CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION
African Literature in English has added a rich, new dimension to the commonwealth literature. Besides presenting the conflicts and contradictions within the African Society successfully, African literature provides a glimpse of things in future. A King says,

The development of Black writing has been closely connected with the renewal of African cultural and political consciousness after the demoralizing effects of the slave trade and colonialism.

Nigeria is the most fertile centre of writing in Africa. It has a population of 103 millions approximately and nearly 250 languages are spoken in the country. Nigeria is known for its multilingualism. The Nigerian writers have mastered the western literary techniques and are producing different forms of literature of the highest order and they have given prominence to the aspirations of the African people. Buchi Emecheta belongs to that set of the Nigerian writers who have adopted an enlightened outlook.

The first Nigerian novel appeared in the 1950s. In that decade eight out of a total of sixteen African novels were Nigerian. This fiction gradually developed and became a flow by 1966. At this time twenty out of thirty three more novels had come from Nigeria. In the year 1967, the year when the Biafran war started, the Nigerian novel almost came to a halt. Once again in the year 1970, when the war
ended, most black African novels were Nigerian. The year 1970 is recorded as the best year ever for Nigerian fiction. The rise of independent African states was paralleled by a phenomenal flowering of Nigerian fiction. Writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Aluko, Amadi, Ike, N'wapa were among the prominent writers who contributed to the rapid growth of the Nigerian fiction. It is to such a Nigerian literary tradition that Emecheta belongs.

The African fiction has been a masculine domain for the most part, since men alone were educated in the early years. Hence the early presentation of women in the African novel was entirely left to the male writers. These writers, conscious about their culture always assigned to the woman a secondary role in their works. Commenting on this Sarah M. Grimke says,

> Man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill.²

The women were often portrayed as prostitutes, mistresses, slaves, and submissive women and never as independent selves by the male writers. They presented women from their point of view and this resulted in a distorted and stereotype image of African woman. Hence the African woman's presence was overlooked in literature. Lloyd W. Brown remarks that these women,
........ are the other voices, the unheard voices, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in the field.  

Feminism as a literary movement has had its origins in the west, and did have its profound impact on the African women. As this movement seeks freedom for women to decide their own destiny, to express their thoughts, and to eschew sex determined roles, it served as a weapon in the hands of the educated African women. Consequently the concept of ‘New Woman’ has emerged. The increased educational opportunities for women have accelerated the feminist movement in Africa and there is a growing body of African literature written by women and the impact of the women writers, in Africa, has begun to be felt gradually. The first generation of the female writers such as Flora N’wapa, Bessie Head, Mariama Ba, Rebeka Naju, and Grace Ogot are no longer solo voices. Many female writers appeared on the literary scene of Africa. The new generation of the African women writers include Ifeoma Okeye, Zaynab Alkali, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Akosua Busia, Case Diane, Lind Sey Collen, and Leila Aboulela. Buchi Emecheta is one among these writers. All these women writers have contributed a lot to the African fiction.

Flora N’wapa contributed six novels, a biography, several short stories, and children’s literature to the African literature. Her novels

Ama Ata Aidoo (1940) is a Ghanaian novelist, poet, playwright, and a short story writer. Her first novel is – *Our Sister Killjoy – or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint* (1977)*. The novel *Changes* (1991) has won the Commonwealth Writer’s prize in 1993. In addition to these she had written two major plays *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) and *Anowa* (1970). She is considered as a committed and outspoken campaigner of women’s rights.


Mariama Ba, who is known as a crusader against social injustices is a Senegalese writer. The novels *So Long a Letter* (1981) and *Scarlet Song* (1983) have won fame for her.

Rebeka Naju, a Kenyan writer, mainly deals with the experiences of women in post-colonial Kenya and also with the conflicts between the traditional values and the quest for wealth and power. *Kenyan Women heroes and their Mystical power* and *Ripples in the Pool*
(1975) are her major novels. She was awarded The East African Writing Committee prize in 1975 for the novel, *Ripples in the Pool*.

Grace Ogot is considered as the first African woman writer in English. *The Promised Land* (1966), *The Graduate* (1980), *The Island of Tears* (1980), and *Land without Thunder* (1968) are her major novels. In additions to these she had written two short stories. She is the founding member of the Writers' Association of Kenya.

These prominent writers are joined by the new generation of women writers who have portrayed a realistic picture of the patriarchal society and the struggles of the African women. All of them have addressed the issues like marriage, motherhood, economic independence, women's education, and so on.

*Buchi Emecheta*, a Nigerian Novelist has become Africa's most prolific woman writer of the second half of the twentieth century. She has become a powerful and influential feminine voice in the entire third world. Emecheta was born in Lagos in 1944 and brought up in Ibuza, an Igbo village in eastern Nigeria. Despite her family's reluctance to invest in girl's education, Emecheta managed to win a fellowship and attend an elite private high school. At a very young age, at the time of her graduation, she was compelled to marry and in six years she had five children. She nursed an ambition to get more education and to become a writer. She had lived an unhappy married
life, which finally ended when her husband burned the manuscript she had written. She not only took care of her children, but also worked, studied for a degree, and wrote. Her drive and talent enabled her to complete her Master's degree and she established herself as a successful writer.


The novels of Emecheta explore the varying definitions of womanhood and motherhood as experienced by her women protagonists in Nigerian Society. She is concerned, equally, honestly, with the issues of the biological control of women where by sexuality and the ability to bear children become the sole criteria to define womanhood and the economic control of women within the colonially imposed capitalist system. The novels examine and revise the
widespread traditional notions of marriage, social responsibility, self sacrifice, and service to the society. As appropriately said by Lloyd W. Brown, "Of all the women writers in contemporary African literature Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria has been the most sustained and vigorous voice of direct, feminist protest".4

Emecheta’s works invoke the "voice" and "perspective" of "The African Woman", She exposes the physical toll on women due to polygamy, perpetual pregnancy, child birth, and widowhood with bitterness. In her novels, she describes the experiences of the African women contending to affirm themselves against every form of oppression racial, sexual, and colonial. As Katherine Frank remarks,

Taken Together, in fact, Emecheta’s novels compose the most exhaustive and moving portrayal extant of the African woman, an unparalleled portrayal in African fiction and with few equals in other literatures as well.5

The awards she has received stand as evidence to Emecheta’s worth as a writer. ‘The Daughter of Mark Twain’ Award (1975), ‘The Jack Campbell – New Statesmen’ Award (1977), ‘The Best Third World Writer’ Award (1976-1979), ‘The Afro-Caribbean Post’s ‘Golden Sunrise’ Award (1977), ‘The Best Black Writer in Britain’ Award (1980) are the prestigious awards received in her career.
The first two novels of Emecheta, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1975) are autobiographical. The readers are introduced to Emecheta’s childhood marriage and her personal struggle for plain survival through the account of Adah’s struggle in the novel. The novel *Second Class Citizen* ends with Adah’s rebellion against her husband’s tyranny and her divorce. And in *In the Ditch* her struggle to assert herself in an alien country with five children in hand, is portrayed.


The protagonist of the novel Akunna is portrayed as an empty shell, pitied by some but mocked by many. She marries a slave descendant without the customary bride price against the will of her parents. Sure enough, Akunna dies after the birth of her first child. Though this may not be judged simply as the price to be paid for breaking tradition, the people of Ibuza take it as an opportunity to reinforce the old taboos of the land by telling her story to every girl in Ibuza.
The Slave Girl (1977), Emecheta’s fourth novel, is the study of the oppression of women by men. This novel has won ‘The Jack Campbell New Statesman Award.’ It is a pathetic study of Ogbanje Ojebeta who on losing her parents is sold into slavery by her brother. Even though she successfully frees herself from the bondage of the Palagadas she is not yet completely free because no woman in Ibuza was free because of the traditions. She marries Jacob, a master of her own choice. In the end she is bought by her husband and thus exchanged hands from one form of slavery into another. The more she longs for freedom, the more deeply she is mired into the tradition and finally gives up herself.

In Emecheta’s Destination Biafra (1982), The Biafran war which took place from 1967 to 1970 is depicted as the main backdrop of the novel. In an African society marriage and motherhood are the most prominent things to any woman but to the protagonist, Debbie, the educated, fiercely independent, and highly spirited woman, all these are secondary. She joins the Nigerian army to participate in the war, and this radical aspect in her character sets an example to the other African woman to step beyond the confines of their domestic life.

'The Rape of Shavi' is the story of shavi, an imaginary African country, which becomes the refuge of some whitemen fleeing the impending
nuclear holocaust. Emecheta’s chief concern in this novel is the exploitative character of colonialism.

Emecheta’s next novel *Gwendolen*, tells about the story of the protagonist Gwendolen, a sixteen year old girl who grows up, from an accursed childhood, into adolescence. This novel underscores the development of a young girl’s consciousness into adult womanhood through a series of initiating experiences and moral encounters. Gwendolen, who is raped by her uncle at the age of seven and by her father in her adolescence, gains a sense of personal bearing in life from the depth of her solitude and shapes her life with independent awareness. Through this novel, Emecheta points out that a woman is no longer confined to a deplorable dependency on man. S. Indira says that this novel,

involves a mixture of spectic cultural situations and values of two different societies. Entrenched in one value system which treats “woman” as an object to be used. Gwendolen slowly gets a clear, positive perception of herself as a woman and as a person.7

*Kehinde*, which is written in 1994 is the story of a Nigerian woman, Kehinde, who, after of her long stay for a period of fifteen years in London, has to return to Nigeria with her husband sacrificing
her freedom and affluence that she could enjoy in London. The novel focuses on the differences between the two cultures – Western and African.

Emecheta's **Double Yoke**, is the story of Nko, an independent minded woman who never compromises on the issue of gender equality. In this novel Emecheta returns to the topic of gender bias which seeks to relegate woman to the background in society. Nko and Ete who are ambitious with a rural background try to come to terms with their different perceptions of love and marriage. Ete, who is more traditional takes Nko to be a very quiet and submissive woman. But Nko entertains diametrically opposite views. This finally leads to a conflict. Commenting on the novel, Linda Barret, says that, it is, "a mixture, the simple narrative laced with ethnographic and sociological details as well as a comment on the foibles and potentials of a rapidly changing society." This novel explores the struggles of both men and women to free themselves from the double standards and hypocrisy of the society.

Emecheta in her next and finest novel, **The Joys of Motherhood** defines womanhood exclusively as motherhood. She vividly charts Nnu Ego, the protagonist's history – passing through the stages of a failed woman to a mother and later a miserable mother consumed by the demands of constant child-bearing and finally culminating in her death at forty.
Nnu Ego longs to be a mother and when she fails to conceive by her first husband, she returns to her father’s house as a failed woman. Her father gets her married to Nnaife and as she begins to have children one after the other she gets enslaved to them. The harsh economic struggle of bringing up her seven children, of sending her sons to school drains her youth and energy. Through the course of the novel, Nnu Ego does arrive at a heightened sense of self-awareness but is unable to emancipate herself from all these bondages. Despite her seven children, she dies alone by the roadside. By the end of the novel, one can realize the irony of the title, “The Joys of Motherhood”. The “Joys” experienced by Nnu Ego as a mother are in fact Sorrows of Motherhood.

As Katherine Frank remarks,

The complete futility of Motherhood that we find in The Joys of Motherhood is the most heretical and radical aspect of Emecheta’s vision of the African Woman.9

Emecheta’s novel Head above Water is autobiographical. The near heroism in her personal life is recorded in this novel. She gives an account of her struggle to establish herself. Anna Grimshaw says that this novel documents her “struggle to escape the marginality of being black, female and poor in Britain”.10

Speaking about the novel, Emecheta herself says,
As for my survival for the past twenty years in England...... dragging four cold and dripping babies with me and pregnant with a fifth one that is a miracle...... please start believing miracles, because my keeping my head above water in this indifferent society is a miracle.¹¹

Emecheta holds a faithful mirror to the plight of the African women through these realistic portraits of the women. The later novels of Buchi Emecheta, namely Second Class Citizen, The Bride Price, The Slave Girl and The Joys of Motherhood have been studied in the succeeding chapters.
References

1. A King *A Celebration of Black African writing*, P.17


4. Lloyd W. Brown, 35.


