CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

The Bhagvad Gita is based on the religious discourse revealed by Lord Krishna to Arjuna. This book carries connotations which are both religious and philosophical in nature for the Hindus. In the Great Indian epic, the Mahabharata. Arjuna became confused and lost when entangled with the dilemma of duty against family ties during the battle of Kurushetra. Lord Krishna came for his rescue by revealing his identity as the Supreme Being Himself (Bhagwan/God). In fact, he blessed Arjuna with an inspiring glimpse of his divine absolute form called ‘Vishwaroopam’. He leads Arjuna in the latter’s quest for spiritual guidance. To quote a Sloka from it: “It is better to live your own destiny imperfectly than to live an imitation of somebody else’s life with imperfection.” ¹

Some such beautiful thought nurtures the importance of one’s individual identity and duty for a complete and satisfactory existence. In other words, in the quest of ‘self-discovery’ the impact of one’s individual identity is indisputable and absolute. Otherwise, the self becomes only an imitator of others. In such a case, the self is deprived of the self-awareness which is like the heart-felt scent of a flower’s real blossom that can later generate a memory worth cherishing and lingering.

This introduction probes into the concept of two key terms used in the thesis – ‘quest’ and ‘identity.’ The rationale is the fact that this thesis discusses the ‘quest for black female identity’ in the works of two black women authors – Toni Morrison and Buchi Emecheta. According to Oxford English Dictionary,
‘quest’ in its verb form means ‘search for’ and ‘identity’ as a noun means ‘the fact of being who or what a person or a thing is.’ Here, the search is for that black female identity that the characters in the works of the two authors will reveal when their thorough analysis continues as part of this research work. And also, during the detailed study of their quest the significance behind the process of developing, discovering and recovering of one’s own perception of self and others will gradually unfold the unique entity within the self that definitely separates one person from the other.

“Who are you?” is the best question that targets one’s self-identity. This is an open-ended question and so various answers are possible. I am …. The last part can be filled by a name in most cases but it is not free from the tentacles of our inter-personal relationships with different individuals. For instance, in any paper work that asks personal details Full Name is immediately followed by Father’s Name or Husband’s Name. Here, the much aware feminist in one shouts back two questions immediately. The first question is “Is a woman always a minor?” who always needs guardianship of a father or a husband. Secondly, “Why is the mother’s place marginalized or invisible in personal details?” provided in the forms. From these two questions onwards the forbidden Pandora’s box of ‘identity crisis’ is readily opened.

The term ‘quest’ is used in both mythology and literature extensively. It symbolizes a journey towards a goal which also serves as a plot device. It has always been an inseparable part of any nation along with its culture and literature. In the context of literature, quest consists of an exerting long journey of a protagonist in order to find something or someone. It includes overcoming obstacles as well as travelling a rather unusually long and adventurous journey. In other words, any quest is dull and less appealing without the showcase of
exotic locations and vivid characters that the protagonist encounters during such a journey.

The usual motif behind any quest is the search to obtain some particular object or person which can either belong to the protagonist before or after the completion of the journey. The epics of the ancient period are characterized with quest and its motif most abundantly. Homer’s *Odyssey* is the ancient Greek tale of Odysseus whom the gods have cursed to wander around and suffer for a long time facing many hurdles and challenges one after another. Sadly, his misery continues until Goddess Athena persuades the other gods of Olympus to allow him to return home. Similar is the tale of Lord Rama in the *Ramayana* where the entire quest is centred on his efforts to regain his wife, Sita and also to punish the Demon Lord, Lanka’s ruler, Ravana for abducting her. On a rather amusing note is *Don Quixote* as a parody of chivalric tales based on heroic quests.

However, in recent times, a unique kind of quest is Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* (1988). It is an international bestseller translated into more than sixty different languages. It has the touch of universal appraisals of being a self-discovering tale and not a mere piece of literature. The tale centres around a young Andalusian shepherd, Santiago and his journey to Egypt in search of a treasure that recurred in his dreams. The core theme of the book is based on the motif behind the belief where the old king, Melchizedek says to Santiago, “when you really want something to happen, the whole universe conspires so that your wish comes true” (Coelho 2006: 42). And yet, there is a twist to Santiago’s discovery of his treasure. He finds it in the most unusual place after facing many hurdles. However, the tale does not just end there as:
The wind began to blow again. It was the levanter, the wind that came from Africa. It didn’t bring with it the smell of the dust, nor the threat of Moorish invasion. Instead, it brought the scent of a perfume he knew very well, and the touch of a kiss – a kiss that came from far away, slowly, slowly, until it rested on his lips. (177)

Now, the term ‘identity’ can be studied from two important aspects – psychology and sociology. It gives the connotation of both the individual self and the group affiliation. Psychologists use it to describe personal identity also known as idiosyncratic things. It is considered to be responsible for making a person different from others. On the other hand, sociologists have used the term to describe social identity also known as collective or group affiliation. It is something used by an individual to identify the self as a part of the group or community as a whole.

In the context of psychology, identity is related to the self-image of an individual which includes one’s self-esteem and individuality. According to Weinreich P.:

A person’s identity is defined as the totality of one’s self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present, expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future.

Erik Erikson is one of the pioneers in self-identity better known as ‘ego identity’. His framework consists of two key concepts – ‘personal identity’ and social or ‘cultural identity’. They are almost similar to the clash of id and super-ego present in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical studies. In some of his works, Erikson has emphasized the importance of the balance and integrity between the self and society or culture for the development of a strong ego
identity in general. Unfortunately, any deficiency will be responsible for any sort of identity crisis of the individual.

Similarly, in the context of sociology, there is a term called ‘identity negotiation.’ Here the emphasis on the role behavior is based upon the learning of certain social roles by an individual through negotiations with the society. Such negotiations bring out one’s identity not only as mere self but as part of the society as a whole.

Further, the concept of collective identity comes where the self gets a sense of belongingness to a certain group or community. However, it also gives birth to the concept of discrimination, based on being a part of the in-group or out-group where favor is always for the former. In addition, Weinreich says that one’s ethnic identity is also inseparable “as that part of the totality of one’s self-construal of past ancestry and one’s future aspirations in relation to ethnicity.”

In the context of this thesis, the term ‘identity’ means both black and female. ‘Black’ represents the ethnic identity while ‘female’ is for the gender identity. In other words, identity is not one sided and simple. Instead, a black woman’s identity as part of the society is multi-layered. So her quest for identity is both dynamic and challenging. In fact, a black woman’s quest for identity is absolutely a long journey of self-awareness and realization of her presence in a patriarchal society where her position is second-class whether being a female or a black. However, such quest does not involve merely a search for an object or person. On the one hand, it is a quest to (re)discover and (re)build the self-identity she has lost gradually during the process of being a daughter, wife and mother that the society has given her as a heritage. On the other hand, it is also a quest to find her presence and heritage as part of black community and its history under the white-washed colonial experience.
Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham quotes Frantz Fanon on the quest for ‘cultural identity’ and ‘self-recovery’ as “the whole body of the efforts made by a people in the sphere of the thought to describe, justify and praise action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (Clark 1993: 110). Namratha Mogaral has cited bell hooks’s take upon the significance of black aesthetics which says that the effort towards “discovery will lead further to the rediscovery of the real-self which is the real Africanism.” However, such aesthetic is only possible after decolonizing any previous mind-set regarding language, color, race and beauty. More importantly, it was a method to tackle the deep-rooted racism that often controls people’s view of the world and intellect.

Mongaral makes use of the BAM (Black Art Movement) as an example of the black movement. It has the main agenda to bring out the absence of the Black into presence; and similarly the black feminist aims for bringing the focus upon their experiences as black women and their struggles for self-identity and (re)discovery of their selfhood. However, in both cases there is an unavoidable hurdle. There are many shades of black – shiny black, blue black, reddish black, brownish black, etc. In other words, just like the difference in shades there exists a difference within blacks based on personal, national and accidental different experiences too. In addition, there is the presence of various themes of Black literature with differences between women and women (race and class), men and women (race and gender), and blacks and blacks (class and gender).

Andrienne Rich in “Is a pen a metaphorical penis?” sees the very act of writing as a kind of conflict creation between “traditional female function” and the “subversive function of the imagination” where art meant male with men
being the natural creators of art. In fact, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert have challenged such historical claim in writing where the men demanded authority over the creative creations including art. They quote Gerald Manley Hopkins’s letter to his friend, R.W. Dixon, where the former declared his crucial theoretical opinion on poetry. For him, the artist’s “most essential quality” was “masterly execution which is a kind of male gift, and essentially marks off men from women, the begetting of one’s thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is” essential for any great work.\(^\text{13}\) Thus, such a sexist theory makes Gilbert and Gubar end up concluding that the poet’s pen has in some sense figuratively taken the place of the symbol of phallus. As a matter of fact, the poet’s pen represents the freedom of their sexuality indeed.

In addition, Terry Lovell quotes Gilbert and Gubar again for their stand upon the sexist attitude of male writers. To quote: “In patriarchal Western culture … the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (118).\(^\text{14}\) Some more attention-grabbing quotations they have used to justify their claim are: \(^\text{15}\)

1. “Literature is not the business of a woman’s life, and it cannot be …”

2. “Literary women lack the blood congested genital drive which energises every great style.”

Within such a clash of gender politics of patriarchy, the problem for women writers does not end merely with the production of writing. Another equally important challenge emerges in the reception of their works. The causes are evident in the classic stand represented by ‘phallic’ centred generations of male writers as –

1. Its tendency to dismiss women’s writing as unfeminine and presumptuous.
2. It's ignored or marginalized as women’s production.

3. Their strategy to confine female authors within the bounds of rigid stereotyping based on gender difference.

This argument is further elaborated in this quote by Toril Moi on ‘gynocritics’:

> One of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in the literary history, we are not learning what women have experienced, but only what men have thought women should be. (Eagleton 1996: 259)

Amidst all these harangues against sexism by the feminists, a shockingly contradictory claim comes from Rosalind Coward. Coward argues against ‘cultural politics’ that dilutes the political agenda associated with feminism in the first place. To quote her:

> Feminism can never be the product of the identity of women’s experiences and interests – there is no such unity. Feminism must always be the alignment of women in a political movement with particular political aims and objectives. It is a grouping unified by its political interests, not by its common experiences. (229)

In the light of such contradictory approaches, the works of black women writers can be directly discussed. It is boosted more by their various experiences of being black and women in a white patriarchal society. It refers to the literature of the African peoples, which is also meant for them. But when we try to deliberately define it, it becomes a problematic exercise. It is mainly due to the diversity African peoples represent. As Chinua Achebe says, “You cannot cram African literature into a small, neat definition. I do not see
African literature as one event but as a group of associated units”. (McLeod 2008: 61)

According to George Joseph, as reflected in *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, African literature is unlike the European perception of literature, which generally refers to the written form. Instead, the African concept includes oral literature where both art and content are inseparable. Traditionally, “Africans do not radically separate art from teaching” and thus African writers, instead of writing or singing merely for beauty’s stake are rather “taking their cue from oral literature, use beauty to help communicate important truths and information to society” as such that “an object is considered beautiful because of the truths it reveals and the communities it helps to build.”

In African literature, both the material world and the fictional world of Africa co-exist. Together they nurture the physical world with various shades of history, knowledge, usages and customs, traditions and social values, languages and cultures, etc. In fact, ‘oral tradition’ becomes the primary color or basis of this African kaleidoscope called ‘African Literature.’ Dr. Vincent Muli Wa Kikutu elaborates:

Voice was the vehicle in which knowledge was passed on from one generation to another. Voice united a family, clan, or community. Enforcement of customs depended on voice. When a person died … his or her voice was no longer to be heard, it was as if a whole library had been destroyed.

The major stimuli for the orality of African literature to blossom into writing, go far away back to the history of European colonialists and their
languages such as English, French and Portuguese. It is no wonder that we often mistake the African literature for Anglophone or Francophone.

Moreover, the African literature is decorated beautifully in a unique way with varying topics and styles, from the colonial period to that of independence; and from the postcolonial period till today. Consequently, a vivid mutation in both linguistic innovations and meaning within African literature is quite evident through these generations of writers.

Folktales, legends, myths, proverbs and the various forms of song were important literary ornaments during the pre-colonial African worlds. Likewise, in the present traditional world of Ibudu and Obanliku areas of Nigeria, the song is still the powerful medium of social criticism and correction.

During the colonial period, the African writers like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, etc. consciously glorified their African indigenous culture. It was also a great part of their constant effort to help their fellow Africans to regain pride and confidence of their native cultural heritage. In 1944, the first free-for-all election of South Africa was held. Nevertheless, it was a milestone against its earlier apartheid regime. The election also added a new luster of modernity to African literature’s faithfulness to orality.

However, nothing much has changed in most of the African nations except the skin color of the exploiter during neo-colonial and postcolonial period. According to Kwam Khrumah, neo-colonialism is the last stage of imperialism. He adds:
In place of colonialism, as the main instrument of imperialism, we have today neo-colonialism … [which] like colonialism, is an attempt to export the social conflicts of the capitalist countries … The result is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world.18

At present, Africa remains a single continent only in the geographical sense of space. Unlike the unified Africa as shown in Atlas maps, the continent is bifurcated into two sections based on its colonial past. The postcolonial state has scars of resistance. And yet, it is also simultaneously moving towards self-reliance as an independent nation. On the contrary, the neo-colonial state is still busy reeking and profusely bleeding for freedom. Thus, in reality the colonial masters of Africa have lavishly infested Africa deep till the marrow with their white education. Indeed, their torch of white education did not just light but burn more the African essence.

With this the present chapter that introduces the key terms of the thesis – ‘quest’ and ‘identity’, thus also provides a tiny zest of the umbrella term ‘African Literature’ forming the very foundation of all black literature in general; it is worthwhile to proceed to the subsequent chapters.

The second chapter will be dedicated to the milieu of black women writers. It will include the black women’s movements in both America and Africa, the triple consciousness of black women, etc. In short, it will provide exclusively the theoretical background of the thesis.

The third chapter will provide the brief bioscope of the two authors concerned. However, the highlight will be on the brief analysis of five novels
from each author which makes the research work up-to-date as it includes the latest works of the authors.

Chapter four and five will be dedicated to the detailed analysis of the core topic of the thesis ‘quest for black female identity.’ The fourth chapter will deal with the black female identity as an individual as well as a part of the women’s community in four selected novels. Her quest for self identity will be discussed in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* and Buchi Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra*. And in both Morrison’s *Paradise* and Emecheta’s *Rape of Shavi*, her identity as a part of the women’s community will be studied in detail.

The fifth chapter will deal with the comparative study of the total six selected novels written by the two authors. In direct analysis, it will include a black woman’s identity in the social scenario as a girl child, wife and mother. In the comparative study of the treatment of the black girl, it will discuss Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Emecheta’s *The Family*. The treatment of black woman within marriage will be discussed in Morrison’s *Sula* and Emecheta’s *Double Yoke*. In order to discuss her treatment as a mother, Morrison’s *Beloved* and Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, will be thoroughly analyzed.

The sixth chapter will form the final chapter of the thesis. It will sum up all the already discussed and painstakingly analyzed aspects of black female identity. In fact, it will aim to bring out the black woman’s discovery and realization of the challenges that the works of these two black women writers represent and discuss. Such findings are vital in her quest for self-identity and realization. Her identity does not end as mere daughter, wife and mother. She is important as both an individual as well as part of the nurturing women’s
community. Indeed, her triple consciousness within the misogynist white society defines her self-identity to the best level. And later, such consciousness encourages and nurtures her as a whole towards self-realization and emancipation.

Finally, the characterisation of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter-I  Introduction
Chapter-II  The Milieu
Chapter-III  Writing with a Difference

Chapter-IV  Individual and Community Identities of Black Women
   Toni Morrison: *Jazz & Paradise.*
   Buchi Emecheta: *Destination Biafra & Rape of Shavi.*

Chapter-V  Social Identities of Black Women
   Toni Morrison: *The Bluest Eye, Sula & Beloved.*
   Buchi Emecheta: *The Family, Double Yoke & The Joys of Motherhood.*

Chapter-VI  Conclusion.
NOTES

1 <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1492580> (Web. 1 April. 2013) is the link from where the quotation is taken.

2 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quest> (Web. 11 March. 2011) is the link of this source/idea.


4 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Identity_sociology> (Web. 5 April. 2013) is the link of this source/idea.


10 “bell hooks” is deliberately uncapitalized. It is the pen name of Gloria Jean Walkins who took this name from her great-grandmother namely Bell Blair Hooks. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bell-hook> (Web. 1 April. 2013) is the link for this information.


13 Ibid.


15 Ibid.

16 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African-literature> (Web. 20 May. 2009) is the link of this source/idea.

17 <http://www.blackandchristian.com> (Web. 29 Jan. 2013) is the link of this quotation.

18 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neocolonialism> (Web. 29 May. 2009) is the link of this quotation.