of creative writing. The representation of women in the works of female authors has been distinctly indentifiable as being different when compared to the same in male authored narratives. The difference between Ekwen-si's *Jaqua Nana* and Emecheta's *Nnu Ego* in respect of their
motherhood lies as much in the characters' attitudinal approach to the phenomenon as a social concept, as it does in their varying portrayal as mothers by their respective creators. Ekwensian women do not lack in their urge to become mothers because there lies the source of their complete aesthetic attainment as women. But the author does not seem to be any more interested in describing what happens to his women after they become (or fail to become) mothers. Motherhood must be achieved, but what happens to the mothers afterwards is seemingly less important. For Emecheta, however, Nnu Ego's true story starts where Jagua's -- or Gladys Nuibe's -- story ends. This is just to exemplify the politics of representation.

It has long been a business of feminist politics to find out why does a woman write what she does. Because, the whole domain of 'the politics of representation' lies in this question. Trying to find out what it means to be an African woman writer, Ama Ata Aidoo observes that, African women suffered from a sort of 'invisibility' at the global level as well as at home. This, despite a great number of them being involved in all the spheres of nation-building, including struggle from independence and other cultural
fronts. This, of course, comes as a sharp contrast to the 'visibility' they enjoyed during their pre-colonial history. However, till recently the situation was like what Aidoo describes as:

> It is definite that anything that had to do with African women was, of all vital pieces of information, the most unknown (or rather unsought), the most ignored of all concerns, the most unseen of all the visibles, and we might as well face it, of everything to do with humanity, the most despised.\(^5\)

From such a state of affairs African women writers have come a long way to their present status, as many of them are internationally recognised to be among pioneers of a new world literature that - while maintaining its local fervour - attains universal significance. They have been successful in relating in their artistic production to the predicament as well as achievements of modern African woman who still has to oscillate between her traditional cultural roots and a civilization defined by the jugglery of modern cybernetics.

So there are as many answers to the question of why an African woman writes, as the number of women writers Africa has produced. This concluding chapter would focus on whether (and why) there exists - in the African context - a
difference between the points of view of a woman writer and that of her male colleague - between Emecheta's vision of womanhood and Ekwensi's perception of African women, to be precise.

It is not an easy task to identify any such difference, because both the writers have drawn from the same socio-political, economic and historical as well as cultural experience. Aidoo elaborates on this by saying that:

There could not be any earth-shaking differences. Indeed, if we thought that anyone was providing us with a platform from which to prove that African women writers were different in any way from their male counterparts, or that they faced some fundamental problems which male African writers did not face, some of us would not really want to use such a platform. How could there be? Did we not all suffer the varied wickedness of colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism, and global imperialists and fascism together?

The first point of departure, however, comes from the reality that surrounds a woman writer in Africa, and women writers in any other part of the world -- a reality primarily described by their non-acceptance in the domain of serious critical perspectives. In Aidoo's words:

(...) it is specially pathetic to keep on writing without having any consistent, active, critical intelligence that is interested in you as an
artist (or creator). Therefore, it is precisely from this point that the African writing women's reality begins to differ somewhat from that of the male African writer. Once we have faced the basic fact of the oppression and marginality that is almost endemic in the lives of the peoples of the so-called Third World, and especially those of Africans, we also begin to admit that at least, some people are interested in male African writer. These include Africans, non-African, male and female literary critics, different categories of publishers, editors, anthologists, translators, librarians, sundry academic analysts (...)^7

Reflections of this indifference to women writers also became evident in Nigeria, among other African countries, where as recent as a-decade-and-a-half ago, creative literature was "phallic dominated with male writers and critics dealing almost exclusively with male characters and concerns naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience."^8 So at various levels of manufacturing - if one is allowed to use the term - the literary talent in Nigerian women had to encounter a male bias. It was, therefore, not the dirth of creative prowess but a lack of opportunity to express it and to be provided with a readership which held women writers back.

Coming back to Emecheta and Ekwensi, their creative imagination of women of contemporary society is very powerfully captured in their most talked about characters,
like Jagua Nana in Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, Nnu Ego, in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*. Their portrayal of traditional African life as well as complexities of urban living has been able to signify the intricacies and nuances of both through the sufferings and adventures of their major female characters. The clash of traditional and the modern values also finds poignant expression in the stories of women both the novelists so brilliantly narrate. And, finally, these women -- with all their idiosyncrasies and myriad emotional orientation expressed in every single action they perform -- represent the status of women in modern Africa, in the totality of their socio-economic and political surrounding.

But certain obvious differences in the outlook of both the authors become evident in the preceding textual analyses of some of their novels. The most conspicuous among them is that while Emecheta's women protagonists appear to have strong convictions - ideological or otherwise - and reflect it in their scheme of action, Ekwensian women lack it pathetically. Even Jagua Nana, probably the only female protagonist of Ekwensi, does not show any. Though she hobnobs with powerful city politicians and warms the beds of rural chiefs, she does not have any political ambition nor any ideological inclination behind her involvement with
them. She casts her overwhelming spell of erotic charm to achieve almost nothing. Ekwensian women like Jagua do not go beyond—according to what the novelist tells or implies in the novel—making efforts to secure a life of comfort that is defined only by designer dresses, good drinks and food, and temporary pleasure-seekers who could by their bodies for a hefty price. Beatrice in People of the City is another example. As Ekwensi tells his readers, the nightlife in Tropicana, the night club in Lagos where drinks flow freely and bargains are struck over women's bodies, is a kind of 'drug' for Jagua Nana.

However, male protagonists in Ekwensi's novels have some meaningful objectives before them and they are seen to be working towards the fulfilment of their goal. They are often highly ambitious, politically inclined, make active participation in political process with a view to bring about change in their surrounding reality. They are, or, evolve in the novels to become, complete individuals, who exercise their choices and options to achieve what they want. And more importantly, these male protagonists are often the agents of change, as by causing human intervention in the ongoing course of events they turn tide over their
own difficulties. So they are never projected as mere puppets of 'fate' or any situation. James Odugo, the radio journalist in *Survive the Peace* is on the Biafran side through the civil war. But when things turn worse with the Biafran dream coming to its unsavoury end, the protagonist exercises his choice to join the fleeing army deserters and the refugees. For he knows that his survival could be ensured if he did so. His death at the end of the novel, however, cannot be interpreted in fatalistic terms, as it was nothing but a misadventure on his part to have undertaken such a dangerous journey. Because he was fully aware and cautioned about the lurking dangers on the road to Obodonta.

Amusa Sango, the newspaper reporter in *People of the City*, is also the master of his world. He pursues or rejects a girl at his own sweet will, according to his own advantage and desire. And the girls on the other hand, appear to be suffocating sans his company. He loses his job not because any stroke of bad luck but because he turns a deaf ear to the in-house policy of the newspaper, which was providing him his bread. If it was Amusa's forte to write about the truth, and only the truth, Ekwensi's protagonist could have deserved some sympathy. His endeavours to write favourably for the union leader and, against the Lebanese businessman,
could be taken as his principled stand on important political, or socially relevant local issues. But he miserably fails to show any such virtue in his personal life, which often controls his professional self. In the Burning Grass, Mai Sunsaye's adventurous wandering in the northern Nigerian veld is a result of the combined influence of human desire and 'fate'. Ekwensi appears to be confusing his readers deliberately over the issue of Sunsaye's 'sokugo' - the wandering disease. At times even Sunsaye himself is seen to be aware of his meaningless wandering. He even tells his blacksmith host that he has the wandering disease. It is ironical, however, to learn that Sunsaye, the powerful Fulani chief of Dokan Toro who is well known far and wide for his medicines and powerful charms, does not do anything to come out of the evil spell of sokugo. On the other hand, his every movement in the novel acquires meaning as he keeps meeting some member of his family or the other after every change of course in his journey. He even achieves his victory over Shehu, his arch rival, and liberates his lost son, Rikku, during his wanderings. Thus his movement from one place to the other in the northern Nigerian grassland seems as much planned and deliberate as it is meant to be involuntary.
But Ekwensi does not give so much freedom to the women in his novels. First of all, with a little exception in case of Jagua Nana, all his women characters appear and develop in relation to his male protagonists. In *Survive the Peace*, Vic Agenta, Benne, Juliette, and Gladys grow up around the novel's central character, James Odugo. Removing him from the scene could render much of their existence meaningless. None of them enjoy the privilege Odugo has been accorded in the novel. They are dependent, powerless, and compromising individuals with an obvious sense of insecurity, who often just surrender to the pressure of the situation around them. Vic never enjoys the 'power' Odugo has inside the newsroom of Biafra, to change reality into illusion. Though she works at the same place, she cannot change the number of dead federal soldiers or exaggerate upon the damage inflicted on the federal territory, in the news report to be broadcast which Odugo so easily does. Odugo does this as a politically thinking person who — in his support of the Biafran cause — tries to boost the morale of his fellow Biafrans. Vic is never into any such show of political will or conviction, and inside the Biafran radio room, she is just another extension of the broadcasting machine.
But more interestingly, Vic owes her very existence in
the radio station to Odugo, for it was he who saved her life
during the war by getting her a job and protected her from a
federal air raid. Her joining the duties in the Biafran
radio is not a resultant action of her political choice, but
a part of her total surrender to her male saviour. He
'saves' her, he 'finds' her a job, and again while fleeing
Umuneko for the security and safety at Obodonta, it is Odugo
who takes the decision to undertake the risky journey. Once
decided over the trip to Obodonta, he plans to take Vic
along with him, and hardly gives her any time to pack up,
not to speak anything of a chance for her to ponder over
whether she should follow him. For, Vic well knew the
possible existence of Odugo's legally married wife, and if
the latter had survived the war, Vic's good times with the
radio journalist was unmistakably short-lived. Knowing
this well, Vic would naturally think over Odugo's proposal,
even when it involved a possible question of life and death
to have remained in Umuneko. But Ekwensi does not give so
much space to her under the situation, making her a complete
slave to James Odugo's will.

Even her appearance in the novel is caused by the
chivalry and magnanimity of the radio journalist, who saves her life during an air raid by the federal planes. So Odugo 'discovers' Vic, and is kind enough to provide her shelter, besides the promise of a job — a rare commodity in war-torn Nigeria. How can Vic help feeling grateful for all this? But at the same time, Ekwensi's readers are told that the protagonist is immediately attracted towards her on the first sight (God! He has time to think about her legs and bosom while federal shells are pounding every inch of Umunevo market square). It is his infatuation that compels Odugo to be so benevolent towards the beautiful dame. A little later the novelist further reveals the protagonist's plans to enter into a passionate physical relationship with the hapless girl who has been estranged from her parents.

So it is the prospect of having some good time Odugo finds in Vic that he asks her to stay back with him even after his initial efforts at getting her a job does not meet with success. Soon both join in the game of bed-warming. So, Odugo assumes the role of Vic's protector and provider. The inevitable split comes the moment Vic is allowed by Ekwensi to exploit her possibilities with men other than James Odugo during their stay at Obodonta.
Benne, the immoral wife of the captain, can be best described with the choicest vocabulary Ekwensi reserves for her in the novel. She is just like 'a hot bitch in the rut', always running for every man who could perform sexually to satisfy her insatiable lust. The captain is brought to make possible a short stay with her in Obodonta after the war, only to prove her infidelity. What else remains of Benne is her sexual encounters with Odugo and the soldiers camping at Obodonta.

Juliette, the socialite wife of Odugo, also depends on influential men of Lagos city to live a kind of life she desires. But the war separates the couple, and during the national crisis, she is shown to be on the federal side, supervising relief operations. But her sense of satisfaction and privilege comes through male agents - the army officers lusting for her company.

Gladys, the fourth of the women in Survive the Peace, is 'created' through Odugo's habitual one-night love affair. In one such encounter she appears with the protagonist in Umunevo. And immediately afterwards, as if Ekwensi thought it would be difficult for his hero to handle two passionate lovers at the same time, she vanishes into a strife-torn
backdrop. Her reappearance comes only when Odugo is driven at his wit's end about his possible break up with Juliette. It is the lasting influence of a strong infatuation that provides the primary base for their reunion.

In *People of the City*, Ekwensi repeats himself in characterizing women who grow up only in relation to the male protagonist, Amusa Sango. Aina, the petty trader and streetwalker, is doomed once Sango is not ready to 'save' her from her humiliation of Molomo Street. Therefore she lands up in jail. Beatrice is a replica of Jagua Nana, and seems to only understand her materialist comforts and prospect of a luxurious lifestyle. That Beatrice is noticeable and enjoys the elite atmosphere in the All Language Club is due to the wealth lavished on her by the English engineer, whose mistress she is. Elina almost has no visible life in the novel. For the most part, this woman is hiding behind the door of the convent in the Eastern Greens. When she comes face to face with the protagonist, he takes no time to send her back to oblivion through his rejection of her betrothal. Beatrice the second survives in the narrative only to embody the qualities of an 'ideal girl' that Sango (or perhaps, Ekwensi himself) would look forward to granting
the status of a 'respectable wife'!

In *Burning Grass*, Ekwensi's treatment of women character highlights his strong male bias. The 'legendary' cattlewoman, Ligu, in this novel shows potential to match the courage and conviction of Emecheta's protagonists. But before she assumes any significant dimension in the novel, the novelist swiftly removes her from the scene lest she should attract more attention compared to the protagonist, the old Fulani cattleman Sunsaye. The reader never comes to know why Ligu is a 'legendary' cattlewoman, though she is given a small chance to exhibit her remarkable courage in the rescue operation of her apprentice, and Sunsaye's dearest son Rikku. The other major woman in the novel, Fatimeh, also suffers from invisibility. Her sudden disappearance and reappearance at the end of the novel is linked by an unknown life she leads in the forest during which she is supposed to have acquired some mysterious power. She applies it in curing Sunsaye of his dreaded disease. She has a wild tiger at her command which guards her and her all white cattle - probably a gift of her mysterious power. But though she is mistaken as a spirit, Sunsaye finds her to be the same compassionate and kind soul who has not forgotten the old man's kind gesture of once saving her from the
clutches of Shehu. However, Ekwensi shows extreme miserly attitude in describing such an interesting character in his repertory. She appears to have been brought into the scene to give some meaningful precedence to Sunsaye’s catching the disease. And when he has been cured of it, and his son’s ‘calf love’ for the girl gone, Ekwensi has no more use for her.

None of these above women, thus, show any apparently meaningful existence. They don’t have any social opinion, political outlook, and conviction to undertake any project that would bear significant results either for themselves or for the larger community. They, unlike the women in Emecheta’s novels, don’t have a ‘voice’ of their own, and are always heard only through some male-related actions. A look at Debbie Ogedemgbe in Buchi Emecheta’s Destination Biafra would reveal the world of difference she shares with her Ekwensian sisters.

By consciously choosing the hardship of armed forces from various other possibilities that would have guaranteed her a life of comfort and plentitude, Debbie exemplifies her strong political conviction and, understanding of social ethos. Her opinion that it was only the army — a force made
of disciplined individuals – which could bring some order in the nation may appear a little too romantic. But she proves through her actions that she is not romanticising only. She joins the uniformed profession and then suffers through her sacrifices that come one after another. Her opinion for a takeover by the armed forces to make possible a smooth running of Nigerian administration by no means signifies any fascist tendency in her. It is a political understanding, driven by her urge to bring some peace to the suffering masses in a feuding nation torn by political corruption and ethnic strife. Towards the end of the novel, she comes out a more matured person politically as she realises that armed action can never bring about the fruits of a democratic atmosphere and freedom of expression and equality. Her sabotaging of Abosi's planned smuggling of arms in a Red Cross plane is a proof of this understanding.

As a sharp contrast to the Oxford educated daughter of Samuel Ogedemgbe, Nnu Ego in *Joys of Motherhood* represents the story of a rural woman who has to cope with a series of difficulties after she migrates to the city. Similarly, Aku-nnna of *The Bride Price* is an ordinary Ibo girl who also suffers a lot of humiliation after she starts living in her
father's ancestral village. Both of these female protagonists of Emecheta do not have any obvious political inclinations like their counterpart in Destination Biafra. But through their sufferings they gather strength to tide over difficulties in their personal lives. Through their individual experiences of predicaments as women, they fulfil their personal goals and while keeping track of their failures, they look forward to their success. But most significantly, it is in their individual struggle to come out of odds, that they symbolise the universal struggle of women for equality and against oppression. Their individual experience attains universal meaning only through the characters' consistent efforts to resist their subjugation by patriarchy.

Emecheta's characterization of women protagonists in her novels poses a challenge to the female stereotypes of Ekwensi. The Ekwensian stereotypes are at times so obvious that the characters embodying them become very much predictable and represent the novelist's bias and short-sightedness. One of the recurring stereotypes in Ekwensi's writing is the bad, selfish and sensuous city woman - Beatrice, Jagua, Juliette, among others. They are essentially pleasure-seekers, who would ignore all social and moral
responsibilities to fulfil their want of material comfort and, to satisfy their boundless lust. It is not only Benne in *Survive the Peace* who becomes 'hot like a bitch in the rut' at the sight of every passing male, all city women are seductresses scheming to exploit men with the help of their sexual power. They hunt their male victims either along the wharfs of Lagos lagoon, like Aina does in *People of the City*, or lure them to submission with voluptuousness at elite night time pleasure spots. They all come to the city because they are bored with the rural life and its stagnation. Their love for fast life makes them cling on to men who can provide them with physical and material comfort. They enslave such patrons in a sexual bond, though often a temporary alliance. But in the process they indulge in all forms of perversion and get entangled with the urban mafia, often becoming partly responsible for gruesome murders or destruction of life and property. So they are primarily characterized as women who exert corrupting influence on the surrounding.

Through this portrayal of city women, the novelist's didactic tone becomes comprehensible, where he tries to point out that the result of going against the established
social norms of the traditional culture is always damaging. The city women in Ekwensi's novels suffer because of their disregard of traditional social laws and customs.

The other dominant stereotype in Ekwensi's novel is that of motherhood which every woman in her right senses should try to attain. And to be an ideal mother she must remain loyal to her husband and to people in her community. This is tantamount to respecting the traditional ethics by observing them in her own life. Therefore, Jagua Nana, the promiscuous city socialite, tries to find solace in her motherhood at the end of Ekwensi's famous novel. The slave girl Fatimah in *Burning Grass* is redeemed from her status of slavery only when she bears Shehu a set of twins. (Never mind even if Shehu is her abductor whom she naturally hates.) Juliette in *People of the City* becomes more unacceptable to Odugo because she is carrying somebody else's child. Odugo cannot forgive her for this even though he has engaged himself in many a short term alliance during the war. Odugo's wife thus falls from grace for not being an ideal mother, if not an ideal wife.

In her essay on the commitment of African women writers, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie opines that one of the foremost
tasks before the women writers in Africa is to break these stereotypes which are created and then deeply entrenched in the psyche of male African writers. She observes:

(...) we already have the stereotyping of women in African literature. There is the figure of the 'sweet mother', the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice. (...) The 'mother' stereotype leads to the limiting of a woman's potential in the society. (...) In addition to the 'mother' and 'houri' stereotype of the African woman, we may consider the stereotypes of the 'sophisticated' city girl and the rural woman. The two are often contrasted in order to dramatize the conflict of modernity and traditionalism.

Ekwensi's women like Jagua Nana or Beatrice appear to be nothing better than 'phallic receptacles', because their whole existence seem to depend on their capacity to sleep with men.

The other recurring aspect in Ekwensi's novel is the author's description - at times utterly disguising for its pointlessness - of female anatomy. The kinks under the woman's arms, her breasts, her buttocks, thighs, legs and other areas related to sensual provocation are described in all vividness. There could be no other reason behind this than the novelist's efforts to give that extra ounce of 'oomph' to his male readers.
So for Ekwensi, any woman trying to break the traditional code of conduct, making efforts to assert her individuality and not remaining attached to any particular male for her 'survival' is something pernicious for the larger community as well as the individual herself. It is tantamount to sin which always is followed by destructive effects. As Helen Chukwuma points out:

In the city novels of Cyprian Ekwensi, characteristically a woman's individuality is asserted only through prostitution.11

Emecheta's women protagonists, however, come as welcome change from these stereotypes. What Lloyd Brown critically observes about Adah and other women in Emecheta's In the Ditch holds good for all her other major female characters:

In the final analysis, their ability to survive in spite of society depends on the willingness of each woman to recover the initiative in her own life and to recapture the personal strength which society and its systems had undermined in the first place.12

Debbie's determination to join the Nigerian army finally makes it possible for her to do so in the face of stiff parental opposition. Her self-imposed task as an ambassador of peace to convince the Biafran leader to stop fighting,
leading a band of fleeing refugees through the dangers of death and destruction, her foiling the attempted smuggling of arms in the Red Cross plane and finally, her resolve to work for the nation instead of securing a life of comfort and luxuries in England, all are obvious examples of her indomitable strength of character and individual will. She asserts her individuality all through the novel. So does Aku-nna in *The Bride Price*. With her father dead and her mother paying more attention to the family politics, she keeps her spirits up and continues with her studies. She has the courage to ignore the Ibuza tradition in order to be able to become what she wants to be in her life and, also to marry the man she wants. She has the tenacity to retain her mental strength and patience to give concrete shape to her personal resolve. Her efforts to discourage Okoboshi from his intention of finding out her virginity is another example of her strong will power and presence of mind working even under a crisis situation. She happily enters into a marital relationship knowing the danger of the non-payment of her bride price. Nnu Ego in *Joys of Motherhood* exhibits exemplary will power and courage to fulfil her desire of becoming a mother, giving education to her children, providing decent clothing and food for them and finally, to
survive' a failed marriage, killing poverty and adverse situations like housing problem, lack of healthcare, etc. In order to be able to achieve all this, these women often resist the dictum of custom and traditional culture that are potential hindrances in the path of fulfilment of their goals. In this context, men are always shown to be acting to enforce the designs of old - and often bogus - traditions.

All these achievements come to the women for some price. Debbie has to forgo a bright career prospect and a life full of comfort to succeed in her own designs. Worse still, she has to suffer the cruellest of personal humiliations through her rape by federal soldiers. She risks death and elimination while moving about in the Biafran territory on self-imposed mission to stop the civil war. Aku-nya has to suffer the psychological trauma of going through the experience of her abduction and forced marriage with Okoboshi. Finally, she has to live with the pain of being estranged from one's own family and the people of one's own community. Nnu Ego, the proud mother of so many children, dies unsung by the roadside.

But Emecheta's women never seem to give up. Because,
unlike Ekwensi, individuality for Emecheta is not a negative trait; rather it is the source of strength in the characters. This individuality is symbolised by a positive outlook of the situations that the women run into. According to Lloyd Brown:

Emecheta's contention is that even in the most uncompromising circumstances, the individual never really loses the potential for choice and strength. (...) Thus, it remains the individual's ultimate responsibility, even in the most unlikely circumstances, to develop what is essentially an indestructible strength of will - (...)\textsuperscript{13}

The stereotype of motherhood has been destroyed in Emecheta's characters like Nnu Ego. Emecheta brings the paradox poignantly in the delineation of this woman in _Joys of Motherhood_. First, she suffers for not being able to bear a child. Her barrenness is removed later in the novel when she gives birth to a baby boy in Lagos. But the child does not survive and her loss makes her so overwhelmed with grief that she attempts to take her own life. However, later she goes on producing one child after another, even while not really wanting to have so many of them. Her pregnancies create obstacles in her efforts to be economically independent and provide for her sons' education and other domestic expenditure. She even sends her sons abroad
for higher education, sacrificing her own comfort. She is finally able to become - by African traditional standards - a proud mother of nine children. But during her last days none of them come to offer her a single word of comfort. Only Taiwo, one of the twin daughters, provides her a little solace. On her death, they arrange a big funeral ceremony to show how great their mother was! Nnu-Ego's "joy" from her motherhood becomes a visible reality only after her death.

Another significant pointer towards the issue of motherhood is found in Debbie Ogedemgbe's temporary role of playing mother to baby Biafra. It could be said that in her care and love for the child and her efforts to save its life. Debbie symbolises the creative aspects of motherhood that is never realised/recognised in the act of biological mothering. Adaku in *Joys of Motherhood* again, comes as an antithesis to the romanticised image of African motherhood stereotype. Despite being the mother of two children she later opts for prostitution, as she cannot give birth to a male child. The realisation dawns on her that a woman cannot attain completeness as a mother until she gives birth to male children. Ma Blackie in *The Bride Price* is accused by her husband of being incapable of bearing him more than one son.
Through her characterization of women in her novels, Emecheta relates to larger socio-political issues in the society. Education of Nigerian women is one such issue that the novelist highlights in almost all her novels. Aku-nna's steadfastness about continuing her education in *The Bride Price* is one example. In Nnu Ego's urge to educate her sons at the cost of her daughters' schooling is another reminder of how women have been neglected in the field of education under patriarchal values. In the novelist's own words:

I want very much to further the education of women in Africa, because I know that education really helps the women. It helps them to read and it helps them to rear a generation. It is true that if one educates a woman, one educates a community, whereas if one educates a man, one educates a man. 14

Another significant social issue that is highlighted in Emecheta's novels is the negative impact of old customs on modern Nigerian women. In one of her interviews, the novelist refers to this aspect by saying that her stay in England has made her more forthright than her country cousins:

I cannot afford to pretend. In Nigeria women are riddled with hypocrisy, you learn to say what you don't feel. You learn not to laugh or not to
laugh too loudly. I find I don’t fit in there any more.  

Nnu Ego, Aku-na and Debbie Ogedemgbe are all rebels as they protest against those elements in their traditional culture that seek to suppress women by controlling their urge to assert their individual self. In *Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta hints at the population problem in Nigeria through Nnu Ego’s pregnancies. Emecheta talks in the same interview about how all her major novels are based on certain social concepts of importance:

For example, *Second Class Citizen* is based on the clash of two cultures, *Joys of Motherhood* deals with population control and *The Slave Girl*, the tradition of slavery.  

As far as Emecheta as a feminist writer is concerned, her domain has been to identify the female oppression vis-à-vis male privilege in the Nigerian—or African—society. Her feminism is not shaped by any fantasy about the concepts of women’s equality and gender bias. Emecheta, as a feminist writer, is always realistic in her approach. Nancy Chodorow thus observes how too much of romanticising about feminist ideals goes against the interest of feminist politics:
In particular, feminists need to be especially self-conscious about the way they draw upon fantasy to inform theory and politics. Much of the feminist writing (...) puts forth fantasy, or primary process thinking as the whole of reality or as a self-evident basis for theory and politics. Fantasies are obviously fundamental experiences and we must take them into account in creating a feminism that speaks to women's lives, but they cannot in themselves constitute theory or justify politics.17

Emecheta's views on feminism have already been mentioned in Chapter Two of this thesis. Relating them to her presentation of women characters in her novels, it can be inferred that she combines in them a strong sense of individual assertion with a genuine respect for the progressive elements in the traditional culture. Aku-naa experiences the Ibo community feelings after the death of her father and wonders about how the whole community came to share her grief. In Ibuza she comes closer to the tradition of living together in a community as a whole. Even in a city like Lagos, the rural migrants are seen to have maintained certain basic structures of community life. Nnu Ego owes her business and her survival to the solidarity of Ibo market women in Lagos city. Her joining the weekly gatherings of women is a symbol of her adoption of community life — an essential feature in African tradition. Debbie learns from her war experiences about what it means to be a traditional
African woman who not only works for her own survival, but for the existence of a whole community. Leading a band of refugees in the swamp, and living on the boundary of life and death, she marvels at the traditional image of African woman. But at the same time, Emecheta's feminist stance is visible in the reaction of her protagonists, as Helen Chukwuma observes:

Her characters adopt a positivistic view in crisis, and do not just fold their arms in tears and self-pity. Rather, they think, plan, execute and concretize. Through this maze of self-assertion, the female individualism and personality shows, she appears in another light, as a person capable of taking and effecting decisions.18

Thus, it is in this remarkable combination of the traditional and the modern, the individual and the communal, that Emecheta's feminist politics takes shape. And her women characters reflect this politics in their actions, thought and resolve. And it is through this politics that Emecheta wants to 'represent' the truth -- the woman's truth.
Notes and References


2. Ibid., p.27.

3. Ibid., p.28. Frank writes, while acknowledging the novel to be historically important from the point of view of African writing by women; And so, to return to Destination Biafra, we can say that though Emecheta's heart is in the right place, the book as a whole languishes in a shadowy region between manifesto and fiction.


6. Ibid., p.158.

7. Ibid., p.158.


10. Ibid., p.6.


13. Ibid., p.43.


16. Ibid., p.43.
