Chapter 1

ART AND ACTIVISM

IN

LITERARY WRITERS
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1.1 Introduction

From time immemorial, the world of art was being dominated by the male writers. Women faced a lot of difficulties to enter into the field of writing. In Old English Period, no texts have been identified as composed by woman, hardly any works by medieval woman, and comparatively few by Renaissance woman (Gilbert, *Norton Anthology* 1). In “Literary Paternity” Gilbert examines the metaphor of literary paternity, which defines authorship as a distinctly male act. According to such a conceptualization of authorship, the text becomes a product or a child of the author/ father, “produced by the generative energy of the pen / penis” (188). Gilbert has analyzed the connection between the metaphor of literary paternity and the idea of paternity itself and argues that like the male author who considers the female characters as his creation, men in general consider women as being “created by, from, and for men” (194).

The patriarchal culture has always denied woman’s artistic and social autonomy. Gilbert quotes Hopkins as defining writing as “a kind of male gift” and the paper on which he wrote as “a metaphorical female womb” (*Literary Paternity* 188). Hopkins compared mastery in writing to sexual maturity, thereby consolidating his conception of literature as an experience of male sexual power. The Western Civilization had always imagined the writer as the ‘father’ of a text, just like God was assumed to be the father of the world (188 - 189). The identification of the pen as a metaphorical penis left many woman writers unsure of their right to write. It denied them role model to emulate. Instead, it created enormous anxiety about the ‘propriety’ of their attempting the pen and thereby prevented many women from
writing. Even those who still managed to write – like Jane Austin and Anne Finch could be seen as having gone through severe emotional conflicts. They felt themselves as abnormals/criminals “crossing boundaries” (191). They were made to believe that “writing, reading and thinking are not only alien but also inimical to female characteristics” (191). As an example, Gilbert cites Robert Southey’s letter to Charlotte Brontë in which he states, “Literature is not the business of a woman’s life, and it can not be” (191). The early women novelists accepted pseudonym so as to hide their identity. George Eliot wrote “like men and from the man’s point of view” (Hudson 134).

Many feminists have argued, “the chief creature man has created is women.” All the well known male creations such as Eve, Minerva, Sophia and Galatea actually demonstrate man’s ambivalent attitude to their own physicality. “Woman as created by, from and for men, the children of male brains, ribs and ingenuity” (Gilbert, Literary Paternity 194). Even that celebrated ideal of women’s ‘virtue’ can only be described as man’s greatest invention. Women are persuaded to identify themselves as ‘ciphers’ whose value comes into existence only when associated with men. Such a view denied them the “autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen” (195).

The final paradox of literary paternity is the male author’s ability - not only to generate and imprison his female characters but also to “silence them by depriving autonomy.” This “fixity of life in art” in turn makes the pen not only a penis but also a sword. The passivity imposed on female characters by the male order is a metaphoric reproduction of this death. Psychologists who have studied the
relationship of the sexes have hinted at the male desire “to kill” women at least figuratively (Gilbert, Literary Paternity 195).

Women did not write in the beginning as it is now, the obvious reason as Virginia Woolf puts it “a woman must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction” (13). ‘Money’ symbolizes power and freedom and ‘a room of her own’ is to have contemplative thinking. Very few women had enjoyed these things in the past so as to develop their imaginative capabilities and personal freedom:

Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom and women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time women have had less intellectual freedom than the son of Athenian slaves. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one’s own (Woolf 112).

In A Room of One’s Own, the narrator was asked to give a lecture on ‘women and fiction’. As she sits on the banks of a river at ‘Oxbridge’ pondering over the question ‘woman and fiction’, the narrator is being interrupted by the approach of the Beadle, a university security guard. He enforces the rule by which women are not allowed to walk on the grass. “Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here, the gravel is the place for me” (Woolf 15). Women were not allowed to think freely, the path was not smooth for them to travel. They had to undergo a lot of hardships to enter in to the world of art.

Women were not even allowed to read as in the case of the narrator in A Room of One’s Own. When she is inspired to view the manuscript in the library, she is
told, “Ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a fellow of the college or furnished with a letter of introduction” (17). Women were not recognized as individuals or autonomous beings. Women had to face a lot of obstacles in the academic circuits, which symbolize the effects of an educational culture that radically restricts the scope of women’s intellectual exposure. Woolf identifies the fact of being denied access to buildings or ideas as another type of infringement on the freedom of the female mind. This exclusion is a more radical kind of interruption, one that disturbs not just a single thought or reverie but the life-long development of an individual or the historical development of an intellectual tradition. In order to prepare for the lecture ‘women and fiction’, the narrator of A Room of One’s Own goes to the British Library for consulting books. To her chagrin, she is surprised to see that men have written a lot of books about women but no book has been found on men either by male or female authors. The strength and weakness of women have been brought to light by the male authors. They did actually celebrate the virtues and vices of women. “They had been written in the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth” (Woolf 41). It was Aphra Behn who first entered into the world of art and earned through writing. She was forced to write and earn her livelihood when she lost her husband. Women abstained from the world of imagination so as to look after their household duties. Women work a lot from early morning to late at night; still their work is not being paid. “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (44).
The male authors depicted women as objects of pleasure. They never allowed the female characters to develop themselves into autonomous beings. They exerted a lot of violence on female passivity and projected male chauvinism in its extreme. Virginia Woolf quotes Coleridge’s theory of ‘Androgynous Personality’ in *A Room of One’s Own* to uphold the view that “the great mind is androgynous” (103). The androgynous mind accepts the equality of both the sexes and equal justice is given to man-womanly relationship:

If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her… It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine…But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman-manly, by passing and looking at a book or two (Woolf 103).

Woolf criticizes Galsworthy and Kipling for their excessive masculine qualities and there was not even “a spark of the woman” in them (106). Virginia Woolf points out William Shakespeare as the classical master of an androgynous mind. It is only through a pull towards the opposite sex, a writer can create androgynous qualities in his/her writings:

The androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent, and undivided (103).
The early male writers denied all kinds of freedom to women in their writings. They were subordinated to male powers. At the same time, some of the male writers supported women’s issues and allowed them to develop themselves in their career. Virginia Woolf has done a thorough study on some of the writers of the past and she has given her verdict in *A Room of One’s Own* as:

One must turn back to Shakespeare then, for Shakespeare was androgynous, and so were Keats and Sterne and Cowper and Lamb. Shelley perhaps was sexless. Milton and Ben Johnson had a dash too much of the male in them. So had Wordsworth and Tolstoy. In our time Proust was wholly androgynous, if not perhaps a little too much of a woman (107 - 08).

Women’s writing was not at all organized in the beginning. Women could only voice their protest against the male dominated world. Feminist criticism is a relatively new branch of literary criticism, which developed mainly within the academic circuits in U.K. and U.S.A. during the 1970s and subsequently spread to other parts of the world. Feminist criticism never had a commonly approved methodology for evaluating literary texts. American feminism has been more concerned with women’s writing and in the task of retrieving lost tradition of women’s literature. Elaine Showalter has been a leading figure in American feminism and her *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* is considered as a work of crucial importance to contemporary literary criticism.

In “Towards a Feminist Poetics” Showalter classifies feminist criticism into two broad categories. One of these is concerned with “women as readers” and thus
consumers of male texts while the others preoccupy themselves with “women as writers.” The former strives to change our apprehension of male texts by providing a “feminist critique” which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena. Showalter describes the latter by the name “gynocritique” as its primary concern is with woman as the producer of textual meanings, along with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women (146 - 147).

Women writers were not free to explore the female consciousness as they were always under pressure to write. In order to get their works published, they had to write in a way that was appealing to the male publisher. This realization later led to the establishment of several women’s publishing homes during the late 19th and early 20th century. Many well-known writers like Virginia Woolf and George Eliot believed that ‘a distinctly female vision’ would emerge in literature when women writers are liberated from economic bondage and male domination. Feminist criticism tried to reconstruct the past of women’s literature so as to discover and establish the continuity of the female tradition. Showalter undertakes such a project in her well-known work A Literature of their Own and identifies three prominent phases in the evolution of English women’s writing. She describes them as “Feminine, Feminist and Female” phases in women’s literature (Feminist Poetics 153). The period from 1840 to 1880 could be seen as the feminine phase in women’s literature; the efforts of women writers during this phase were mainly to imitate or “equal the intellectual achievements of male culture.” Most of these writers had “internalized male assumptions about female nature”, which prompted some of them to choose “male pseudonyms.” Such an assumed masculine disguise
also exerted an “irregular pressure on their narratives, especially in tone, diction, structure and characterization” (153). Showalter describes the period between 1880 and 1920 as the ‘feminist’ phase. The woman’s writing of this period was inspired by the exhilaration of having won the vote and had given up the “accommodating postures of femininity” (153). The phase is remarkable for its questioning and rejection of masculine values and a male centered worldview. Showalter sees the period after the 1920 as the “female” phase as it marks the recognition of women’s “experience as the source of autonomous art.” At this phase the woman writer rejects both “imitation and protest” and embarks on a mission to analyse the female experience “extending the feminist analysis of culture to forms and techniques of literature.” Many women writers of this period like Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson attempted a “retreat into the celebration of consciousness” which proved to be both an “enriching and imprisoning” experience (154).

In the early quarter of 20th century, women writing became an accepted fact. People began to notice the ‘celebration of consciousnesses’ in the writings of women. The considerable shift in women writing was nothing but “difference” (Showalter, Feminist Criticism 56). The initiative in this direction was taken up by French feminist critics, especially Helene Cixous who coined the phrase “écriture feminine” to highlight “the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text” (55). In order to equal with the male writers in the realm of art, women writers had to undergo a lot of traumatic experiences. Lack of exposure kept women away from writing. The burden of rearing children and other house hold activities denied freedom to women. Art has paved way for feminist activism,
which resulted in the empowerment of women. Women vindicated their aspiration through writing and art has changed their way of life.

Art did not give way to activism in the writings of men, as they were more or less didactic. In contrast, women writers were more concerned with activism as an effective tool for social change. Activism is an “effective agent of social change than electoral politics” (Humm 2). Women writers believed that art is a major weapon for social change. Many of the women writers have moved towards the noble profession of activism through art.

The word activism is synonymous with protest or dissent and more deliberately it is an intentional action to bring social change. Activism in literary writers is a new phenomenon, where they dedicate themselves to the welfare of the society. Many of the literary writers advocate activism as a part of their writing, since they believe that writing has a social purpose. It is only through art and activism that a radical change can take place for the good of the society. Women writers like Mahasweta Devi, Sara Joseph and Arundhati Roy consider art as a major source of inspiration to pave its way to activism. They are all socially committed to serve the humanity and extend their helping hand to the poorest of the poor.

1. 2 Mahasweta Devi: Her Life and Works

Mahasweta Devi, the renowned Bengali writer and activist, was born in 1926 at Dhaka in East Bengal, the modern day Bangladesh. She had done her elementary education at Dhaka and after the partition of Bengal, her family moved to West Bengal in India. She took the B.A (Hons) in English from Vishvabharati University
in Santiniketan. She passed the M.A. in English as a private student from Calcutta University in 1963. Mahasweta Devi started writing from a very early age and contributed various articles to newspapers and magazines. She belongs to a family that has an ardent love for literature and social work. Her father Manish Ghatak was a poet and a novelist and her mother Dharitri Devi was a social worker and a writer. Mahasweta Devi was inspired by her family to persevere in her career as an artist and an activist. She was appointed as a lecturer in English at Calcutta University and retired from service in 1984. After the retirement, she concentrated on writing for the upliftment of the poor, especially the downtrodden section of the society. She has been editing the quarterly ‘Bortika’ since 1980 to voice the pent-up emotions of the marginalized people of her country.

The Government of India honored her with Padmasree in 1986 for the activistic work among the tribals of Northern India. Mahasweta Devi won the Magsaysay Award in 1997, which is considered to be the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Shamik Bandyopadhyay have translated many of her works from Bengali to English. Mahasweta Devi is a realist who portrays the life of the ordinary people in her works. She is driven by an ardent passion for the sufferings of the humanity and effects a change in their life through her writings. Even as a student, she could help the victims of the Bengal famine in 1943. It was a turning point in her life, where she realized the need of social work to be a part of education. She continues to extend her charity works to the tribals of North India.
1.2.1 **Art Paves Way to Activism**

Mahasweta Devi is a leading figure in the realm of art in the post independent era. She is a bilingual writer and most of her works stem from her mother tongue Bengali. Mahasweta Devi could publish her first book *Jhansi Rani* in 1956, a biography of the woman ruler of a princely state in North India who fought against the British forces in the first war of Indian Independence in 1857. In order to collect materials for the biography, Mahasweta Devi set her way to Bundel Khand, the native place of Jhansi Rani. Mahasweta Devi was so inspired by the choice of the subject that she kept aside all her inconveniences and gathered minute details about the legendary queen Jhansi Rani. Mahasweta Devi collected a lot of facts about Jhansi Rani from the mouths of ordinary people as it was transmitted orally from one person to another. Mahasweta Devi’s quest for adventure resulted in the creation of her first book *Jhansi Rani*, by which Devi immortalized Jhansi Rani’s life in the minds of the people.

Maitreya Ghatak divides the forty years of Mahasweta Devi’s creative writing, starting from 1956 as the base year, into four different phases. “In the first ten years (1956-65), nineteen titles were published; in the next ten years (1966 - 75), nine; in the following ten years (1976 - 85) twenty seven and last ten years (1986 - 95), thirty nine” (ix).

Mahasweta Devi established herself as the major novelist during the second phase of her creative writing. In *Kavi Bandyoghoti Gayiner Jivan O Mritya*, Mahasweta Devi portrayed the inner struggles of a lower caste boy to fight against human rights and *Hajar Churashir Ma* deals with the radical left Naxalite
movement and its effects on the people. There was a major shift in the third phase of Mahasweta Devi’s creative writing; art gave way to activism and she tried to depict the struggles of the people against exploitation and tyranny. *Aranyer Adhikar* was based on the life and struggles of Birsa Munda, who could give a befitting fight to the British forces in the famous Munda rebellion of Nineteenth Century. Mahasweta Devi got the Sahitya Akademi award in 1979 for this work by the Government of West Bengal. Mahasweta Devi, after having laid strong foundation in the realm of art, changed her role to become an activist. She has explored the various possibilities through her writing to be an immediate saviour of mankind:

The subject of her creative writing has remained the socially marginalized, the poor and the tribals, and their struggles. The tribals, who contribute 8 percent, and the so-called scheduled castes, who constitute 17 percent of India’s population, and who belong to the bottom of India’s caste hierarchy, along with other depressed communities, meet these criteria as no other social category in this country does. They remain the focal point of her writing (Ghatak ix).

Mahasweta Devi has created an indelible mark on her fictional and non-fictional writings. In her fictional works, Mahasweta Devi has included a wide range of topics, such as demands for land, minimum wages, roads, schools, drinking water and various oppressions against the minorities (Ghatak x). In her non-fictional writings Mahasweta Devi recorded the history from a subaltern point of view and brought to light various atrocities faced by the minorities.
Mahasweta Devi insisted on the need for literacy campaign in the tribal areas and she carried out this mission with the help of educated people in the locality. Mahasweta Devi believes that education could curb the exploitation to a large extent in the tribal areas. Mahasweta Devi highlighted in her non-fictional writings the problem of deforestation in the tribal areas. The problem got nation-wide attention when the media also supported Mahasweta Devi with features and write-ups. Deforestation takes place among the tribal areas when the vested private interest lures the locals with money. Mahasweta Devi, through her consistent effort, taught the tribals about the need for rich vegetation for a good environment. Mahasweta Devi became successful in her attempt when the tribals took charge of their environment and protected it from massive exploitation. Mahasweta Devi once again proved that she could wield her pen over the mighty forces and put an end to all the atrocities faced by the tribals.

1. 2. 2 A Crusader of Social Justice

As a crusader of social justice, Mahasweta Devi takes the role of a journalist to uphold the rights of the ordinary people. In 1982, Mahasweta Devi joined as a reporter in a Bengali newspaper *Jugantar*. She was an impartial judge to pass verdict on the various issues of the society through her writings. As a reporter, she could travel across the country, especially the tribal areas of North India. In 1984, Mahasweta Devi started writing for a Bengali daily *Dainik Basumati* and in the following year she worked for *Bartaman*, another Bengali daily.

Mahasweta Devi has won wide acclaim across the state for her powerful and thought provoking words. She has never taken ‘sides’ in her writings, and as a
result her writings represent a powerful weapon for social change. In order to give a platform for the common people to voice their protest, Mahasweta Devi started editing a Bengali quarterly called *Bortika* from 1980. Mahasweta Devi encouraged the peasants to write about their problems and contribute their share to the quarterly. Mahasweta Devi, the editor of *Bortika*, insisted, “the contributions must be based on facts, figures and observations” (Ghatak xii). Mahasweta Devi conducted several surveys among the tribals of Northern India so as to delve into their problems and the findings were published in the quarterly *Bortika*. As a result of her courage to reveal the truth in public, Mahasweta Devi was being approached by so many people for solving their problems. She could function as a resource person to so many people by solving their problems. She would take necessary action by way of writing letters to the people concerned after having taken the pain of studying the entire case in detail. As she was involved more deeply into the problems of the ordinary people, Mahasweta Devi realized the need for organizing the people under different banners. In 1981, Mahasweta Devi formed an organization for the bonded labourers at Palamau District in Bihar with the belief:

Unless people unite in groups, assess their own situation, bring pressure on the authorities in a united manner, and actively participate in whatever needs to be done for them, no meaningful change can come about and that these grassroot-level organizations are best suited for planning and implementing development programmes for their own areas (Ghatak xv).

Mahasweta Devi is the lone figure behind the creation of various organizations like ‘Paschim Banga Munda Tribal Samaj Sugar Ganthra’, ‘Paschim Banga Lodha
Sabar Denotified Tribe Kalyan Samiti’ and so on. Mahasweta Devi is a popular figure among all the organizations and she tries to do her best to help the people. She has undertaken various projects for the welfare of the people with the support of the State Government.

1.2.3 A Full-time Activist for the Upliftment of the Denotified Tribals

India is a land of variety and vitality. Its people speak different languages and the climate varies according to the place. A large section of Indian population resides in the tribal areas and they are not competent enough to be equal with the people of the urban areas. It is very difficult for the tribals to come to the mainstream and they are deprived of all kinds of assistance by the government. Mahasweta Devi has played a crucial role to form various organizations among the tribals as the first step for development. These organizations have been functioning as a source of inspiration to the tribals and they are able to raise their aspiration in public. Mahasweta Devi could put an end to the “bonded labour” system that was prevalent at Palamau District in Bihar with the collective force. In the bonded labourer system “a person loses his status as free labourer and virtually becomes serf labour under a person from whom he has taken a loan” (Ghatak xix). The labourers have to work till the loan is paid back and the wages are very low whereas the interest is very high. It so happens that many of the labourers won’t be able to repay the debt before their death. The children are forced to join the bonded labourer system as they are not free from the clutches of this evil system. Mahasweta Devi realized that bonded labourer system was the worst form of exploitation prevailing in the tribal areas. It was a long struggle for Mahasweta Devi to free the tribals from the bonded
labour system. To eradicate this social evil, she formed the ‘Palamau District Bonded Labour Liberation Front’ in May 1981.

Mahasweta Devi was further inspired by the support of the activists across the country to carry out another mission in her life. She could wield her pen against the ‘Contract Labour System’ through her quarterly Bortika. Mahasweta Devi points out the harmful consequences of this system:

Young tribal women are taken away as labourers to the brick kilns of West Bengal or Bihar, where they are not only ruthlessly cheated of their money but also regularly sexually exploited by the brick-kiln owners, their employees or those whom the owners want to keep in good humour (Ghatak xxii).

Mahasweta Devi conducted a survey among the workers of various brick kilns in Bihar and West Bengal in 1984 and she had this shocking piece of information to reveal:

The going rate for carrying 1000 bricks was Rs. 3.30 - 4.30. And the average daily earning, if they get the money, would be a mere Rs. 4 - 5 after a backbreaking day’s work (Ghatak xxii).

The contract labourers of various brick kilns had no other escape except to be servile to their masters. Their children didn’t get enough medical attention and proper education. Mahasweta Devi wrote several articles in her quarterly Bortika, so as to make their problem a national issue and get the maximum government attention. Mahasweta Devi dedicates her life for the upliftment of the denotified tribals. As the first step, Mahasweta Devi tried to eradicate superstition, casteism
and communalism from the minds of the people. She has realized her need to be a full-time activist and she works 14 to 18 hours a day. Mahasweta Devi is of the opinion that “tribal identity is closely linked with tribal languages” (Ghatak xxxi). She criticizes the government for not recognizing tribal languages as the first step for development in this area:

If Sindhi and Kashmiri can be recognized, why not Sanathali, as there are many more people speaking Santal than Kashmiri? (Ghatak xxxi).

Mahasweta Devi is now a living symbol of providence for the tribals and destitutes. Activism should flourish in our country and for that purpose there should be many more followers to this noble profession. In 2006, Mahasweta Devi was awarded the Padma Vibhushan by the Union Government on the 57th Republic Day of our country. She dedicated this highest civilian award to the upliftment of the downtrodden sections of the society. When Mahasweta Devi received the Janapith Literary Award, she reiterated the immediate task of every Indian:

We are about to enter the new millennium, a curtain hangs before us. A curtain of all pervading darkness. A darkness that separates the people from mainstream society. What is necessary is to tear apart that curtain, see what lies on the other side, and in the process see our own true face (Ghatak xxxiv).
1.3 Sara Joseph: Her Life and Works

Sara Joseph is the forerunner of feminist movement in Kerala. She is an artist and activist of the present generation. She was born in 1946 at ‘Kuriachira’ in Thrissur. She was married at the tender age of 15 when she was in class IX. However, she was allowed to attend her classes even after marriage. She could pass the S.S.L.C examination in the first class and later she was sent for the Teacher’s Training Course. She began to earn money as she became a teacher. She was driven by an ardent force to complete her studies and she did her B.A and M.A in first class as a private candidate. The Public Service Commission appointed her as Malayalam Lecturer in Government Sanskrit College, Pattambi.

Sara Joseph established herself as a leading novelist in Malayalam language through her trilogy: Alahayude Penmakkal being the first, the second of which is Maatathi and the third is Othapp. Sara Joseph began her artistic career very early in her life. She brought out her first collection of stories Manassile Thee Maathram in 1973 and the second collection of stories Kaadinate Sangeetham in 1975. Sara Joseph won the Kerala Sahithya Academy Award in 2001 for her first novel Alahayude Penmakkal and she also received the Kendra Sahitya Academi Award in 2003 and Vayalar Literary Award in 2004 for the same novel. Sara Joseph’s second novel Maatathi bagged the first O Chandhu Menon Award, Abu Dhabi Arang Award and Kuwait Kala Award in 2004.

Sara Joseph devotes most of her time for the upliftment of the marginalized sections of the society. She has proved that art and activism could go hand in hand to bring changes for the eradication of poverty, rejection of patriarchal ideologies
and male dominated culture, campaign against deforestation and the creation of an eco-friendly environment. As a mark of protest, Sara Joseph avoids all kinds of inorganic things in her life. She advocates woman’s autonomy through education and self-employment.

Sara Joseph is a well-versed orator; her speeches are eloquent and thought provoking. She has not been influenced by any of the political ideologies. Sara Joseph strongly believes that religion is not strong enough to save the mankind. When people uphold the religious values, they forget the reasoning capabilities as they are driven by the collective consciousness. Sara Joseph has left a new style of writing in Malayalam with the publication of her novels. She is an artist cum activist and at the extreme a feminist to safeguard the rights of the women. She inculcates values through art and activism and her values are purely humane.

1.3.1 Art and Activism: Essential Means of Social Change

Sara Joseph initiated her artistic career by writing poems, which she did as a 9th standard student. One of her poems was published in the Mathrubhumi weekly. She could write poems even after her marriage and altogether 15 poems were published. Sara Joseph was very often invited to recite her poems in the formal get-together of poets. The renowned Malayalam poet Vyloppilly advised her to concentrate only on poems and avoid fiction (Joseph, Sthree 92). Sara Joseph’s literary career rests on all kinds of genres and the major thrust is given to short stories and novels.
Sara Joseph got enough opportunity to face the realities of life when she worked as lecturer in Government Sanskrit Collage, Pattambi. She realized the need for changes in the society through education. Art without activism is just like theory without practice. In *Alahayude Penmakkal*, Sara Joseph immortalizes the fast disappearing local dialect of Thrissur and she also tells the story of a group of people who are deprived of their native land as a result of urbanization. Her creative writing is a protest against globalization and exploitative culture. The small world presented in her novel *Alahayude Penmakkal* has now become a global phenomenon where the marginalized sections of the community gives way to others.

Sara Joseph upholds the philosophy that art and activism are the essential means of social change. The role of an artist is to keep the people informed of the various developments that take place in the society and prepare them to form their perspective about it. Sara Joseph was being severely criticized by others for blending art and activism in her writing. In the opinion of critics, activism affects the aesthetics of literary work, and they themselves suggest that Sara Joseph’s earlier works are better than the later ones. It is remarked that her earlier works are deprived of activistic tone and that the later ones reflect the social realities of life in general. (Joseph, *Ormakal* 26).

Sara Joseph has declared solidarity with the people of ‘Plachimada’ at Palakkad district in Kerala, where the big Coca-Cola factory is situated. The Government of Kerala gave sanction to this multi-national company to operate itself from ‘Plachimada’ and they dug bore-wells and sucked the fresh water to its extreme.
The villagers in ‘Plachimada’ are under threat, as they have no safe drinking water. Once upon a time the land was enriched with a lot of fresh water. As the company established its operation from ‘Plachimada’, they drained the rich fresh water resource and poisoned the water with waste from the factory. A lot of agitations and strikes have been conducted to close the factory but the Government of Kerala turned a deaf ear to their plea. In order to pacify the villagers, pipe water was made available to them. Sara Joseph along with other activists did their best to free the villagers from this tyranny. The struggle has been a long-winded process and the activists are adamant to save the villagers from this exploitation.

Sara Joseph became an activist with the formation of a women’s organization called *Maanushi*. It was a thinking woman’s organization that was formed with the help of students and teachers. Sara Joseph could become a good organizer through her involvement in this organization. Her popularity as an artist rests on the creation of Annie, Lucy and Margaleetha, the central characters in her trilogy. Margaleetha in *Othapp* surpasses the traditional notion of womanhood as she rejects the religious order and patriarchal culture. Sara Joseph’s strenuous effort in the realm of activism led to the feminist movement in Kerala.

1.3.2 *Circumstances of Creating Women’s Organization Called ‘Maanushi’*

It is a great surprise that Sara Joseph became a college lecturer without ever entering the campus for her studies. Eventhough she taught in a school for ten years, she could not get any opportunity to interact with the society. Sara Joseph was exposed to so many things with her entry into the campus as a teacher. Her first appointment was at Government Sanskrit College, Pattambi, in 1978. Sara
Joseph became more and more conscious of the various atrocities against women and children through her constant contact with the society. She was sad to see the pathetic condition of women in the society. They were subordinated to male dominated culture and they suffered various oppressions. Sara Joseph had read a lot of shocking reports about women committing suicide, women being killed, women being molested and so many atrocities against women in the name of dowry.

Sara Joseph’s earnest quest for its root-cause led her to the thought of women’s liberations from the male dominated culture. The girls in her collage used to meet her to discuss the various inhumanities faced by woman in the society. There was a general consensus among them to form a forum to start its operation for the common good. The immediate cause behind the creation of an organization was an issue within the college between a teacher and a student. It was said that a lecturer had sexual inclination towards a student of the college. They used to meet in the laboratory and the students found out this clandestine relationship. It became a great issue in the college and the classes were disrupted. The authorities in the college came up with a proposal that the issue could be solved with the public apology of the teacher concerned. The teacher apologized publicly and the student felt abashed and committed suicide. The after-effects of the suicide brought reverberations in the campus. As part of it, a group of sixty girls along with Sara Joseph conducted a march of protest in the campus. This march of protest led to the creation of ‘Maanushi’, the thinking women’s organization. The name ‘Maanushi’ was suggested by Sara Joseph and all the members of the organization whole-heartedly welcomed it.
The society never encouraged women working in any kind of organization during the eighties. Various institutions closely monitored Maanushi’s performance in the campus. In order to depict the social realities of life, ‘Maanushi’ formed a Feminist Theatre and for that the members themselves wrote and directed street plays. In 1986, the performance of such street plays created a ripple in the society. The organization could bring out three volumes of its publications under the title ‘Maanushi.’ The publication could not continue further because of financial difficulties. The disintegration of ‘Maanushi’ began in the late eighties, as there was little consensus among its members about its objectives. The organization was asked to take a stand during the crucial time of Mavoor Gwalior Rayonz strike. Since ‘Maanushi’ was a politically neutral organization, many of its members disagreed to support the strike. The organization ceased to function after having lost its organic unity. Even though the organization could not continue with its activities, it engraved an indelible mark in the history of women’s liberation in Kerala.

1.3.3 Rejection of Patriarchal Ideologies: A Feminist for the Empowerment of Women

The advent of ‘gynocriticism’ resulted in the need for creating a new language for women. The feminists believe that the existing language is created by the male chauvinistic world. As a result it is difficult for women to represent some of the male gender terms. In Malayalam, there is no equivalent male gender term for ‘Veshya’, which means a prostitute. In one of her interviews with Githa Hiranyan, Sara Joseph says, “If there is a gender discrimination in the society, there will be a language which denotes that discrimination” (Joseph, Sthree 102). The existing
structure of the language needs to the dismantled so as to undermine the power within the male gender. The ‘difference’ in women writing is the first step towards the liquidization of patriarchal ideologies. In her novel *Othapp*, the central character Margaleetha tries to reject even the male dominated religion by way of performing priestly duties.

The concept of the ‘other’ is as primordial as consciousness itself. In most primitive communities, one finds the expression of a duality, that of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ (De Beauvoir 16). Sartre argues that there is a conflict at the most basic level of human consciousness as each individual seeks domination by asserting himself as ‘subject’ and the other as ‘object’ (Bryson 152). In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says that man has successfully relegated woman to the status of permanent ‘other’. The woman is excluded from the realm of true humanity and she never becomes an equal and so never a threat (171).

The patriarchal culture considers woman as an ‘object’. The word ‘*Charak*’, for instance, is used in Malayalam to refer to a woman as a commodity to be used sexually. Such derogatory terms have been used by the society for the objectification of woman. Sara Joseph strongly disapproves of the so called fashion shows by women. It is part of a patriarchal culture, where women become mere sex objects in front of others. On the other extreme, the male dominated society would always encourage the woman to keep up her femininity. Simone de Beauvoir had done a lot of studies on women and her thesis was found in *The Second Sex*. One of the important obstacles to a woman’s freedom is not her biology or the political or legal constraints placed upon her, or even her economic situation; rather it is the
whole process by which femininity is manufactured in the society. In her celebrated phrase “one is not born but rather becomes a woman” (295).

Celebration of femininity by the practical culture is actually a subjugation of female autonomy. In order to destroy the supremacy of patriarchal culture, human beings should be identified as male and female on the basis of their sex and not as man and woman. The term ‘woman’ connotes the qualities of a woman, which the society attributes to a female. She should be obedient, patient and servile in her behaviour towards others. The moment a woman does something different and then the society would call her either a bad woman or a mad woman. Human beings are not products, which come out of a factory to be alike. It is high time that the patriarchal culture ceased to exist for the all round development of women.

1.4 Arundhati Roy: Artist cum Activist of the Modern Generation

The international community knows Arundhati Roy as an artist with her debut novel *The God of Small Things*. It bagged the coveted Booker Prize for fiction in 1997. Roy is the first non-expatriate Indian author and the first Indian woman to have won this prize. This novelist and human rights activist was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize in 2004 for her work in social campaigns and for her advocacy of non-violence. Arundhati Roy is now the chairperson of the “Jury of Conscience” of The World Tribunal on Iraq. In her opening statement on behalf of the Jury of Conscience of The World Tribunal on Iraq, Arundhati Roy says, “We truly do live in the Age of Irony, in an age when satire has become meaningless because real life is more satirical than satire can ever be” (*The War in Iraq* 2).
Arundhati Roy was a bright student in the school. She carried out the same momentum throughout her career. Arundhati Roy’s mother says:

Arundhati is a born talker and a born writer. While she was studying in our school it was a problem to find a teacher who could cope with her voracious appetite for reading and writing. Most of the time she educated herself. I can remember our Vice Principal Sneha Zakaria resorting to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as a text for the little fourth grader (Prasad 112).

Arundhati Roy joined the Delhi School of Architecture for her higher studies. She had to struggle a lot to make a living and very often she resorted to sell empty beer bottles for earning something. Arundhati Roy’s artistic career began as a screenplay writer. She wrote the screenplay for *The Banyan Tree*, a television serial, in 1987. She had acted in the role of a village girl in the award-winning movie *Massey Sahib* and wrote the screenplays for *In which Annie Gives it those Ones* and *Electric Moon*.

The international attention was focused on Arundhati Roy when she won the Booker Prize in 1997. It was the twenty-ninth Booker Prize for Commonwealth Nations’ best novel. The Booker Committee has described Roy as “an architect in literary circles moulding language in all shapes and sizes as was never done before at least in the Indian literary context” (Surendran 50). Roy was trying to imitate and hate the colonizer with the use of English language in her novel, as she says, “For me language is a skin on my thought and was thinking of a way of telling…I wrote it…the way an architect designs a building” (Surendran 51).
Roy seems to be artistically iconoclastic in *The God of Small Things*. The stylistic innovations make the novel unique and this variety brings vitality and exuberance to the novel. The novel is unique in every aspect and it is a linguistic experiment with the English Language. The stylistic innovations include the use of words, phrases and even sentences from vernacular language, use of italics and upper case letters, subjectless sentences, deviant spelling, topicalization, deviation from normal word order, single word ‘sentences’, change of word classes, clustering of word classes and a variety of other techniques (Surendran 51). Shomit Miller, Roy’s close friend and author, says that the book uses language in a way that is rare… “Very rarely do you get someone who can tear apart the rules and give you something that is fresh and not pretentious” (Surendran 51).

In her novel *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy has given prominence to ecology and subalternity as the major themes in the novel. The novel *The God of Small Things* is actually the dawn and dusk of her artistic career. The readers have witnessed the death of an artist with the debut novel of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. Roy has confessed many a time that *The God of Small Things* is the first and the last book of fiction in her whole life. It doesn’t mean that she has stopped writing, but she has switched over to a kind of research on her own novel *The God of Small Things* in the light of the hard realities of life.

Roy’s close observations on the minute aspects of life resulted in the creation *The End of Imagination* and *The Greater Common Good*. In *The End of Imagination*, Roy criticized the nuclear policies of the Government of India and the testing of nuclear weapons in Pokhran. In *The Greater Common Good*, Roy
denounces the effect of dams on human life and the environment. *The Greater Common Good* is a saga of the pathetic plight of tribals, displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Arundhati Roy has turned out to be a full-time activist on the banks of the Narmada valley. She has proved herself to be a great example of selfless service to the humanity. She contributes all her money for the upliftment of the displaced tribals in the Narmada valley. She criticizes the government for not taking any measures to rehabilitate the displaced tribals.

1.4.1 **A Spokesperson of the Dalit and the Deserted**

Arundhati Roy, through her non-fictional writings, has taken the role of a spokesperson to support the Dalit and the deserted. In *The End of Imagination*, Roy’s royalties have been assigned to the campaign against nuclear weapons in India and in *The Greater Common Good*, her royalties have been to Narmada *Bachao Andolan*. In the dedication to *The Greater Common Good*, Arundhati Roy writes, “for the Narmada and all the life she sustains.” She is not the sort of writer who engages in an armchair journalism. In order to understand the life that the Narmada sustains, she takes the pains/joys of travelling extensively on it, visiting its banks and valleys and seeing the tribals’ “airy fragile homes and their fields and the forests behind them” (1). Arundhati Roy severely criticized the validity of the 2:1 split verdict of the Division Bench of the Indian Supreme Court on the 18th October 2000 in favour of the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. Roy had to face the Contempt of Court for having staged a dharna outside the Supreme Court and for shouting slogans against the judiciary and the judgment in the Sardar Sarovar Case.
In *The Greater Common Good*, Arundhati Roy tries to question the validity of the democratic government, “What is the issue now is the very nature of our democracy. Who owns this land? Who owns its rivers? Its fish?” (3). Roy is convinced of the fact that big dams will never help the progress of a country like India, even though our first Prime Mister Jawaharlal Nehru deemed dams as “The temples of modern India” which he himself regretted later (Roy, *Greater Common Good* 7).

In "The People Vs the God of Big Dams", Arundhati Roy says, "We must be the only country in the world that builds dams, uproots millions of people, submerges forest and destroys the environment in order to feed rats" (33). Roy substantiates her arguments by citing the report submitted by the India Country Study done for the World Commission on Dams. It says that ten percent of India's food grains is produced by big dams. That's twenty million tonnes. The Ministry of Food and Civil Supplies says that ten percent of India's food grains is eaten every year by rats. And that's twenty million tones. So, Roy recommends the construction of better warehouses as more relevant to our needs than big dams (33). Roy is deadly against nuclear weapons, which destroy the very elements of nature. When India conducted the nuclear tests, she answered with her non-fictional essay *The End of Imagination*:

If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be earth herself. The very elements - the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water – will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible” (12).
Arundhati Roy foretells the harmful consequences of nuclear weapons on human beings and ecology in *The End of Imagination*:

Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames when everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day. Only interminable night. Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn into toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth and contaminate groundwater. Most living things, animals and vegetables, fish and fowl, will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging, relict humans for what little food there is (12 - 13).

1.4.2 **Art and Activism: Modern Weapons of Social Change for Arundhati Roy**

Arundhati Roy is a peace activist of modern India. She follows the Gandhian principles of non-violence in her life. The weapon that she has got in her armory is the weapon of peace with justice. In *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Roy pokes fun at wars, as she says, “People rarely win wars, governments rarely lose them” (242) and the war on Afghanistan by America, the most powerful country in the world, has been compared to the burning of a haystack to find out the needle (254). Arundhati Roy, with ardent passion, charges the government for having conducted the nuclear test. To her, “it signifies dreadful things. The end of imagination. The end of freedom” (Roy, *End of Imagination* 32). Both India and Pakistan build up nuclear weapons for the protection of their territory but many things we share in
common, we come to lose even without our knowledge. All their aspirations go in vain, when one country attacks the other:

Though we are separate countries, we share skies, we share winds, we share water. Where radioactive fallout will land on any given day depends on the direction of the wind and rain. Lahore and Amritsar are thirty miles apart. If we bomb Lahore, Punjab will burn. If we bomb Karachi, then Gujarat and Rajasthan, perhaps even Bombay, will burn. Any nuclear war with Pakistan will be a war against ourselves (Roy, *End of Imagination* 34).

The Government of India often pacifies its people by saying that India will not use nuclear weapons first against its enemies. Arundhati Roy concludes her provocative essay *The End of Imagination* with criticism lashed upon the then Prime Minister of India:

Who the hell is the Prime Minister to decide whose finger will be on the nuclear button that could turn everything we love – our earth, our skies, our mountains, our plains, our rivers, our cities and villages – to ash in an instant? Who the hell is he to reassure us that there will be no accidents? How does he know? Why should we trust him? (52).

Roy has included Big Dams among the weapons of mass destruction. Big Dams render the poor as destitute in the independent country:

Big Dams are to a Nation’s ‘Development’ what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They’re both weapons of mass destruction. They’re both weapons governments use to control their own people. Both twentieth century
emblems that mark a point in time when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival (*Greater Common Good* 61 - 62).

In *The Greater Common Good*, Roy takes the role of an activist and tries to speak for the subalterns. The subaltern in *The Greater Common Good* consists of people from three different states of our country. The people, who were affected by the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam, appeal to the State and Central Governments to listen to their petitions. But all their aspirations go in vain, when the Supreme Court continues to give orders for the further construction of the dam. 'The majority judgment', passed on 18th of October 2000, blamed Narmada Bachao Andolan for filing the petition so late. The judgment proclaims:

> For any project which is approved after due deliberation, the Court should refrain from being asked to review the decision ... relating to height of the dam and the extent of submergence, environment studies and clearance, hydrology, seismicity and other issues except implementation of relief and rehabilitation, can't be raised at this belated stage (Roy, “People Vs The God of Big Dams” 30).

It means that the government can afford to neglect studies on a project before it is launched and that citizens have no right to question it once construction begins. "The message from the highest Court in the land is pretty clear: Poor? Adivasi? Dalit? Happen to live in the submergence zone of a big dam?" (30). Arundhati Roy wrote *The Greater Common Good* in support for Narmada Bachao Andolan. The essay is a well-studied thesis, portraying the deplorable condition of the displaced tribals on the banks of the Narmada valley:
India now boasts of being the world’s third largest dam builder. According to the Central Water Commission, we have 3,600 dams that qualify as Big Dams, 3,300 of them built after Independence. Six hundred and ninety-five more are under construction. This means that forty percent of all the Big Dams being built in the world are being built in India. Yet one-fifth of our population does not have safe drinking water and two-thirds lack basic sanitation. … Big Dams are obsolete. They are uncool. They’re undemocratic. They’re a Government’s way of accumulating authority (Roy, *Greater Common Good* 7).

The theme of ecology is carried over to *The Greater Common Good* from Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. Arundhati Roy discusses in great detail the various ecological problems in *The Greater Common Good*. Big Dams are harmful to human society. They are the perpetuators of earthquakes. “They lay the earth to waste. They cause floods, water logging, salinity, they spread disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquakes” (8). The dam-building industry has shifted from the first world to the third world and everything is done in “the name of Development Aid, along with their other waste, like old weapons, superannuated aircraft carriers and banned pesticides” (8). Roy makes fun of each Indian Government who “actually pays to receive their gifted garbage” (8).

The Supreme Court has given further orders to raise the height of the Sardar Sarovar Dam from 88 meters to 138.68 meters. The government of India doesn’t take into consideration the views and aspirations of the displaced tribals in the Narmada valley as they are illiterate. The government is not ready to rehabilitate
the displaced tribals on the banks of the Narmada valley. The people are in fact helpless to wage war against the authorities. They will have to be satisfied with the compensation that they get from the government for their lost territory. The displaced tribals have got a sad story to tell:

The millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war. … it’s being done for the sake of the Greater Common Good. That it’s being done in the name of progress, in the name of the National Interest (Roy, *Greater Common Good* 12).

The rural poor continue to suffer in the name of development. All kinds of atrocities have been inflicted upon the villagers. They are neglected and often become prey to pseudo developments. Arundhati Roy substantiates her argument in *The Greater Common Good* by stating that:

India does not live in her villages. India *dies* in her villages. India gets kicked around in her villages. India lives in her cities. India’s villagers live only to serve her cities” (15).

1.5 Conclusion

The social commitment of an artist is a long discussed and disputed matter in all centuries. In the 21st century, many artists consider art as a tool to help their activism. They don’t take art for its own sake but for the activistic sake to bring social changes. The artists recognize the fact that activism is the need of the hour. The marginalized sections of the society face the want of support; especially the Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribe. As a developing nation, India has to push
its backward people to the main stream. India is an agrarian country and most of its people live in the rural areas. As they are not connected to the developed cities, the government and the authorities very often neglect them. Most of the tribals have their own language and culture, which causes great difficulty to interact with the main land.

Artists find that it is their duty to support the weaker sections of the society through their activism. The illiterate lot is exploited to the maximum extent by the privileged classes. In India, literary artists recognized their need of championing the cause of the lowest strata through their writings. The artists resort to journals, as a vehicle of thought to vindicate the truths before the public. The activistic writings of Mahasweta Devi have been published in the Bortika. She could invite support for the tribals through her journal. Narmada Bachao Andolan brings out its publication every year. The Narmada dam project has become an international issue now and it has a lot of supporters across the globe.

The artistic sensibility is always lenient towards the weaker sections of the society. The artists can feel the pulse of the society and it is being reflected in their writings. Mahasweta Devi, Sara Joseph and Arundhati Roy consider activism as a mission and not as a profession. There is a lot of difference between professional researchers and activists. The professional researchers would collect materials with a scientific bent of mind, prepare the report and submit it to the authorities. They would have only one topic to brood over at a time without any kind of involvement in the ground realities of life. The activists on the other hand don’t consider the atrocities on the people as the mere subjects of their research nor raw materials for
their literary writing. They are absorbed themselves in the predicament of the marginalized sections of the society. So, activism in the case of an artist is the reflection of this involvement, which they can’t resist. These artists don’t like to be called as ‘activists’. They believe that such kinds of terminology would restrict the very concept of their activism.

This chapter has analyzed how art and activism go hand in hand in literary writers. They consider activism as a major source of inspiration for all their endeavours. In order to show the indebtedness to the society, the literary artists very often resort to the theme of subalternity in their works. In the next chapter, we discuss how Mulk Raj Anand, Toni Morrison, and Arundhati Roy in particular project the theme of subalternity in their works for the noble cause of putting an end to the social evils.

Notes

1 Oxbridge: A fictional university meant to suggest Oxford and Cambridge.

2 Androgynous Personality: Having both male and female characteristics; looking neither strongly male nor strongly female.

3 Bortika: The literal meaning of the word Bortika is ‘torch’. In 1980, Mahasweta Devi started editing a Bengali quarterly called Bortika. It was an obscure literary periodical edited by her father. Once she took charge, after the death of her father in 1979, she changed the journal beyond recognition. Bortika became a forum to express aspirations of the people.
4 **Jugantar: A Bengali Newspaper.** Mahasweta Devi worked for two years for this paper from 1982, after having taken leave from the college in Calcutta where she had been teaching English Literature. It gave her an opportunity to travel in the countryside and write weekly columns regularly for two years.

5 **Dainik Basumati: A Bengali Daily.** In which Mahasweta Devi worked for a year after having retired from her teaching job in 1984.

6 **Bartaman: Mahasweta Devi started writing for this Bengali Daily from 1985 and she had a weekly column to furnish the deplorable condition of the rural people till 1991.**
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