CHAPTER-I

DEFINING COMMITMENT

Literature is by its very nature a social art committed to human values. Its role as a potent medium of communication entails more of responsibility than privilege to the writer. It carries a great deal of social significance especially when it is committed to politics of right and left, but the politics of right and wrong to the humanistic gestures and to artistic principles. The image of the writer as an idle singer in the ivory tower and a vendor of illusions are no more tenable in the modern context. The publication of a work is essentially an act of communication through which the writer seeks to impose his personality and vision of life on the society. Commitment stands for the basic cast of mind, the genuine devotion of the writer to a cause and his convictions. It denotes a pledge, an involvement of the nature of a binding promise, implying a clear stand in a specific problem arising out of a deep consciousness of the various dimensions of the issues concerned. “A committed or engage writer is one who through his work, is dedicated to the advocacy of certain beliefs and programmes especially those which are political or ideological and in aid of social reform” (J.A.Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms; London:Andre Deutch Ltd.,139). The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term commitment as an engagement that restricts freedom of action. This is not a negative as it sounds. It indicates an ideology firmly held and a perspective adhered to with zeal and dedication. The intensity
of the commitment arises from the sense of moral fervor and righteousness. Conviction goes with commitment. It can include the willingness to worth for a well-defined ideology aimed at the reform that the writer has in mind, and the dissemination of the faith.

Commitment “is an awareness, an attitude, a clear and feelingful recognition of being fully present in the moment, making the choice of the moment, and standing by the consequences of these choices whether anticipated or not” (William Horosz, The Crisis of Responsibility: Man as the Source of Accountability; 248). In a spectacular semantic explosion the word, “Commitment’ has gathered to itself an astounding variety of new meanings. An examination of contemporary criticism reveals that the word and its various adjectival forms have recently assumed new literary terms. It has raised a number of literary problems and the writers have passionately chosen sides on the problem. Writers do not live in a vacuum. They are sensitive to the world around them more acutely than others. So their works bear the impact of their times. Yet, reflecting the deepest mood of their times, the writers shall also shape their times. Thus, they are shaped by their age and they mould their age, too. In an epoch of intense social transformation, political and social forces exert considerable influence upon the artist, responsive to these forces. The forms of commitment and the political alternativeness chosen by writers living in an age of controversy differ. The aesthetic consequences of their choices form a
distinctive aspect of the study of literature. Thus, the term commitment includes “both the conscious involvement of the artist in the social and political issues of his age (in contrast to deliberate detachment or political noninvolvement), and the specific political obligations which the artist assumes in consequence of this involvement…” (Gerald Rabkin, Drama and Commitment; Bloomington: University Press, 164, 14). Analysis of the evils in society leads to violent disapproval and protest. Registering this protest has become one of the major functions of literature. The writer by his very nature cannot help being conscious of vital political issues. Thus, it is clear that commitment is conceived as a social and political activity. The writer must commit himself to the political arena in order to retain his integrity as an artist.

Thus, the term commitment is used as an equivalent to an undertaking or an obligation. It includes any belief, which incurs obligation whether individual or social. The writer commits himself to work for an individual, an ideology or an institution. His belief may include non-political areas such as a moral, religious or aesthetic and their literary consequences. Since the implications of commitment are greatly widened, it is not possible to speak of the act of commitment without predicing an object to which the writer is committed. The question, which inevitably arises, is what he is committed to. All art is committed to human as well as aesthetic values. In so far as the artist is concerned with aesthetic commitments, there is no problem. The problem arises
when he is committed to values or actions extrinsic to the immediate concerns of his art, i.e., when he is forced by non-aesthetic considerations such as political, social or religious commitments. If the writer is committed to certain social objective, he is invariably involved with considerations of means to realize them. The effect of a writer’s commitment on his work has to be judged in the light of the purely literary or artistic merit of his work. Only then can it be decided whether his commitment has vitiated the artistic integrity of his work and degraded art into propaganda. Time is the arbiter of this. If the work retains life and significance long after the resolution of the issue that gave rise to it, it may be concluded that his art has transcended contingencies of propaganda.

Therefore, it is imperative and justifiable that a writer must be committed to the promotion of human values. There are certain fundamentals of human decency, which must be preserved and protected. But it would be absurd to deny that there are occasions when aesthetic standards and our central human values clash. His affiliation to certain doctrines and actions may adversely affect the aesthetic value of his work. The importance of political commitment as a literary problem engenders a number of aesthetic dilemmas.

Political commitment involves two pertinent problems: the moral problem examines whether the artist as a human being living within a social situation which demands political resolution can evade these problems in his art and still retain his integrity as a social being and the aesthetic problem raises the question
if the artist can evade these problem in his art and still maintain the integrity of
the work. The concept of commitment has thus emerged as a subject of debate.
At bottom, it is a question of discharging one’s responsibility without fear or
favour and it essential for the artist. Kenneth Tynan in his essay, “Theater and
Living” argues that “if all art is a gesture against death… it must commit itself”
(Gerald Rabkin, op.cit. 4). His argument is assertive and in a clear positive tone
indicating the creative role of literature has to play in society. He points out that
there are three attitudes towards life open to the writer: he can record it
imitatively; it must comment. Literature demands, besides interpretation,
resolution as well. Therefore, the artist is expected to involve himself with social
questions, to immerse himself in the milieu of which he is an integral part. Art,
which evades social issues, is like a flower that “is born to blush unseen” and
“waste its sweetness on the desert air”. The other pole of this argument is that
artist should not lose himself in his times.

The liabilities of the political commitment of writers must not be
overlooked. Some writers have become loathly to involve themselves politically
as they find their writings discounted or discredited as a result of their ‘position
taking’. For example, as a response to a question about the artist’s relationship to
the growing tension between the Soviet Union and the United States: “Do you
think a writer should involve himself in it (as writer, as person) to the point of
commitment?” (Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, 11.55-
several writers affirmed the writer’s detachment. Clement Greenberg asserted that while the person might have political obligations the writer had obligations only to his art. Leslie Fielder also declared that although the writer may at times be forced into a position of political commitment, he is so at the sacrifice of his role as a writer and Rosenberg opined: ‘there is an inherent conflict between artistic integrity and any commitment’.

The significance of political commitment for the artists and the consequences of their conscious involvement in the social issues of the age in which they live are, by no means, a simple problem. Writers when they confront such problems may keep quiet on things going wrong or convert a concrete into an abstraction and tell the ruling class what it wants to hear. In some extreme cases, especially in the totalitarian regimes, the writer is compelled not only to be socially alive but also more openly to join the common people in their struggles. He cannot afford to have a neutral stance. Such an engaged writer is expected to be a model to others and display his fidelity to the rulers, absorbing their outlook and speaking on their behalf in order to uproot dissent, to implant favourable ideas and to transform the conditions of life as designed by the rulers. The writer adopts the representative of the rulers by parroting platitudes and converts himself into an encaged writer.

A major question raised in this context would be whether commitment represents a political assault on the integrity of the artists. It is looked upon at
times as a leftwing plot to deprive him of his freedom, to make him follow certain doctrines, to forbid him from others and to force him to have no other God besides the leader of a particular cult or creed. It can, from the same perspective, be a ruse to impose on the artist new fetters or to clip his wings and keep him tied to a spot. A crucial issue is if it is a moral question that binds the artist and demands his allegiance to a specific cause. Further, it raises the doubt whether it is a question to be asked of an artist’s work rather than his life and whether the words on the page can be conceived as a self-sufficient entity.

These questions require careful consideration of the idea of commitment is thought of as useful, important and inevitable. There is, of course, something to be said on. Since the term commitment is frequently referred to without much reflection, it remains a nebulous concept. “Writers were persecuted and killed precisely because literature was recognized as an important and potentially dangerous force” (George Steiner, “The Writer and Communism”, Language and Silence (New York: Athenaeum, 1958, 357). Politics is seen, in the final analysis, as an instrument of oppression, no matter who wields it. The fear of politics lurks in the minds of writers.

Professionals like doctors and lawyers take a vow to follow their professional ethics and etiquette; politicians openly declare to abide by the constitution and religious heads commit themselves to God, the Holy Scriptures and the religious order. However, writers have no such compulsion to commit
themselves to anything. It is precisely this is the freedom that imposes tremendous responsibility on the writers.

The artist is committed to freedom by the very exercise of his art. Practical observation suggests that writers have bartered the freedom of their profession for power, pelf, and position and at times, for mutually contradictory philosophies.

All art is committed; it would seem, to something beyond itself, to a statement of value, not purely aesthetic but to a criticism of life. There is no criticism of life that does not have social and political overtones. Whether a writer actually joins a party, embraces a creed, or emulates a leader is of merely biographical interest. (The) biographical fact that Brecht never became a member of the communist party does not help us decide the important and difficult question of how far Brecht realized his “Marxist ideology” in his dramatic work. Brecht’s commitment, like that of any other artist, must be sought in the work itself, not in Brecht’s views about his own works (9).

The writer can make his stand known without advocating it openly. Perhaps it is a measure of a writer’s success when he can move people and pleasurably teach them without any offensive propaganda. “The function of art was to teach and educate and move unify and organize people, not to mystify them or offer dazzling support of the status quo” (LeRoi Jones, “Afro-American Literature Forum, 14:1, 1980,8). Therefore, a writer need not fight shy of
propaganda. It may be germane to ask if, when an artist is made a political propagandist, art is not sacrificed for politics or made subservient to it. The artistic function is not viewed as something separate from the political function, cancelling or contradicting each other. The two functions do happily mix and blend, work together in harmony, support and strengthen each other. “Propaganda in some form or other lurks in every book, that every work of art has a meaning and purpose- a political, social and religious purpose-that our aesthetic judgments are always coloured by our prejudices and beliefs”(George Orwell, The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters, vol.2, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, Penguin Books, 1970, 152). The novels such as Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four, written by Orwell, in spite of their obvious propaganda, have stood the test of time due to the fact that the political situations dealt with in these works still exist today. Commitment is not necessarily a mistake; everything depends on the writer’s vision and the manner in which he makes out his case. Therefore, it is pertinent for a society to ask of a writer to what he is, in the last resort, committed.

The expression social commitment is used in preference to the more familiar political commitment, since the former is more comprehensive than the latter. In fact, social commitment includes political commitment as well. The maladies affecting any society are more than simple questions of political programmes or affiliation to political ideologies. If it is committed to social
objectives of society as it deals not only with political questions but with issues that lie beyond. Social commitment comprises all the aspects of involvement, and is thus wider in connotation.

Social commitment has three major aspects, the first being a deep and probing enquiry into the drawbacks of society leading to the sincere understanding of the problem, the second, considering and suggesting the possible remedial measures for all ailments of society, and the third indicating methods of implementing the solutions. Committed art thus becomes art with a clear social function.

Committed literature is bound to be subjective, reflecting the author’s stand regarding major social questions. It would quite conspicuously represent the ardour of the writer’s commitment to society. He does not seek freedom the bondage: it is a pledge he has made of his own, not out of frustration or coercion, but out of the conviction that society can be improved, provided there is a concerted effort of the artist, of the social reformer, and, at times, of the politician as well.

The writer finds in life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his intention is to make these appear as distortions to his people who are used to seeing them as natural and he is forced to take all available means to get his vision across to the people. To the hard of hearing, he shouts and for the visually impaired, he draws large and startling figures. The people will take what he
shows as a revelation. The committed writer has the sharpest eye yet for the grotesque and the perverse. He has the courage to call a spade a spade. He also shows the means to correct the distortions and to remedy the situation by calling attention to the fatal eventuality of frenzied action and the equally fatal consequences of apathy.

The writer, as consequence of his commitment, may display a creative approach in his suggestions for positive reforms. Or he may be negative and destructive and emphasize violent disapproval and protest.

Literature thus embodies the ruthless scrutiny and criticism of social evils, dethroning and destroying all the undesirable values. Yet, creating positive faith in the human possibility for improvement and reform is an equally important and integral aspect of the socially committed art. Social reconstruction might be through different means. Political affiliation or collective political action might become necessary. Solutions might even be sought elsewhere. The specific method of achieving the purpose is secondary to the main issues. Political commitment is, thus, only one of the aspects of social commitment. Once the writer is committed to a particular ideology, he embarks upon a course of action to achieve his cherished goal. This leads to an examination of the relationship between art and commitment, trying to answer as to how far aesthetic values would suffer if the writer was a committed artist.
The Marxist “Agit-Prop” and the “Living Newspaper”, produced in large numbers in the 1930’s were meant to confront the audience directly with specific burning social problems and to suggest probable alternatives to solve them. These represented attempts to channelize the general mood of protest into specific directions. They were not aimed at producing wholesome works of literature with high aesthetic standards. Yet, though they were concerned only with the highlighting of certain issue, they were just a plain record of one contemporary event.

These Agit-Prop and Living Newspaper forms of dramatic presentation cannot claim aesthetic or literary value. They are only tracts meant to serve specific purposes through propaganda, invective and suggestion. Yet, they succeed not by aesthetic appeal, but by the portrayal of specimens of suffering humanity, thereby in establishing rapport with the audience, arousing a deep sense of social consciousness and rousing them to collective action, which may be even political in certain cases. They were meant only to create a sudden, through temporary, jolt among the smug, complacent people.

Even though the plays produced by Clifford Odets (1906-1963) were Agit-prop in design, his overt commitment to the Marxist ideology has affected the artistic integrity of his plays. His play *Waiting for Lefty, (1935)* based on the New York City taxi strike of 1934 was intended to invite the audience to join in the final call for a strike. In the play, a group of workers is seen waiting for the
arrival of their representative Lefty. A man enters and informs his comrades that Lefty has just been found, behind the car barns, with a bullet in his head. It is not the actors on the stage, but the entire audience who shout louder and louder still, “Strike”. The play ends with the lyrical proclamations of the revolution. The audience and the actors are at once with each other. This proves how the playwright has succeeded in presenting the emotional values in all their poignancy, unimpaired by his party affiliation.

The committed writers like Clifford Odets have made substantial contribution to art and have produced literary works whose aesthetic value did not wane in spite of the overtones of extra-literary considerations. They had clear social perspectives, and even brief periods of political affiliations, yet their commitment to society never affected the intrinsic aesthetic standards of their works. W.H. Auden, along with the other revolutionary poets of the 1930’s, offers the best example of literary commitment. W.H. Auden had a clear Marxist affinity in the beginning, soon outgrew it, and his later poetry reflects this change. In his youth, even though he was committed to the clear political ideology in the efficacy of which he had deep faith, Auden’s poetry included more than issues which simple political reforms could cure. He was conscious of psychological, religious and moral issues. Auden’s formal commitment to the communist party was very brief, but his subsequent literary output shows that his social commitment never weakened. The edge of the Marxist ardour got blunted,
but his consciousness and his commitment to the social problems never slackened.

There is in Auden’s later poetry a general tone of reassurance in society. The ruins of social decay are highlighted by the testimony of the senses; and it is not surprising that the worlds of art and ideas for social enlightenment. The pose of non-commitment, Auden came to feel, was itself a political act.

Literature is committed to the details of known experiences. The major tradition of European fiction, which aimed at the delineation of the known experiences, is described as realism. It emphasized the rendering in art, with precision and vividness, of the everyday, ordinary, contemporary reality. Attention was bestowed upon the selection of material, which was normally ignored or evaded and considered sordid, offensive or repulsive. Realism was thus the outcome of an appeal to the obvious truth of the visible external world and owed its sustenance to the disciplined principles of sciences. If the descriptive function of the author is the shaping priority, the work is called documentary. On the other hand, if a pattern taken from contemporary society is materialized as a whole and presented with improvement in another time or place it is called utopia. Utopia is speculative and enshrines a search for the best possible form of social order.

A third type of realistic fiction known as science fiction includes predictable and probable projections based on fancy or fantasy and scientific
experiments and inferences. Here the writer is concerned with the probable, not merely the possible, spectacular changes in the world, and with a blueprint for the future or nightmare visions of the unborn and avoidable future. There is yet another type of realistic fiction called the fiction of special pleading advocating a specific ideology or propagating a particular doctrine.

Thus realism has a wide connotation. It is not just a mechanical reproduction of contemporary reality. It is a recording process and yet a deviation is always possible based on the commitments of the writer and the needs and aspirations of society. It involves more than mere perception. New ways of perception, interpretation and organization are possible and deeply necessary.

The emphasis is on truthful representation of external realities, but the creative talent of the artist can synthesize disjoint truthful aspects effectively. A scientific vision can arrange them into a clear, purposeful and logical pattern. Thus, the stress on truth carries realism far above the level of photographic realism generally used in a derogatory sense. The objectivity of realism “is not a dispassionate noninvolvement but a commitment to a particular reading of human society...” (Raman Selden, The Theory of Criticism (London: Longman1988, 42).

Realism as the conscience of literature confesses that it owes a duty, some kind of reparation, to the real world – a real world to which it submits itself.
Thus conceiving of reality in a certain way, and presenting it, refer to the role played by creative energy in sorting out casually observed facts, arranging them in a particular order, and infusing the chosen facts, in short, with perennial literary value. Reproducing reality is different from producing reality; as the former involves the function of the critical and creative faculty, which has to do both selection and elimination before presenting the finished product, whereas the latter is simply photographic in execution. The writer has a conscience to obey, and a duty to perform. Therefore, he has to abandon the subjective line and depict life truthfully. His aim is truth - unconditional and honest.

The representation of material reality or visual realism later developed into the investigation of the moral behavior of man in society, where character is a product of social factors and environment. Eric Bentley’s comment “an increasing closeness to objective facts; special techniques for their reproduction; an empiricist outlook -- these are realism… and it aim at the candid presentation of the natural world” (Roger Fowler, A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, 156) may be applied to all forms of literature produced by committed writer. At the primary level, realism busies itself with depicting the life of common people, reproducing their speech pattern and lifestyle faithfully. At the secondary level realism takes us into the problems of contemporary life of ordinary people whose responses to the demands of life constitute the basic of neatly formulated pattern. At the tertiary level, realism
leads into zola’s territory of naturalism. It denotes scientific objectivity in literary portrayals and represents empirical work. It is an antithesis to idealism stressing the effects of heredity.

In the works of such writers, a deeper and more acute understanding of the middle class life – its milieu and ethos—is found and a genuine attempt is made to express social problems and to portray real characters. Committed literature depicts the attitudes of an author who brings out realistic works with the consciousness of his function in society as a writer. The power that is latent in each work of art should assert itself, and generate the necessary will power with which social and political reforms can be effected. The author’s idealism is manifest in the zeal for reform that underlies a literary work. Social Realism is very rarely used as an expression in critical terminology, except in the general or loose sense of literature that attempts realistic interpretations of the conflicts and problems inherent in modern society. Social Realism is a phase in the evolution of realism, closely allied to the scientific interpretation of social history. A work of fiction should reflect a certain phase in the social or moral history of the age. With acute fidelity to the concrete facts of the external world, and the scientific approach, the expression Social Realism becomes self-explanatory. The same instinct that impels the writer to expose the painful and sordid realities in society manifests itself in the form of Social Realism. Works of social realism
need not necessarily have any political affiliation. Practical reform may be yet far off from the writer’s field of vision.

Socialist Realism indicates the writer’s commitment to the cause of society, and his determination to plan his role as an intellectual leader, in exposing the drawbacks through his writing and stating appropriate actions that are conducive to change. Socialist Realism, obviously, belongs to the modern age and it needs ‘an ideological correlate which is of primary importance’, and is ‘written in the historical interests of the working class’. This alters realism from its sense of the direct reproduction of observed reality; realism instead, becomes a principle and organized selection. Thus, a proper blend of the subjective and the objective interpretation is expected of a committed writer. A statement made by Lukacs makes this meaning clear, “... a correct aesthetic understanding of social and historical reality is the pre-condition of realism”, and his prediction, “Society will eventually achieve a condition which only socialist realism can adequately describe” (Ibid, 77-115).

In a literary portrayal that is truly realistic, the element of social criticism along with suggestions of how the present could be improved is bound to be incorporated. The zeal for reform, even when presented indirectly, gives the work that idealistic touch. “Its life issues not from the autonomous character of the work but from the mutual interaction of work and humanity. Its life is founded in ... the ‘life’ of mankind ....” (Cited in Stern J.P., On Realism
(London; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, 180-181). It is this mutual interaction of work and humanity that forms the core of any literary work based on social awareness.

Bernard Shaw’s definition of Problem Plays as the presentation in parable of the conflict between Man’s will and his environment may be applied to all committed literature. Every serious play ends with a note of interrogation. This is a correct statement not only of dramas but also of all committed writings because they do not and cannot give a satisfactory solution to the main questions posed, nor can any ending be totally satisfactory. Alternative solutions and alternative endings, in fact, entirely different handling of the theme itself, can be very frequently suggested. They are committed to the exposition of truth; several complicated situations in modern society are open to different interpretations and suggestions for improvement. No solutions suggested by the writers can wholly be acceptable.

The writings leave scope for different ethical interpretations and alternative solutions. Often the problem raised remains unsolved. They perform the function of rousing the conscience of society against several kinds of evil prevalent, sometimes even under the guise of law, rule, and convention or custom. Such customs come together to keep the individual down, suffocating under the burden of restrictions, finally expedite his total collapse. The writer participates in the struggle against such corruption with all sincerity, moral
fidelity and commitment. Identifying and presenting objectionable elements in society with the idea of focusing public attention on them so as to make them think of possible solutions, is in itself an act of social duty and commitment. Obviously, more than the function of a simple photographic camera is expected from the committed writer whose creative faculty sifts and chooses, eliminates and sharpens.

The second approach to literature in the European tradition is Naturalism. It implies that “man’s moral beliefs and values require no supernatural sanction, but can be explained in terms of natural causes, including in this case biological and psychological causes. The view also implies that there is no transcendent purpose in the universe, and that man is not free in any unique sense” (Caxton’s Encyclopaedia, vol.iv, 476). According to Emile Zola, a practitioner of this approach, Naturalism is expected “to possess a knowledge of the machinery of his intellectual and sensory manifestation, under the influence of heredity and environment, such as physiology shall give them to us and then finally to exhibit man living in social conditions produced by himself which he modifies daily and in the heart of which he himself experiences a continual transformation” (Ibid, 476).

The fact of powerlessness has caused men to view themselves as subjected to the forces of nature. To be without power is to be unable to exert influence upon the universe. This condition is conducive to the flourishing of
naturalism, the application of the principles of scientific and socio-economic determinism to literature. Of the two schools of naturalism, socio-economic determinism, emphasizing social and economic factors in precipitating man’s actions, and biological determinism, emphasizing the “given” in man’s personality, particularly his hereditary animal nature -- the former school is the more optimistic since it places the responsibility for man’s action within the control of the society of man. Such ambivalent actions on the part of the society only lead to confusion, and the explosive release of aggressions. In the end, fateful resignation to those forces, which cannot be controlled, moves men to symbolically accept the validity of the law of the society.

The school of biological determinism is more pessimistic since it defines the locus for control of man’s actions within the realm of nature. In the world view of men who are powerless, that which forces subjugation is perceived as antagonistic. Nature, the antagonist, controls the universe; in Nature, power rules. Evil is a matter of course; weakness is man’s greatest fear. This view of the machinations of nature is psychologically congruent with the perception of evil as a nemesis, which will be eradicated only when nature itself is eradicated.

Repeated stress on the fatalistic attitude towards life is the most conspicuous aspect of naturalism. Naturalistic writers like Zola, Maupassant, and Balzac presented certain inevitability of consequences due to factors of heredity and environment. They introduced characters around whom an invisible network
gets tightened, defeating all their attempts to save themselves from tragic fall. Refuting the charge that this approach was fatalistic, Zola draws a clear distinction between ‘Fatalism’ and ‘Determinism’. Determinism differs from fatalism upon which no one can act at all. Fatalism assumes that the appearance of any phenomenon is necessary apart from its conditions, while determinism is just the condition essential for the appearance of any phenomenon, and such appearance is never forced, “the moment that we act, on the determining cause of phenomenon, we cease to be fatalists” (Ibid.57).

Henrik Ibsen has used the technique of naturalism very effectively proving how the forces of heredity exert a vitiating influence over the fates of individuals, thwarting their attempts to emerge unscathed from agonizing situations in life and plunging them headlong into tragedy. The strength of individual character and determination proves to be ineffective. Social and hereditary factors together form the modern equivalent of Nemesis.

These writers stress the deterministic aspects of modern life where society, instead of classical Nemesis, takes toll of human happiness, by repeatedly defeating their attempts to reform themselves. The inevitability of the nature of ending and the cause-and-effect pattern, give their writings a naturalistic character. Given the details of heredity and social or domestic environment, the individual’s character is moulded in a definite form, heading towards the
irrevocable end. The audience could anticipate the tragic ending with scientific precision.

Naturalist writers are known not only for a realistic portrayal of life but also for the philosophic determinism and its specific influence, the social environment -- and that in an uncommonly narrow sense -- almost to the exclusion of all others. Their characters fall under the power of that amorphous and hostile force known as society. Once trapped, they further complicate their lives by committing errors of judgement, and their weakness of character becomes apparent in their tendency to despair. This fact, coupled with their sense of futility, underscores their pessimistic attitude towards society.

Quoting F.H. Heineman Gerald Rabkin refers to Jean-Paul Sartre as “the philosopher as well as the artist of commitment” and quotes Hazel Barnes’s meaning of the French word “Engager”, having “both the idea of involvement and the idea of deliberate commitment”(Gerald Rabkin,op.cit., 8). The terms engagement and commitment are frequently interchanged. Engagement or commitment arose as an aesthetic problem when the French existentialists attempted to redefine the purpose of art. Since French existentialism is an activist philosophy, satire’s position is not one of detachment. Man is in the world here and now, must act upon the existentialist fact in order to achieve freedom and self-realization. Sartre attempts to show the necessity of a committed literature. He affirms that literature must be committed.
Existentialism is a modern movement encompassing a variety of themes, among them the doctrine that individual existence determines essence, that man has absolute freedom of choice but that there are no rational criteria serving as a basis for choice, and the general claim that the universe is absurd, with an emphasis on the phenomenon of anxiety and alienation ... it is scientific naturalism, human life and conduct are held to be products of mechanical laws or forces, physical or psychological, and man has no real freedom ...”(The New Universal Library, Vol.ii(London: Caxton Publishing Company, 1968, 301-02).

Existentialism, therefore, begins with the fact of individual consciousness as the basis of any philosophical interpretation of life. The study of man, his inner conflicts and genuine choices, his significance in the drama of personal relationships and his responsibility to his fellowmen and to God, these are the elements of human existence.

The emphasis is on the words, ‘choice’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘commitment’. Man is free to make his choice, and once he does it, he is responsible for the outcome, and is committed to it. It is in this sense of the inexorable and the irrevocable choice, frightening in its finality, that the essence of existentialism is found. ‘Existentialism’ means something deeper, fuller and richer than ‘life’. It signifies not merely physical existence, but also the warmth and complexity of self-consciousness. Hence, the use of the term ‘existentialism’
reinforces the view that philosophy must base its conclusions on life, feeling, passion, and will, and not on intellectual abstractism.

In his book *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre explains the essence of his philosophical concepts. “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. The first principle of existentialism is its ‘subjectivity’. Man is, indeed, a project, man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity ... our responsibility is thus much greater than we supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole ...” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen Ltd., 1970, 29).

Sartre notes that man is considered a product of several factors beyond his control. Existentialism, on the other hand, he explains, is optimistic as a man gets an opportunity—the freedom to choose.” What is at the very centre of existentialism, is the absolute character of free commitment, by which every man realizes himself i.e., realizing a type of humanity — a commitment always understandable, to no matter whom i.e., no matter what epoch and its bearing upon the relativity of the cultural pattern which may result from such absolute commitment. [He adds:] Man makes himself: he is not found ready-made; he makes himself by the choice of his morality and he cannot but choose a morality such is the pressure of circumstances upon him” (Ibid. 47).

Since the choice is irrevocable, it becomes a strong commitment or a binding promise on the part of every man to make positive decisions, which will
prove right for him and for society. Choice in political and social matters thus, becomes a matter of commitment to the cause of the betterment of society, be it through political or any other means. It denotes the moral responsibility on the part of the writers. Presenting the truth, exposing the hypocrisy, and driving home the imperative necessity of urgent reform at the moral, social, political or religious levels form the functions of modern art.

Here it is relevant to note that the European point of view of the commitment of art and the African point of view coincide. Leopold Senghor (as Ron Karenga quotes), declares that all African art has at least three characteristics: “it is functional, collective, and committing or committed” (Ron Karenga, “Black Cultural Nationalism” in Addison Gayle, Jr., Black Aesthetic; New York: Doubleday and Co., 1971, 33). Karenga explains it elaborately. These characteristics are not only traditionally valid but inspiring and make art revolutionary too. It is functional in the sense that it must be utilitarian and it dismisses the false doctrine of ‘art for art’s sake’ as a hoax and myth. All art reflects the value system from which it springs. For, if the artist created only for himself and not for others, he would lock himself somewhere and write just for himself. But he does not do that. On the contrary, he invites others to listen to him and subjects his work to the scrutiny of his people for their appreciation and evaluation. No art can flourish in vacuum and the evaluation cannot be a favourable one if the work of art is not functional and utilitarian.
The second characteristic of art in his view is that it must be collective. It must be from the people and must be returned to the people in a form more beautiful and colourful than it was in real life. He who turns a blind eye to his own people will find himself sterile. A writer is the product of his own milieu and epoch. He is no more than the context to which he owes his existence. He owes his art to the context and therefore he must be accountable to the people of that context.

Art and people should flourish or decay together. It must move with the masses and be moved by them. The artist must express his appreciation for the people and all they represent and his disdain for everything that threatens their existence. He must move forward with the people with the positive pace rooted in the reality of their situation. He must be with them where they are and take them where they should be.

Whether the emphasis on collective art destroys the individuality of the artist is a relevant question. Individualism is a luxury that the artist cannot afford. Since he owes his existence to his context a writer has no individuality, he has only a personality. Individuality is ‘me’ in spite of everyone and personality is ‘me’ in relation to everyone. The one is an insipid isolation and vanity and the other is an important involvement and vitality. The individual is an essence of humanity. The writer is an inseparable part of society and the one complements the other. Individuality implies a false independence; the writer and the society
derive value and meaning in a real interdependence. It is an expression of uniqueness of the writer, not in isolation from but in relation to the society in which he lives.

Another relevant question, concerning the artist who rejects the social interpretation of art is whether he should have freedom to do something or freedom from the restrictions that prohibit him from doing something. He demands a socio-political right and that makes art social first and aesthetic second. Art is not an independent living thing; it lives through the people and through the meaning and message people give it. A writer depends upon the language, myth and imagery created by the people. An artist may have freedom to do what he wishes as long as it does not take away from the people the freedom to be protected from those images, words and sounds that are negative to their life and detrimental to their development. It is good to bear in mind the truth of the proverb, “one hand washes the other.”

Art must be committing. It must commit the people to revolution and transformation. This is commitment to the struggle,’ a commitment that includes the artist and the observer. Art will revive, inspire, and give enough courage to face another frustrating day. It must not teach resignation. All art must contribute to revolutionary change and also preserve everything that is good for humanity. If it does not, it is invalid. Art will make people love, and unwillingly though necessarily, to make war too. They will not cry for spilt milk or lost opportunity
but find meanings in those things that remain. Art must remind them of their love for each other and their commitment to the revolutionary struggle, which must be fought, and won.

Chinua Achebe declared in the course of a discussion that an artist is committed to art, which is ‘committed to people’. By Aesthetics, it is meant those qualities of excellence, which a culture discerns from its works of art. Man makes Art man, and, therefore, according to the needs of man, his qualities of excellence. The artists are not simply receivers of aesthetics; they are creators of aesthetics. They are in a position to create, and society will endorse or reject what they create. Art has a social purpose, and it belongs to the people. Art is social, political, economic, religious and anthropological. The total life of man is reflected in art. It is all-inclusive and all embracing. It does not attempt to exclude anything that is related to man.

Art cannot be on the side of the oppressor. It is in the service of man. It is not created to dominate and destroy man. Man for his own advancement creates it. The artist tries to use whatever is around and presses it into the service of man. Art is based on morality. Morality is basic to the nature of art. In a work of art we are confronted with the way we treat each other in society and in politics.

It is against this background of shifting emphasis in the nature and function of literature that the question of black American writers, the inheritors of African and European traditions as committed artists, poses a challenge. The
black writer in America “has to locate himself as a Negro with a double commitment to share in the life of the Americans as a whole, and to assert his cultural importance, so that he is not integrated in the white culture on the white man’s terms” (Ezekiel Mphahlele, “African Writer and Commitment”, in Voices in the Whirlwind and Other Essays (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964, 195). How committed these writers have been, to what ideology, and how far, if at all, their art has been influenced by their commitment will be the points for investigation.