Introduction
INTRODUCTION

Commonwealth literature occupies a unique space in world literatures in that the thought patterns are still in the process of genesis and rebirth. Literatures from the erstwhile colonies occupy a special place among world literatures for freshness, vigour and vitality; its writers have an unparalleled flamboyance brought about by the confluence of several traditions. Although the colonies of the empire consisted of nations having their own distinct literatures, both written and oral that survived the dismantling onslaught of colonialism, the new-wave writers in these countries used the medium of English, in addition to indigenous languages.

Today, the art of writing in these countries during or after the colonial response is more or less an act of rehabilitation. The distortion these countries, especially Africa, India and the West Indies, suffered during the imperialistic era is being corrected by writers who have tried to retrieve and restore the traditional values and features which are still relevant in the present. As Kendrick Smithyman puts it, one finds in these countries a “Common experience, common response,”¹ both social and literary. He goes on to say “...colonial literatures often enough proclaim, and both overtly and tacitly applaud, conformity to type,”² especially as conditions of colonisation tended to repeat what had been experienced elsewhere.
In situations such as the African, Indian and Caribbean, in contemporary societies, ex-colonies with pluralistic traditions, it is natural that, both at a social-cultural level and in the field of literature, there is a concern with what constitutes commonwealth. No culture is analogous to any other culture. Even within a nominally unitary culture, distinctive regional sub-cultures exist. Granting the differences, the possibilities of likeness yet remain open. There is thus a need to establish a framework for comparing peripheral culture systems, which permit the analysis of similarities and differences in the literatures of these countries.

Culture systems can be broadly divided into four basic sectors, the linguistic, the belief, the knowledge-producing and the socio-economic sector. These in turn are sub-divided, but these sub-sectoral divisions vary with particular countries and their levels of development. Consequently, within each of the four basic sectors are groups of semiotically similar signifying systems. In the linguistic sector are the languages of the society, in the belief sector its religions and ideologies, in the knowledge producing sector its educational institutions and in the economic sector its class hierarchies.

Although these countries have been able, to a large extent, to break away the colonial shackles both physical and emotional, there has been a set of structural and symbolic adjustments that previously autonomous culture systems made to the imperial presence of European colonisers. This cultural hybridization has been a consequence of imperial domination, through the extent to which it occurs varies greatly.
A comparative framework that links the dynamics of peripheral cultures to the political economy of their societies should be established. Thus a study of the literatures of India, Africa and the West Indies show that hybridization is much greater in some societies that others. It now becomes necessary for our comparative framework that we identify a number of factors that will help us to account for these variations in patterns of hybridization.

These factors could be:

1. Role of cultural elites.

2. Social organisation and the position of women in society.

3. Levels of development.


For example, within the Indian context, there has been little or no creolization; the original cultures have withstood the onslaught of hybridization, and the impact if any, has been absorbed into, not replaced the original culture. In the case of the African and Caribbean cultural setup, there is a large degree of creolization, and the original culture of the Africans has if not been annihilated, been replaced to such a great extent that depictions of constant conflicts between ‘western’ and ‘indigenous’ beliefs are quite common, as seen in the works of writers like Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiongo. African writers thus try to find their native voice,
which lay suppressed under the colonisers tongue, using their art to
resurrect a lost form of African ethos.

As students of African literature, we usually deal with the African
woman as a topic in that literature, but very seldom as a contributor.
Women have always played vital roles in oral literature, but the written
form has tended to ignore the women. Until recently, literature was a
male preserve and women featured in this literature as cardboard
characters, that answered to the images that male writers have of their
mothers on the one hand, and their wives on the other. It is at this point
that one can visualize the importance of the works of writers like Buchi
Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head and Mariama Ba. The works of
these writers belie the myth that feminist issues are not important to
African women, that African women already have sufficient power, that
women choose to support polygamy because they like it, and that
whatever misery African women suffer can be blamed on the introduction
of western cultures into Africa.

The first chapter of this dissertation ‘In their own Voices: Women
writers of Africa’ has put itself together by working out its research
substance from these various issues that are foremost in the works of the
Nigerian Novelist Buchi Emecheta. Apart from the largeness in scope,
Emecheta’s account of womanhood is an unapologetically feminist one.
She exposes and repudiates the feminine stereotypes of male writers such
as Achebe and revels the dark underside of their fictional celebrations of
the African woman. It is the African woman, Emecheta seems to say, far
more than the western woman or the African man, who is caught in a terrible bind. In order to be free and fulfilled as a woman she must renounce her African identity because of the inherent sexism of traditional African culture. Or, if she wishes to cherish and affirm her Africanness, she must renounce her claims to feminine independence and self-determination. Either way she stands to lose. It is Emecheta's growing awareness of the futility of attempting to resolve this dilemma, which accounts for the growing bitterness one can trace in the development of her novels.

In the Caribbean, much of the writing by men like George Lamming, Derek Walcott and Andrew Salkey has focussed on the issue of colonisation, alienation and political fragmentation and degradation both moral and physical. But here, as Kenneth Ramchand reiterates,

"West Indian literature seems to be the only substantial literature in which the dialect-speaking character is the central character. The conventional association of the dialect with comic characters or with characters on the periphery have not been eliminated, but they are disarmed of any stereotyping appearance or effect by occurring among other contextualisations of dialect."³

This use of dialect is present in proverbs, Anancy stories and folklore, as alive today as it was a hundred years ago, and acts as a tool in the hands of women writers in the making of subversive tradition.
In the Caribbean of the 1990s the term ‘woman writer’ is somewhat the term of a tautology, most of the significant writers are women. It is no longer surprising that women write, and that they write well. Velma Pollard, Edna Brodber, Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior and Jamaica Kincaid are some of those women writers with womanist preoccupations.

A Jamaican proverb ‘when man drunk, him walk and stagger; when woman drunk, she sit down and consider...’ - a gender-specific response to drunkenness that is wittily expressed, may be metaphorically extended to suggest difference of sensibility that predispose more women than men to the contemplative process of writing. Indeed, the proverb can be also be decoded to suggest that much of the writing that is done by women is essentially a therapeutic attempt to recover from the ‘hang-overs’ of patriarchy: to sleep it off-in Rhysian terms.

For a generation of Caribbean women, the recurrent theme in their works has been the woman’s condition as maddeningly marginalised, emotionally frustrated, dependent with a child-like trust on the vagaries of disapproving masculine attentions. For Senior and Kincaid, whose sensibilities take shape in rural Jamaica, that is both oral and scribal, folk and intellectual, processing words and writing is the considered alternative to walking and staggering. Their historical imagination leads them into far more complex explorations of the West Indian past, an exploration of self and identity, an exploration of the different aspects of human consciousness as are subjected to in the forces of history and an
awareness that the past has shaped, not just the individual life, but the consciousness and identity of a people. Even in such works, where the time in which the characters involved is contemporary, there is still a great concern with the past, and some of their consequences are still being felt by West Indians who are fortunate in that sense, in that they are already aware of the necessity, as Georg Lukacs puts it, "...for [wo]men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history, something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them." For a woman's story is not only the individual woman's story: it is a collective voice, a kind of communal narrative that assumes the generalizing proportions of myths, so that the parable become a primary narrative trope.

This forms the second chapter of the dissertation 'Considering Women: Adolescents and Mothers in the works of Senior and Kincaid', wherein works of these two authors are studied in depth. The Caribbean has always presented a very dynamic arena in which to analyse gender relations; both these women writers' works present the crystal clarity and lapidary strength of their vision. Comment, social and moral, is implicit, and in the starkness of their portrayal, one finds an uncompromising honesty of vision and sureness of touch that seems to spring less from conscious technique than a tireless persistence in capturing the truth of an experience and in cutting away the accretion of sentiment and rhetoric.

For Indian writers, there exists a wide range of cultural patterns within the strong fortress of tradition, and any collision with western
influence is converted into an embellishment. Writers such as Arun Joshi and others have sought to explore the deep-seated confusion existing within modern man, who is in search of his individualistic choices. In literary fecundity, Indian women writers in English have outnumbered the Indian male writers; Gita Mehta, Padma Hejmadi, Nayantara Sahagal, Shashi Deshpande and Anjana Appachana to name a few are some of India’s prolific women writers. The experiences of the main character or characters in their works, draw our attention to the modern Indian woman’s attempt to establish herself as an individual in her own right vis-à-vis a society which, by tradition, has reserved and continues to prescribe certain functions and roles to its women. This forms the research substance of the third chapter in this thesis titled, ‘In Search of Answers: Indian Women’s Voices’. Ismat Chughtai, Shashii Deshpande and Anjana Appachana are the three writers whose works are researched in this chapter, their works spanning half a century of Indian women’s writing.

All three writers explore, with considerable insight, the psychological problems faced by middle-class women at different stages in life, and are particularly interested in depicting societies in which women’s social status, their educational backgrounds and their professional involvements are rapidly changing. Professional women tend to rationalize their careers in terms of their suitability for women. The dichotomy which has traditionally existed between the sexes, in terms of occupational roles performed, has, over the past twenty years or so, been openly challenged by several sources. The reformist approach
seeks the aid of legislation to attain the goal of elevating women to the position of men, without radical change in the organisation of society, while the second alternative calls for complete restructuring the society, for women to be freed from the ‘bondage of the home’, and for them to “...assert a new politics, whereby the male definition of women as sex object is turned into a political tool for forging a new political order out of the special experiences of women.”

Culturally, women have been the ‘other’, defined by men. Women need to struggle free from social and literary confinement through redefining the self. A realization that the world is not made in her image influences the woman’s relation to space the time, and thus the form in which she writes. This struggle sometimes influences characterizations and narrative point of view. The search for definition of the self, and the uncertainty as to whether a self exists, might explain the frequent mixture of autobiography and fiction found in the writing of many Indian women.

Most of them are urban middle-class, and as people who write in English, they are often regarded as members of an elite or rather elitist group. To be a westernized Indian through the education received, to think and feel in English and yet to relate not only to contemporary India but the whole Indian heritage is a self-conscious task which has to be systematically undertaken.

They often offer realistic, uncompromisingly detailed glimpses of urban life. Their minds are alert to the issues of contemporary society,
especially as those issues affect women, and their literary skill are able to present these issues in a manner that is intellectually provocative.

Nowadays, there is perhaps no major Indian woman writer dominating the literary arena, but the increasing variety and relevance of women's voices is nevertheless apparent. In the words of Gilbert and Gubar:

"...the woman artist enters the cavern of her own mind and finds there the scattered leaves not only of her own power but of the tradition that might have generated that power. The body of her precursor's art, and thus the body of her own art lies in pieces around her, dismembered, disremembered, disintegrated. How can she remember it and become a member of it, join and rejoin it, integrate it and in doing so achieve her own integrity her own selfhood?""6

The thematic and ideological perceptions of the modern Indian woman writer reflects the efforts of the female mind in India to re-define woman in the context of the tremendous economic, social and intellectual changes which have characterized the social scenario in recent years.

Shashi Deshpande's description of her protagonist's/narrator's sense of victimisation and isolation, of a dichotomy of body and soul, the
outside world and her inner self, of the humiliation she feels at being treated like an object of gratification, and finally, of her experience of emptiness, uselessness and fear, takes us into the realms of the female psyche which no writer of the previous generations has dared put into words so candidly.

Similarly Appachana's works respond to the call of those who are trying to find images and metaphors with which to shape a new notion of identity. These stories suggest the possibility of finding alternative values to define how women can not only survive, but phoenix-like arise, newly creative and fertile, working through their art to find not 'new varieties of defeat' but patterns of commitment and optimism which celebrate female creative power.

The women in the oeuvres of Emecheta, Senior, Kincaid, Chughtai, Deshpande and finally, Appachana play an important role in sustaining communal hope, exuding an earthy stoicism that supports and comforts men and children. Mothers, aunts, maids and grandmothers are exemplary models for others, particularly children even though in many cases the family unit may have disintegrated.

For example, Senior's 'The Two Grandmothers', celebrates the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter. In doing so, Senior imbues the grandmother with social and political significance, especially with regard to language and identity. The granddaughter's identity is inextricably linked with the grandmother's idiom. This is a
key theme, not only in this story but in many others as well. In each of
the stories, the narrative stays close to the consciousness of the central
character.

Generally speaking, the relationships portrayed between females
are positive. Mothers and grandmothers are a consistent protective
presence, breadwinners and emotionally sympathetic. If the relationships
between women are reassuringly supportive, the same cannot be said for
those between men and women. Men are unwilling to bend to the
changing demands of society and reluctant to sacrifice their traditionally
dominant role.

Part of the appeal of the African, Caribbean and Indian writers
chosen lies in the way the auto/biographical narrative develops and seems
to envelop the first person narrators and protagonists of their stories. It is
an extremely seductive appeal fraught with the tensions and conflicts that
inform debates about representation and subjectivity, that is, about
gender, race and class differences. In many respects, this personal history
signals the ‘return’ of the unified subject of liberal humanist discourses,
particularly through its adherence to a linear narrative which celebrates
ideas of the migrant individualist and of the migrant success story. The
authors’ attempts to keep the woman at the forefront as ‘image’
throughout, is perceptive, and there is a curious blend of wit, wisdom and
wonderment in their depictions of their worlds.
In India, Africa and the West Indies, women writing is about their lives and the socio-political framework which shapes to a large extent, their experiences; there is a tacit indication that however much the author may be absorbed with the telling of her story, she feels nevertheless, a powerful attraction towards social-historical details; perhaps there is even the implicit suggestion that no story can be properly told without the inclusion of the social aura. The writer, because of the nature of her art, can easily deal with the past and present simultaneously and therefore evoke powerfully, the ways in which the past continues to shape our lives.

Women in India have traditionally been tellers of tales, and this century has witnessed prolific output from women writers whose short stories, novels and poems reflect the range and sophistication, which has now become their hallmark. Many write in Indian languages, and the translations have been able to retain the flavour of the language of the original, the Indian ambience and nuances. The reality of the multilingual situation in India is that many urban Indians today speak more than one language. Many writers, although proficient in English, choose to write in the regional languages. With such a vast array, the choice of writers for this research endeavour has been made with an aim to strike a balance between quality and subject matter. Most of the stories included have a special kind of complexity. They are often concerned with overlapping worlds of experience. Many writers delve into their personal past to bring out poignantly the girlchild’s, the adolescent’s or the woman’s point of view.
The chapter devoted to Indian women writers comes a full circle as it were, having by far the most number of contributors presenting a cross-section of the work written by women in India. Ismat Chughtai rightly occupies the pride of place, writing at a time when women were discouraged from crossing the rigidly demarcated threshold into literary pursuits, where even serious thinking was taboo. Similarly writers like Deshpande illustrate vividly in their novels, what the modern, yet domesticated, woman undergoes in life, and how she copes in a male-dominated, anti-individual society. An effort was made to find writers from varying backgrounds from different periods of women’s writing in India. What emerged was congruity and variety, a representation of women writers who were faithful to their experiences, to life as it really is, and who spoke in their own voice.

This project seeks to present an evaluatory exploration of works by African, West Indian and Indian women writers, and the segments of literary works chosen from these areas have been selected to put forth the research idea that women, though marginalised, are, from their perspective, central. The authors chosen for study are Buchi Emecheta, Olive Senior, Jamaica Kincaid, Ismat Chughtai, Shashi Deshpande and Anjana Appachana.

To conclude, the women writers chosen from the three former commonwealth colonies of Africa, West Indies and India are brilliant for their delineation of the female protagonist-girl or woman. In their hands the novel responds to the call of those who are trying to find ways to
shape a new notion of identity. It suggests the possibility of finding alternative values by which to redefine the concepts race class and gender, pushing to the periphery patriarchal norms, 'recasting shadows' as it were, as the margins now become the central, universal point. Women's literatures are like points on a sphere wherein every point is the centre. So it is that women attempt to recast shadows, by centering the flame of creativity.
ENDNOTES


2. ibid., p 14


