CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Feminism from the feminist point of view is a cry against male chauvinism, eternal degradation, constant humiliation, perpetual victimization and moreover against inequality in socio-economic and political spheres. It is a voice of the suppressed and oppressed lot struggling to come out of the clutches of the so-called civilized society ill-treating female. It is an attempt to break away from the servitude, insubordination and forceful exploitation of womanhood and an attempt at recognition of woman as equal in all spheres of life.

Most African feminists espouse 'womanism' which Alice Walker defines in restricted sense referring to black womanhood:

as a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood ...its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self healing.¹

Akpayom Imoh, a student of Federal Government Secondary School, Nigeria penned a poem for a school
publication. The poem titled, "I Hate Being a Girl" speaks of the deep-rooted bias against female 'race'.

\begin{verbatim}
From birth a gift of mixed feeling
Accepted rather with reluctance
For the mission she has come to fulfill
Christened 'father's wealth' 'father's desire'
A reflection of the role she has come to play
A mere disquieting thing;
No matter how loving, good and beautiful
She can never be initiated
In to the family circle...  
\end{verbatim}

Gina Houng Lee, the Co-coordinator of the Fiji Women's Rights Movement opines that feminism is woman's having control over her own life, how she wants to live her life and making decisions about her own life.

Zaynab Alkali, the feminist propagandist has observed,

\begin{quote}
that certain women have used this feminist issue to shout themselves hoarse about certain ideas. Many women use the feminist movement to get back at men. So you have this feminist thing which is one big cover where people give their own interpretation to what it is. 
\end{quote
The chief concern of a ‘feminist’ or ‘womanist’ is uplift of woman struggling to find her destiny on her own overcoming all the external hurdles and self-imposed inhibitions. It is an attempt to counter her status emerging from age-old suppression and mute victimization. Feminism aims at transforming the discriminatory attitude of men towards womanliness. More than claiming equal rights in all walks of life on par with men, the activists of feminism feel the need to prevail upon the biased men for better treatment and to consider them richly deserving and equally privileged class in all aspects.

Feminism in African context is no exception to this generalized view. A detailed study of African writings with special reference to West African novel reveals certain factors responsible for the emergence of ‘feminism’ that are akin to the conducive factors elsewhere across the globe. A close look at the writings of various prominent female writers suggests that all are not alike in their attitude towards presenting the problems of women. As such writers differ from the other in their perception of the problems and in taking them onto the canvas. Their comprehension of the problem varies though the prevailing atmosphere in the African social setup is not a significant variant.
In African fiction invariably the setting is rural and the urban setting focuses the transition affecting African cultural identity. The traditional society has its own social patterns and spiritual processes based on native religion. The behavioural patterns in general are the same or similar in many African societies. People in remote parts of the country hold different views on education, marriage, and employment of woman for they are governed by superstitions and traditional beliefs. One who breaks away from the traditional customs and beliefs is viewed as the one possessed by ‘Satan’ in the Ibo tribe.

Nnaemeka’s father in Chinua Achebe’s *Marriage is a Private Affair*, an extract from his *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1972) says when Nnaemeka refuses to marry the girl whom he had found for him,

*I owe it to you, my son, as a duty to show you what is right and what is wrong. Whoever put this idea into your head might as well have cut your throat. It is Satan’s work.*

In traditional society it is the family and the community that decide the marriage of individuals. The society has vehemently opposed the church leaders who encouraged
woman education. But in urban society the situation and attitude towards women is different.

It is strange to note that the writers while upholding the traditional and cultural norms also try to impress their readers with their points of view and progressive ideas. But feminism means different to these writers. Some have blatantly put forth the need to sound feministic while others with an underlying current and the rest with subtle and non-committal tendencies. Some while focusing the lapses lay emphasis on the emergence of a new order to redress the endless subservience of woman.

Flora Nwapa, the spokeswoman of ‘woman protest’ against female suppression and marginalisation of woman is frank enough in spreading feminism in the contemporary African society. She emphasizes on the development of woman through economic independence and self-reliance. Efuru, Idu and Amaka represent in their own way to champion the causes of women. The rebel in them seeks to break the barriers of woman subjugation over the ages. It is also in a way a struggle for self-realization and liberation for economic and personal freedom. There seems to be a quest for emancipation of woman from
physical, economic and psychological bondage and to make her more independent and assertive.

Flora Nwapa claims:

*I am just an ordinary writer, an ordinary writer who has to write, because if I don't write, I think I would have to be put in an asylum. Some people have to communicate, and I happen to be one of them. I have tried several times to take University appointment and work as a critic, but each time I have packed up and left without giving notice. I found that I could not bring myself to criticize other people's work.*

Umeh Marie in her interview with Flora Nwapa, elicits the opinion of Nwapa on being called a radical feminist by Frank Katherine in her article, *Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa.*

*I don't think I am a radical feminist. I don't even accept that I'm a feminist. I accept I'm an ordinary woman who is writing about what she knows. I try to project the image of women positively. I attempt to correct our men folks when they started writing, when they wrote little or less about women, when their female characters are prostitutes and ne'er do-wells. I started writing to tell them that this is not so. When I do write about women in Nigeria, in Africa, I try to paint a positive picture about women because there*
are many women who are very, positive in their thinking, who are very, very independent, and very, very industrious.  

The major voice in African woman liberation movement, Buchi Emecheta generalizes the eternal victimization of woman. She is the symbol of direct feminist protest. Greatly concerned about victimization and enslavement of traditional Igbo woman to the dictates of traditional Igbo culture, she raised her voice as a feminist. She vehemently protested against the deep-rooted notion that feminity and womanhood is sexuality and the ability and to bear children and rearing them. Nnu Ego, Adah and Kehinde refuse to surrender to the Nigerian traditional mores. They are for the black woman empowerment. The feminism of Buchi Emecheta upheld the status of woman by contesting that woman is not merely an object meant for physical gratification and an industry for procreation.

Emecheta in her works is selective in choosing her personal experiences and general issues pertaining to African women to propound her ism. She herself admits that for herself, she doesn’t deal with great ideological issues. She writes about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, she sees things through an African
woman's eyes. She chronicles the little happenings in the lives of the African women she knows. She did not know that by doing so she was going to be called a feminist. But if she is now a feminist then she is an African feminist with a small "f".

Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta have presented men in their writings in low profile, not of domineering nature. What is now needed of African writers, who write about contemporary woman, is a portrayal of promising woman that could become a model and to inspire Nigerian young women today. Though African woman mostly is a suffering woman, abused and discredited, she desires to marry a rich man who could provide her with all comforts in life.

The new African woman is visualized to be a professional woman, rational in her thinking, interested in her career and also conscious of her role as mother. For Nwapa motherhood is not only a phase in the life of woman to become complete woman but also a dimension of life even to disown fatherhood if necessary. And Emecheta gives much importance to motherhood, as woman becomes more inclined towards children especially sons. Nwapa and Emecheta themselves have shown that professional women can make their career successful also by being good mother.
Buchi Emecheta's novels have documented mirror incidents in her own life. Her novel, *Second Class Citizen* speaks of her own experiences, her separation from her husband when he ventured to destroy the manuscript of her novel. But her children remained with her and her experiences in nurturing them formed the basis for the theme of her classic novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. In this novel, she emphasizes the importance of motherhood and children under her care. Nnu Ego's grandfather has no sons. Though his daughter, Ona is not traditionally married to Nwokocha Agbade, yet he prefers to send her to Agbade's house expecting that she would deliver a male child. But Ona dies after delivering Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego becomes a fond mother of five sons but ultimately dies when her own educated sons abandon her.

*She died quietly thereby the roadside, with no child to hold her hand and not friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as mother.*

The intellectual, revolutionary and ideologue Ama Ata Aidoo aims at projecting a positive picture of womanhood. She is too bold to speak out openly the sensitivity of the social issues. Her feminism is an attempt to make women become socially and politically conscious. She is not interested in focusing the
traditional significance of her heroine as part of the mainstream of life. Nor does she allow her women protagonists become the victims of circumstances, as she hates the male dominance.

The women in the works of Ama Ata Aidoo are more radical compared to men and demonstrate solidarity with other women. The vengeful Esi and Sissie are such a pair in this direction. Ama Ata Aidoo in her Theoretical Essay *Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves* has confessed that she is aware of the bitter criticism of her works that she has written like a man, outspoken, militant and vengeful.

Cyprian Ekwensi through his jaguar-like character Jagua in *Jagua Nana* launches an attack on the corrupt society. The reversal of the status of woman from secondary to primary is depicted vividly. Jagua stabilizes her position through prostitution considering it to be similar to any other trade. Jagua considers prostitution as an authoritative independent trade a woman can run for herself. For her it signifies individuality, no mean business. And so she readily accepts money from Chief Ofubara rejecting even his marriage proposal.

*She felt rotten, loose and awful. She knew she could never really abandon her past life and settle down*
with someone like Chief Ffubara in village like Krinameh. But the money would come in useful. She reached out her hand and clasped the two bundles.  

There are different types of prostitution in vogue in African society encouraging poor women to become harlots, some to improve their economic status, as it is an instant-moneymaking entreprise and for the rich women to enrich themselves further through their contacts and associations with the affluent in the society. Mariama Ba is a crusader in her feministic approach waging a battle against indignities inflicted upon women.

Chinua Achebe’s women in his early works are plain, docile and indolent with no voice or involvement in serious activity. They are traditional and submit themselves to male supremacy. Even when the society is changing they continue to be the same. Achebe has exposed the social immortality, sexual exploitation and ethnic bias in Nigeria. Female resistance shifts from trouble to a consensus, compromise and reconciliation. In *Things Fall Apart*, Ekwefi could not spell out her protest against the decision of the village elders, nor could she prevent Okonkwo from participating in the killing of Ikemefuana, a war hostage.
Nigerian Authors like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Cyprian Ekwensi portrayed women rot in the patriarchal society segregating than conceding no individuality, freedom to enjoy power and lead their own life comfortably. But Flora Nwapa's women are progressive by their diligence, industry, ingenuity and resilience. They often wield power and protect themselves from humiliation and dehumanization unlike many of Buchi Emecheta's and Mariama Ba's fictional heroines. Nwapa records traditional practices, which oppress women such as clitoridectomy, polygamy, wife inheritance and property disinheritance. She also challenges some of the fundamental assumptions concerning Igbo Women's passively accepting retrogressive cultural norms.

Chidi Ikonne rightly remarks that

Nwapa's womenfolk are imbued with beliefs that mirror Ugwuta society. Her women passively accept the idea that 'woman' basically inferior to the man, a concept which underlies the folk attitude to and treatment of women.¹

Wole Soyinka offers pigeonholed images of women, without significant feminist protest or voice raised against excesses of its male-dominated society. Except self-awareness, individual courage, integrity and moral austerity to a little
extent, the women characters are not fully in the mould of feminism. Similarly, the other writers too hold different points of view while presenting the female characters.

Before analyzing the situation that gave rise to the emergence of feminism or female protest in the light of the status of woman in African society, one needs to categorically view the demarcation of woman of traditional era and modern period. Women in the early period were duly regarded and not treated merely as slaves upholding the female principle governing the traditional Africa. Even an aged woman is considered a blessing to a man. The richest possession of man in traditional society is his own wife, more than a pearl. She is neither a commodity to be sold nor shared. She is regarded as the mother of creation and dispenser of life. She brings fortune to her souce and comforts and consoles in his distress.

It was believed in the traditional society that to beget a woman was to beget a man. Even an ugly girl does not become old at home. She shares the mysteries of life from beginning to ending. Women were staunch supporters of husbands and active participants in religious activities. They used to share fortunes and misfortunes of man, family and society and carve a niche for themselves in the spiritual orientation. They were like
the true fragrant flowers in the garden rendering life, pleasant and meaningful. They were the good omen for the family and the society. Women goddesses dominated the spiritual world of Africa more than the male-gods. Women thus represent the more privileged class of society reflecting various aspects of the deities worshipped by the society.

Lake Goddess of Ugwuta oral traditions, 'Chi' personal spirit of Igbo society, Chielo, the priestess of the Oracle of Hills and the Caves, Mamiwata and Uhamiri of Nigerian society are the fount of femininity, courage, wealth, beauty, fertility and motherhood. They constitute the spiritual force. People worship them for family welfare and prosperity. Some women are preachers, priestesses and also witch doctors believed to possess the mystical powers.

On the other hand, the treatment meted out to the widows and the widowers is alike. The period of mourning for a man after his death is at least three months during the period of which his widows in polygamous society must remain indoors. A Widow neither bathes nor would plait her hair, nor changes her clothes, which she had put on at the time of her husband's death. Similarly a widower will remain unwashed and unshaven during the period of mourning. Afterwards, the widow
and widower are forced to put on their best clothes, sing, and
dance and visit their friends, to thank them for condolences
expressed on the death of their spouses.

Contrary to the status enjoyed by woman in the
traditional Africa, the woman of modern Africa has to experience
a lot of physical suffering as well as agony caused by ill-
treatment and deprivation which lead to the emergence of
feminism. In the beginning men and women were sharing the
burden of their task in agriculture and trading. There was a
common understanding between men and women to work
together for betterment of family and society and to fight against
corruption and other social evils. In doing so, men turned out to
be organizers and working only for limited hours and thus
overburdening women with the greater part of work initiated.

Some of the intellectual women felt insulted when
they were considered inferior to men and demanded for equality
and parity. This led to the emergence of women liberation
movement in the first decade of the twentieth century for uplift
of women for equal rights, personal freedom, and economic
independence and for parity and sexual emancipation. Men
instead of giving better treatment to women turned more partial
and prejudiced and started humiliating them by racism and
sexism. The continuous conflicts on physical as well as emotional planes formed the subjects of great concern for the writers within and outside the country. Such writers that would plead and advocate equal rights for women and parity with men are branded as 'feminist writers'.

The feminism in the West African Novel is the call given by black women writers by addressing themselves to the grievances of black women in the contemporary African society. The justification of the influence of feminism lies in the emergence of a transformed society where the black woman has the least to grudge or grumble against her counterpart and her society. Though the desired effect could not be achieved immediately, the West African novel is sure to have paved the way for the transformation of agrarian society to exhibit equanimity, solidarity and woman fully co-operating with men and their society. The West African fiction shouldering a vital social responsibility has endeavoured to bring awareness among women for resurgence and renovation of society. Let us hope that the accomplishment of establishing an idealized society in conformity with the expectations of the African feminist writers does not remain a distant dream.
REFERENCES:


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