

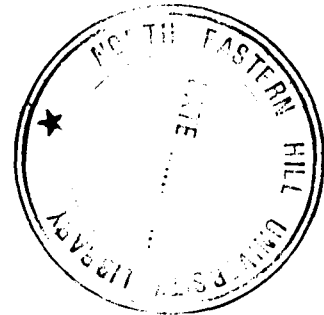
**ARUNDHATI ROY AS A WRITER-ACTIVIST: A STUDY**

**ABSTRACT**

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ENTRANCE

Studies in the literary canon over the years have shown that literature cannot be read without reference to the complex wave of socio-cultural, political and economic situations in which it is produced. Literature reflects societal realities through a play of several ideologies and the factors that constitute these ideologies. Literature becomes a site for creative resistance through immense possibilities and so literature has always been closely associated with social and political activism.

In recent times the writings and activism of Arundhati Roy have generated a lot of intellectual curiosity and interest in the context of literary writing for social transformation, a feature that characterizes her as a writer-activist. Arundhati Roy was born on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1961 and is acclaimed as an Indian novelist, essayist and activist who focus on issues related to social justice and economic inequality. The ideological position of the author is expressed in the use of language and images used both in her fictional and non-fictional work. Roy came into international limelight with her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) which got her the Booker Prize in October, 1997. Spun in a unique narrative mode, this book is a critique of social and political issues. In this study, an attempt has been made to look into Arundhati Roy's selected fictional and non-fictional writings to study the author as a writer-activist.

Roy deals with multifaceted issues in India and abroad. In her essay entitled “Greater Common Good”(2002), Roy raises her voice against the Indian Government’s dam building projects and in “The End of Imagination”(2002) she critiques India’s nuclear projects. *Listening to the Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (2009) is again a collection of essays that deal with India, the world’s largest democracy where the author traces the journey of Hindu nationalism and neo-liberal economic reforms that started simultaneously in 1990s, unraveling their agenda in dangerous ways. Dealing with the issues of communal violence in Gujarat, she writes about how “progress” and “genocide” have gone hand in hand, the danger of unaccountable judiciary and the unholy collusion between large corporations, the government and the media. *Listening to the Grasshopper: Field Notes on Democracy* in a sense tries to track the fault line that has threatened to destroy India and has raised fundamental questions about democracy and its vulnerability. Her work *The Shape of the Beast* (2008) is another collection of fourteen essays where Roy has tried to clarify her views on her work and her participation in resistant movement and her own dilemma of guarding her privilege and private space necessary for writing in a world that demands urgent, unequivocal intervention. *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to the Empire* (2004) is yet another collection of essays written between June 2002 and

November 2004. In these essays Roy draws the sketch of the empire through seemingly unconnected areas,<sup>1</sup> uncovering the links between America's war on terror, the growing threat of corporate power the response of big and small nations in resistance movement in their own territories, the role of NGOs and the perverse machinery of an increasingly corporatized mass media.

Thus Roy opened up a new paradigm of writing: activism, that stretch into a fortuitous literary representation of lived experience of reality of immediate societies. How this merging of domains of activism and literature manifest in her writing is a saga of roles she has been playing. She has been an active participant in public rallies against construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam Project.<sup>2</sup> She has made financial contributions also towards this movement. She has personally gone on fact finding journeys to the jungles of Chhattisgarh to meet the Maoists who are at the standoff with the government to fight for their rights.<sup>3</sup> Her interventionist writings have set a precedent for writers concerned with societal and political change. One could summarize Roy's progression in her interventionist writings as writer-activist in the following ways:

Firstly in a critical sense her response to sensitive social and political issues, which got further transmuted into polyphony of voice, set a dialogic tone in her activist and literary writings, constituting her authorial

agency. Secondly, all of Roy's work so far document the historical and political achievement accomplished by Indian women activists. This is an area of a situated and responsible writing on her part that puts her in a lineage of activism through writing. For instance, her essays not only depict and critique gendered oppression; they also problematize the association between feminist, liberalist ideologies, modernity and activism. Roy does not confirm herself into any rigid ideology. She problematizes the restricted associations with feminism, liberalism, activism and modernity. She clarifies this viewpoint in her statement. She says, "Academicians have this problem of confining to particular discipline...To understand what is going on, you must cross discipline and you must see the connection between the dispossession and the despair created by corporate globalization flowing into the bitterness of partition, flowing into the rhetoric of cultural nationalism. All these things come together to create this situation".<sup>4</sup> Thus she believes in a cross disciplinary interventionist role, to be able to see things from an objective perspective, without coming to a closure on judgment about matters. In Chandra Mohanty's book, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonising Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), Mohanty describes this gap in feminist theory stating that the term 'feminism' is itself questioned by many third world women, and has been challenged on many grounds. Thus Roy states:

A lot of women who are involved in resistance movements and who are activist are also redefining what 'modern' means. They are really at war against their communities and traditions on one hand and against the kind of modernity that is being imposed by the global economy on the other. They decide what they want from their own tradition and what they will take from modernity. It is a high wire act<sup>5</sup>

Roy is very much conscious of this changes and conflicts in the feminist movement and so she emphasizes on basic humanist ideologies, avoiding restrictive rubrics. She adopts a humanitarian standpoint to problematize issues of rights of communities she considers to be marginalized. She encourages the utilization of art and aesthetic as instruments to promote social justice.

Thirdly, while studying the author as a writer-activist, an attempt has been made to examine the credibility of Roy's activism, which stems from the fact that she has been a pro-active participant in social, economic and environmental issues.<sup>6</sup> Her interventionist writing and her physical participation in meetings and rallies have left an imprint of a writer who has chosen to take the path less travelled by most writers. This is evident from her decision to write in protest against injustice, oppression, deprivation and undemocratic policies of the government. She has deliberately and consciously taken sides to place herself in the spotlight of controversy by voicing her protest through her writing.<sup>7</sup> Despite being accused of being a

celebrity who likes to remain the limelight for publicity she continues to lend her voice to the oppressed and the dispossessed through symbolic and physical defiance of authorities in power.<sup>8</sup>To a question ‘why were you drawn to the Narmada issue and why has it become a powerful symbol she answers:

Because I believe that it contains a microcosm of the universe. I think it contains a profound argument about everything – power, powerlessness, greed, deceit, politics, ethics, rights and entitlements... To me, the understanding of Narmada issue is the key to understanding of the world at works. It’s also about things that most political ideologists leave out. Vital issues – rivers, estuaries, earth, mountains, deserts, crops, forest and fish. And about human beings that most environmental ideologists leave out... So the real issue is not how ordinary farmers in Gujarat will benefit from the Sardar Sarovar project but how they will eventually suffer.<sup>9</sup>

So Roy with her linguistic skill uses literature to unveil complexities which are often overlooked. Fourthly, the thesis in the process of analyzing the nature of her literary contributions has placed Roy as a writer-activist because such a description seems to be the most appropriate to describe her as an author. However it may be mentioned that she herself is very critical of the term ‘writer-activist’ because of the limited scope and position the definition offers. This dilemma is revealed in her statement . She says, “First, because it is strategically positioned to diminish both writers and activists. It seeks to reduce the scope, the range, the sweep of what a writer can be and therefore lacks complexity and sophistication and is instead

fuelled by crude simplistic one-sided understanding of things.”<sup>10</sup> But in spite of these constructed dilemmas, Roy rather takes a middle path and uses her writing to understand a situation and its problem and present them from a humanitarian perspective. This personalization of the thematic is part of greater representational artifact that she develops in her textualisation of experiences. She uses her skills in creative writings and explores the gaps, the silences, the ambiguities, the complexities and the contradictions in society.<sup>11</sup> Thus as a writer- activist her works are taken as an influencing factor on the social and political life. In short she places herself in a position where she can blend her writerly self and her activist concerns. Therefore, the thesis is divided into the following five chapters, titled according to their focus.

## Chapter I- Introduction

Activism in general can be described as a form of action that aims at ‘transformation’ and ‘emancipation’ of an existing social context. It begins from an intentionality of the human subject to enact and affect cultural, economical, social and political change. Activism manifests itself in speech, writing and behavior, in a wide range of forms which is directed at either supporting or opposing a cause one strongly feels for.

Historically, the term ‘activism’ and ‘activist’ in a political sense first appeared in the Belgian press in 1916 in connection with the Flamingant movement.<sup>12</sup> The word “Activism” is often used synonymously with protest or dissent but activism can stem from a number of political orientation and take a wide range of forms as mentioned earlier, from writing letters to newspapers columns or political campaigning, economic activism, rallies and street marches, strikes or even guerrilla tactics. Such attitudinal and contextual interpretation on activisms or activism find their political expression in genres of writing that may belong to fiction, non-fiction, prose, poem, essay or even music. Activism goes beyond voicing of rights to protest for existence. Activism can be seen from a broader spectrum which also includes the positive and courageous actions of ordinary people in their daily lives.

In the process of defining various types of activism the thesis has narrowed down its focus to an examination of activism through literature. This chapter provides the framework of the thesis by tracing the growth and development of activism in general and activism through literature in particular. Through their literary work writers often expose the injustice done towards an individual group or to the society. There are writers who through their writing try to bring about awareness in preserving environment and the eco-system. American activist writers of 1800's and 1900's like, John Burroughs, John Muir, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Rachel Carson brought about human consciousness about environment and voiced for preservation of the American landscape. John Burrough's works like *Indoor Studies*, (1904) *Breath of Life*, (1915) and *Under the Apple Trees* (1916) raise voice against the destructive forces of industrial expansion. Emerson's essays on *Self Reliance*, (1841) *Nature* (1836) and *Prudence* (1841) also come out in support of preservation of environment and its impact on human life. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* published in 1962 brought about bioregional movement on the west coast-led by poet activist writers such as Gary Snyder, Peter Blue Cloud, Peter Burg and Lee Swanson. These nature writers evoked the spirit of the old naturalists through their engagement with a kind of activism that is a combination of the literary and

the activist.<sup>13</sup> This chapter also includes a study on some of the contemporary educationist and academicians who are engaged in activism in one form or the other. For instance, Zitkala-Sa from South Dakota Sioux in her work *American Indian Stories* (1985) has made significant interventions in order to address key political and social issues, like tribal sovereignty. It may be mentioned that Susan Sontag is another writer- activist who used her pen to attack various injustice in the society and in government policies. She also served as a president of American Chapter of the Writers Organization PEN. Writer activist and rebel Emma Goldman's and Barbara Smith's works are also mentioned in the chapter. Barbara Smith has played an important role in building and sustaining Black Feminism in the United States. Smith has been active as an innovative critic, teacher, lecturer, author and an independent scholar. In 1975 she played a crucial role in reorganizing the Boston Chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization to establish the Combahee River Collective. This collective gave importance on issues dealing with race, gender and class oppressions faced by the Blacks and other women of colour. To address the needs and problems of women of colour, Smith in 1980, along with Audre Lorde and Cherrie Moraga, co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press; the first publisher in America for the 'women of color'. Her article "Towards a Black Feminist Consciousness" (1982), first published in

*All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But some of Us Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982) acted as a pioneer in opening the field of Black women's literature.

It may be mentioned here that India has had a long history of social upheaval and resistant movement through literature. Well known Indian writer like Mulk Raj Anand through his work like *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1996) and *The Village* (1939) demonstrate political atrocities under the British rule and social problems in the caste ridden Indian society. Author and activist Raka Ray mentions that the Indian Women's movement has a long and rich history linked to the social reform movements of the nineteenth century and the political challenge to British colonialism in the twentieth century. In contemporary times, activist writings of Mahasweta Devi in her path breaking work *Dust on the Road* (1997) echo similar voices for the poor and the unprivileged section in the society. Amitabh Ghosh, in his work *Countdown* (1999) has written about the aftermath of nuclear test at Pokhran on May 11, 1998. He has also given an investigative account of people who lived in and around the site of explosion and their sense of insecurity and nightmares of the result of nuclear test. Similarly Vandana Shiva, a well known ecologist, ecofeminist, author and activist in her work *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (1997) traces the history of international

patents to European colonization of “native” people. Her first book, *Staying Alive* (1998) helped redefine perceptions of third world women. Shiva also participated in the non-violent Chipko Movement in 1973 where activists led by Sundarlal Bahuguna formed human chain around the trees to protest against mindless felling of trees for industrial purposes. The works of a few contemporary writer-activists like Mahasweta Devi are also mentioned in this chapter to throw light on the kind of activism they evoke through their writing.

## Chapter 2: Activism and Literature.

It is a known fact that activism has always contributed to literature as literature seeks to address and reflect upon socio-cultural, economic and political material conditions. In this chapter an endeavor has been made to show the relationship between activism and literature by way of mapping the work of some of the writers whose life and work reveal how their physical and emotional participation in people's struggle had sharpened their literary skills. Writer-activists like Toni Cade Bambara used writing as a way to participate in the Black Freedom Struggle. To her understanding of activism, writing was one of the ways to involve herself in the affairs of the world around her. Her story entitled "Broken Field Running" under the collection *The Sea Birds are still Alive* (1977) celebrated the traditions of resistance and attempted to tap Black potential and tried to join the chorus of voices of dissent against different forms of oppression. Writing was one of the ways in which she participated in the transformation. Similarly T. Minh-ha's works are also cited as activist writings, as they are focused on the plight of women in today's society. Her work *Women Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1987) is based on a feminist perspective towards the stagnant social status of women (considered as third world inhabitants) in post feminist societies. Patrick French and his work- *Tibet, Tibet: A Personal*

*History of a Lost Land* (2003) deals with the author's personal experience in Tibet and his participation in the Tibetan cause. Similarly the writing of Sonia Sanchez, the winner of PEN Writing Award, particularly her work *We Be the Word Sorcerers: 25 Stories by Black Americans* (1973) deals with Black literature and many issues related to the struggles of Blacks in America. Works of activist and writer Rigoberta Menchu are also highlighted in this chapter. She is known for advocating the Indian Rights and ethno-cultural reconciliation based on love and respect for the rights of indigenous people. Her work *I Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984) is a heart wrenching human document which caught the attention of international community. In 1986, she took the role of a narrator in a film called "When the Mountains Tremble" which depicted the struggles and sufferings of the Maya people. She was also awarded Nobel Prize in recognition of her work for the indigenous people.

In the Third World, development of literature is closely associated with the shift from colonialism to nationalism. Chinua Achebe, the African novelist also describes the role of writers in the society in his essay, "The Novelist as Teacher", (1965). He opines that a writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration. Similarly, Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) displayed for the first time a

moving portrayal of African-American life. Alice Walker, another well known writer and activist is also involved in the Civil Right Movement in America. In her work *We are the Ones we Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*, (2006) deals with her experiences as an activist. Thus this chapter has tried to focus on the integral relationship between activism and literature. Karl Marx in his *Thesis on Feuerbach* under the Eleventh philosophical note - “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”,<sup>14</sup> is of the opinion that in the present world, only radical activism can aim to change the world. He stresses the point that though there are academicians and intellectuals who try to interpret the world and their ideas have and can influence the world, they remained encapsulated in their ivory towers. Their work can be effective only if their politics is grounded in an activism that deals with struggles against war, state terror, racism, sexism and poverty. He is also against rigid compartmentalization between activists and intellectuals. He argues that the extreme groups of activists who are anti-intellectuals have limited visions in grasping wide scopes of struggles. In his opinion productive activism needs to bridge the gap between theory and action; which is a must for greater understanding among communities. He opines that writers and academician of today work for the production and promotion of their product. Thus his



critical of the present day Universities where knowledge is produced and guarded only to be branded and marketed but closed to the world leaving no contribution to the society. Alf Gunvald Nilson and Laurence Cox in their paper entitled “Why do activist need theories?” (2004) stress on the need for theory within activist experience and the need to characterize the ways in which social movements seeking to change the world have found themselves forced to engage in the process of finding theoretical tools for building solidarity with other social movements. Shashi Deshpande a well known Indian writer says that writers who are also activists attribute their activism as a part of their personal agenda as they see the subject of their work through human life. She also reveals that there are unstated areas in which a writer struggles through the ambiguities, complexities and contradictions often without conclusion. So what really matters is understanding the social and political issues in their proper perspectives and evolving methods towards solutions.<sup>15</sup> There are many instances where the activist in Roy is predominantly displayed through her search for various approaches to social and political solutions. She herself states-

I am called a writer activist because after writing *The God of Small Things*, I wrote three political essays. The truth is, fiction is my big love. But often you are in a situation where it is very hard especially because I live in India, not to intervene immediately when someone is shot or police have opened fire... We have the greatest custodial death in the world.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore for Roy activism through writing is an inevitable choice before a creative writer particularly in the Indian context.

### **Chapter 3: *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* and Roy's Political essays**

This chapter makes an in-depth study of Arundhati Roy's political essays under the collection *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002). After her much acclaimed award winning book *The God of Small Things*, Roy travelled around the world promoting her book, basking in the glory of her success and fame. After one year she came back to India and plunged herself into writing political essays. Thus Roy began her journey of political writing which she claimed was a conscious effort and immediate response to the happenings in India and the world. Roy of course does not find a difference in writing fiction and non-fiction. For her, it was an extension of one form of writing into another. The story in *The God of Small Things* is beautifully crafted with equal amount of harmony and vividness. The novel is wrapped up in layers of possible meanings which have regional as well as universal, political and domestic themes. The novelty of her style and language in the novel brought her the winning edge. Thus she created a niche for herself in the world of literature.

Roy began to use her celebrated position as a writer to raise her activist voice on several issues which she thought needed intervention. In her first essay in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* entitled "The End of Imagination", Roy emerges as a critique of Indian Government's nuclear

policies. She satirizes upon the euphoria made by the ruling government after the successful nuclear test at Phokhran on 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1998.<sup>17</sup> She is appalled at the shortsightedness of the government, the scientist and the intellectual who completely ignore the result of nuclear testing and the use of nuclear weapons. She states:

Once again we are pitifully behind time-not just scientifically and technologically...Our comprehension of the Horror Department is hopelessly obsolete....If there is nuclear war, our foe will not be China or America or each other. Our foe will be Earth herself. The very element- the sky, the air, land and the water will turn against. Their wrath will be terrible.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly in her essay “The Greater Common Good”, Roy raises her voice against the dam building projects in India, in which she breaks down the traditional notion of Dam building as a “temple of modern development”, a notion based on hegemonic viewpoints.<sup>19</sup> Roy participated in the cry for justice and her activist voice merges with the march of the thousands of displaced Adivasis in the Narmada valley. As mentioned earlier, she has also contributed money for the resistance movement under Narmada Bachao Andolan. “Power Politics”(2001). is another essay where Roy brings alive Rumpelstiltkin a character in European folklore to create an image of power hungry politicians and the corporate world.<sup>20</sup> She takes on Maharashtra’s electricity policy on Enron plant project where America receives the maximum benefits along with a few rich Indians. She terms the

contract as a 'sweet heart deal', a rape without redress. In all these endeavors of the capitalist game, the poor are the most affected and are at the receiving end of the miseries caused by the rich and the powerful. Hence Roy calls for participation and activism to bring about changes in the system. In another essay "Ladies have their feeling... shall we leave it to the experts?", Roy focuses on globalization and how it has deepened the gap between the rich and the poor, a situation she terms as a mutant variety of colonialism which is remotely controlled and digitally operated by America. In the essay under the title "The Algebra of Infinite Justice", Roy talks about World Trade Center and gives an analytical view of the aftermath, consequences and the possible motive behind the attack. She considers the attack on WTC as a desperate attempt on the part of the powerless people whose lives have been suppressed and ruled over by the iron hands of the powerful. She also denounces military operations against Afghanistan and Iraq which is unethical and cynical on the part of America. Roy disputes the assertion of USA calling itself a 'peace loving' country when it is actually engaged in war against many nations. Her protest against American imperialism is a part of her activism against oppression, deprivation, brutalities and injustice committed by USA on many fronts. Closer at home, misuse of democracy and rise of communalism in India is also an area that Roy deals with. Thus

she calls for keeping one's eye on the public institutions and invites accountability on the part of the government. In *An Ordinary Person's Guide to the Empire*, (2005), Roy tries to sketch the American empire and gives us insight into the workings of this empire.<sup>21</sup> She tries to sketch the American Empire through seemingly unconnected and unnoticeable areas, exposing the link between its war on terror, the ever growing threat of corporate power, the influence and misuse of the mass media and the world's response to it in the form of resistance. In another essay "Instant Mix of Imperial Democracy: Buy one and get one free", Roy lashes out at America under the leadership of George W. Bush. She invites the common Americans to join hands to fight for their rights. She reminds the American audience that they belong to a rich country of resistance. So they should fight for the retrieval of democracy with the weapon of non-violence. She says, "And you will see how beautiful it is to be gentle instead of brutal, safe instead of scared... Befriended instead of isolated... Love instead of hatred".<sup>22</sup> Thus, the importance of Roy's writing brings forth the unique interconnection between writing and activism through a weaving of her literary narrative through a politics of language and representation.

## **Chapter 4: Writing as Activism: Arundhati Roy in the footsteps of**

### **Mahasweta Devi**

This chapter is an attempt at a comparative study of Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi's (who has been described earlier as a writer-activist) literary and political writings. Both Mahasweta and Arundhati Roy's writings and activism have touched and inspired the lives of the common people especially the underprivileged of the society and brought about collective consciousness in common mass. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak who has translated two collections of Devi's stories including those in *Imaginary Maps* (1995) into English, suggests that the inter play of activism and literary writing in Devi's fiction can be of substantial interest to current academic discourses and practice. Spivak insists that Devi's works suggest a model in which activism and writing can reflect upon each other, providing a necessary vision of the possibilities of constructing a new kind of creative responsibility. Therefore, it is an imperative that Arundhati Roy (b. 1961) who represents the contemporary generation of writer-activist be compared to Mahasweta Devi (b.1926). Both Devi and Roy have a history of activism and literature in their family. But Devi was an activist before she came into limelight as a writer unlike Roy who became an activist after her prominence as the first Indian to win the Booker Prize in 1997. Both Roy and Mahasweta

Devi deal with themes like gender oppression, exploitation of the lower class, dispossession and deprivation of the tribals.<sup>23</sup> Roy in *The God of Small Things* critiques the system of gendered oppression and problematizes the association between feminist, liberalist ideologies and activism and the idea of modernity. Her creativity finds expression in the weaving of autobiographical element with social and political realities in India. On the other hand Mahasweta Devi's work, *Jhansir Rani* (Queen of Jhansi) was published in 1956 and this marked the beginning of her prolific literary career. Since then Mahasweta has published novels close to a hundred in number. It is a well known fact that Mahasweta Devi has been a champion for the cause of the tribals. These concerns are found in her works such as *Aranyar Adhikar* (Right to the Forest) (1977), *Chotti Munda O Tar Tir* (Chotti Munda and his Arrow) (1980), *Bitter Soil*, (1998) *Breast Stories*, (1997) *Mother of 1084* (1997), *Imaginary Map* (1993) and *Dust on the Road*, (1997). In all these works Mahasweta reveals a sensitive conscience and a strong ideological position on issues that affect the society. For a comparative study in this chapter Mahasweta Devi's activist writings compiled in *Dust on the Road* and Arundhati Roy's collection of political essays like *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Listening to the Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy*, *The Briefing*, a short fiction written in 2008 and *An*

*Ordinary Person's Guide to the Emperor* are taken for study. The common traits in the works of these two authors are analyzed and an attempt has been made to place them as writers whose work reflect in activism. For instance, they belong to that group of writers who are known for their unconventional individual traits. They often do not go by the accepted norms in the society. Devi is often described as a firebrand person who has a unique individual approach to life and understanding of things. Roy too has a reputation of being confrontational and defiant in the way she analyses and studies issues from different perspectives.<sup>24</sup> Both have in their early career involved only in journalistic writings. Both Mahasweta and Roy come from activist families. Mahasweta Devi's father was a writer who wrote about Calcutta slums and her mother was a social activist. Arundhati Roy's mother Mary Roy is also a well known activist who fought for her rights as a woman in a male dominated Syrian Christian family. In fact it created a legal history in India where the Supreme Court rules in favor of women to have the right to share of patriarchal property. Recently, Mary Roy who has fought and won the landmark legal case after twenty four years has decided to donate her property worth 1.8 crores for charitable purposes.<sup>25</sup>

Both Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy show their commitment and concern for the indigenous tribes in India, whose life for

years have been made miserable by class and caste politics. Devi in her work *Dust on the Road* and her fiction *Hajar Chaurasir Ma* invites the reader and the public to look into the deeper realities behind the Naxalite problems. She would like us to believe that it is not always the issue of land or property, but a case of basic humanitarian question of preservation of identity and dignity, question of love and respect of one human being towards the other. Arundhati Roy too has her concern for the Naxalite problem which threatens to shake the Indian state.<sup>26</sup> In fact she is accused of taking sides with the outfit, and accused of being a irresponsible citizen. But this does not discourage her. She made a fearless journey to the jungles of Dantewada to see things from the Maoist point of view. Her essay “Walking with the Comrades” published in *The Outlook*, March 29, 2010 is a closely analyzed and investigative account of the Maoist and their jungle warfare with the government. She justifies their cause by informing the reader that they too have their stories to tell. They have their own imagination and dreams. To reinforce this idea she gives the example of Nyamghri hills of Orissa where the companies like Vedanta were engaged in extracting bauxite.<sup>27</sup> Roy in her razor sharp language draws attention to the plight and sufferings of the Dongria and Khond tribe of Orissa for whom the hills and forests are their homes for generations. They are born and nurtured in this hills and forests

and depend on it for their survival. But when these hills are destroyed and mined to collect the bauxite they contain, they are turned into homeless people. Her logical argument is that if the flat topped hills are destroyed, the forests that clothe them will be destroyed too. This will be followed by the destruction of rivers and streams that flow out of them to irrigate the plains below. And it is not only the case of Dongria tribe getting destroyed but all the people who live in the forested areas of India where similar mining take place. So their only way to regain their dignity is to fight back. She is vehement at the Government's terming them as 'terrorist' which are based on false assumption without knowing the factual realities. Roy with her exceptional analytical skill reveals the values and the free market policy of the Government and the corporate companies on the wealth (Bauxite) of the mountain. For the tribals, the mountains are the living deity, the source of their fate and existence, their natural habitat. So it becomes a matter of concern when the dwelling places of the tribals are destroyed in the name of development. Mahasweta Devi too raises similar concerns in her path-breaking activist writing *Dust on the Road*. The book documents the history, geography and social conditions of the most neglected tribes in West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. She took personal initiative to start a quarterly journal *Bortika* which acted as a mouthpiece for the marginalized

tribals and oppressed section in the society. These included the peasants, agricultural labourers, tribals, workers in factories and rickshaw pullers. She left her teaching profession to join *Jugantar* a Bengali Newspaper as an investigative report writer. Thus through her writing Mahasweta Devi exposed the nexus between the dominant class of landlords, the police officers, the contractors and the politicians. She wrote against the evil practices of “Bonded Labour System”, “Contract Labor” system and the unemployment problems of the educated tribals.<sup>28</sup> Another area of common concern in the writings of Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi is the destruction of nature and the imbalance created in the ecosystem by men. Mahasweta raised her passionate and pleading voice against the plantation of eucalyptus for industrial purposes. She says,

I am concerned with the India I know. My India is of the poor, starving and helpless people. Most of them are landless and few who have land are happy to be able to make the most given resources. To cover Purulia, Bankura, Midnipur, Singhbhum and Palamau with eucalyptus will rob my India of drinking and irrigation water. These are the areas where there is chronic water scarcity.<sup>29</sup>

She also raises her voice against the exploitation of the labourers at Roro Asbestos Chaibasor in Singhbhum owned by the Birlas. Roy too in her latest fiction, *The Briefing* advocates the need for preserving the balance in the eco-system. Roy here manages to draw the attention of the public about the evils of capitalism, the cut throat competition in

manufacturing artificial snow to keep the business of ski-resort for the ever-growing tourist attraction. Through an allegorical narrative Roy tries to show the link between destruction of forest, global warming, flood and destruction and men's never ending greed. Rise of communalism in various parts of the country is another area where Mahasweta and Arundhati Roy raise their voice of concern. While Mahasweta attacks fundamentalist forces for their divisive policies, Roy also condemns the communal riots that broke out in Gujarat, at the post Godhra train incident. Both Devi and Roy are critics of the Indian government and its nuclear policy with USA as partner.<sup>30</sup> While Roy vehemently denounces the government about the nuclear Test, Devi has written protest letters about the proposed nuclear power project at Haripur in West Bengal.

In comparing the approach and style of both the authors, one finds that Mahasweta writes in simple and colloquial language while Arundhati Roy writes in both simple and sometimes unconventional style. Nevertheless the message she tries to convey is beautifully structured through her diligent use of words and phrases. Both these writers project both positive and negative side of realities of the subject they write about.<sup>31</sup>

Thus Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy complement each other in many ways; their forte is writing and activism. Both the writers deal with

problems and issues of universal appeal like question of inequality, justice, dignity and love for humanity. Their activism and experience emit through their writings. Roy uses her pen as a sword to slash through the thickness of social injustice, inhuman brutalities and deprivation in many parts of India and in the world. Thus Roy can be said to have taken the footsteps of Devi who augments a blend of both writing and activism placing Roy in the tradition of writer-activist like Devi.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The concluding chapter summarizes the key social and political issues raised by the author through her writing, as discussed in the previous chapters. The journey of Arundhati Roy as a writer and the variety of roles she evolved for herself over the years is reflected upon through a re-reading of her previous and her current writings. From playing the role of a critique of gendered representation in essays like “The Great Indian Rape Trick” and “The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane”<sup>32</sup>, about the film *Bandit Queen* made by film maker Shekhar Kapur, Roy has managed to prove her worth as a novelist right from the time of publication of her magnum opus, *The God of Small Things*. Despite her status as a celebrity, Roy has never ignored the realities around her; things like everyday struggle and miseries that ordinary people go through. She writes about human problems that need immediate attention.

Today if we trace the growth and development of Roy as a writer, we find that her leanings are more towards the support and upliftment of the people who come under the last dreg of the social classification. Her writings are efforts to voice those issues that are often ignored under the political cloud even though they affect the lives of millions. Her works which have caught global attention are issues dealing with the unjustified Iraq War, America’s hegemonic war policies on Afghanistan, unjustified Israel’s

occupation of Gaza, a disputed Palestinian territory and military atrocities on Tamil civilians in the Sri Lankan war. She also writes about environmental issues, like global warming, imbalance in the eco- system due to unhealthy policies and on industrialization that destroys nature of its bounty and beauty. Roy continues to intervene into contemporary issues through her prose pieces. She criticizes the government on many fronts where she feels the need. She registers her protest against the destruction and dispossession of the Adivasis and the low class people and the repressive policies of the government towards the Maoists, Army atrocities in Jammu and Kashmir and against the eviction of tribal people from their homes and land in Kerala. She also continues to protest against the corporatization and developmental programmes which have created an uneasy chasm between the rich and the poor.<sup>33</sup> But Roy does not conform to any ideologies. She would like to operate from that “Thin Line” which is indefinable and at the same time unavoidable for a conscious writer.<sup>34</sup> Edward Said also terms this position as the expected norm of a responsible writer and the freedom of personal space from conformist rules. It is perhaps due to the complexities of the present time and the nature of intellectual dilemma that one is thrown into, that makes her writing poignant and yet not purely ideological. Roy blends all

aspects of writing and doing, thinking and acting which are cleverly infused together. This is clearly evident in her statement,

The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it. And once you've seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political, an act as speaking out. There's no innocence. Either way, you're accountable.<sup>35</sup>

She also stresses on the fact that literature and politics are not two separate things though she acknowledges that it does not mean that there is not a world of 'difference between literature and propaganda'. She believes in seeing things from a cross disciplinary point of view. This is expressed in her assertion in the lines-

Specialist and experts end up severing the links between things, isolating them, actually creating barriers that prevent ordinary people from understanding. I try to do the opposite: to create links, to join the dots, to tell politics like a story, to communicate it, to make it real. To make the connection between a man with his child telling you about life in the village he lived in before it was submerged by a reservoir, and the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank. *The God of small Things* is a book which connects the very small things to the very biggest. Whether it's the dent that a baby spider makes on the surface of water in a pond or the quality of moonlight on the river or how history and politics intrude into your life, your house, your bedroom, into the most intimate relationship between people-parents and children, siblings and so on.<sup>36</sup>

Roy is very critical of the Indian Media, the Politicians and the intellectuals with whom she ruffles many feathers. Yet, many admire her because of the subject she writes about and which attract attention and provokes public debates. Roy has her own style of combining the political and the aesthetic. She reveals, "There is beauty yet in this brutal damaged world of ours... We have to seek it and nurture it."<sup>37</sup> She further states, "I love the unanswered question, the unresolved story, the unclimbed mountain,

the tender shard of incomplete dream.”<sup>38</sup> It is evident that Roy’s writings and her activism evokes critical response all over the world. To a question by David Brasman as to how she handles her celebrity tag, Roy promptly states, “As a rule, I never do things because I am a celebrity. Also I never avoid doing things because I am a celebrity. I don’t inaugurate things, I don’t appear as a chief guest anywhere, I don’t grace occasion. I am a writer first. I am a celebrity because I am a writer, not the other way around.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike most of her contemporary writers Roy did not go to any well known institutions in India or abroad. All the same her choice of Architecture as a subject seem to have played an important role in shaping her ideology. At a very early stage in her life she learnt to understand the deep gap between power and powerlessness, the bounty of the haves and the wretched emptiness of the have-nots which gave her writing a genuine touch that evokes attraction and attention.

Roy is a role model for several writers of our times who have chosen to use the agency of writing to affect social and political change. She has maintained that distinctive uniqueness of a courageous intellectual as far as her creative and political writings are concerned. She has brilliantly learnt to evolve according to the needs of the time. Amitava Kumar in his article “

The Currency of Arundhati Roy says, “ There are people who make history.Roy is one of them.But,she is also one who has been made by history.Velutha, the tragic, untouchable hero of her novel, has found his-flesh-and-blood counterparts in the Narmada Valley. Roy’s struggle to articulate this fact makes her perhaps the most important writer in India familiar to the West since Rabindranath Tagore”. She is an inspiration and hope for various sections of people living in misery and loss under the ravages of war and human calamities. Her writings are reflective of the experiences and understanding of the world of marginalized people around.

#### **End Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Arundhati Roy, *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005) p134.Print.
- <sup>2</sup> Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good” *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, (New Delhi:Penguin Books,2002)pp73-99.Print.
- <sup>3</sup> Arundhati Roy, “Walking with the Comrades” 29<sup>th</sup> March, 2010,*Outlook*, pp.24-59.
- <sup>4</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Globalisation of Dissent”, in conversation with David Barsamian, *The Shape of the Beast*,” January 2001. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008)p 121.Print.
- <sup>5</sup>Arundhati Roy, “ Development Nationalism”, in conversation with David Barsamian, *The Shape of the Beast*,” January 2001. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008)p 112.Print.

- <sup>6</sup>Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good” *Algebra of Infinite Justice* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002)p.57,p101,p121. Print.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.p.198.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.p.62,p104.
- <sup>9</sup>Arundhati Roy, *The Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi:Penguin Books, 2008) p 208.Print.
- <sup>10</sup>Arundhati Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002) p209.Print.
- <sup>11</sup>Shashi Despande, “The Writer as Activist”. *Literary Review. Hindu online Edition*, Sunday July 6, 2003.
- <sup>12</sup> Flamingant Movement was originally initiated by priests in Flanders Under the French occupation in 1792.  
[www.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/2187576](http://www.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/2187576). Web 28 December 2008.
- <sup>13</sup>Thomas Rain Crowe, “The New Naturalists” *E journals*. Volume 50 Number 1. Web 20 January 2009.  
[http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/VALib/v50\\_n1/crowe.html](http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/VALib/v50_n1/crowe.html)
- <sup>14</sup>Karl Marx, “On Activism”, Ahilan Kadirgmar-*LINES* August, 2002.  
[http://issues.lines-magazine.org/Art\\_Aug02/Ahilan.htm](http://issues.lines-magazine.org/Art_Aug02/Ahilan.htm) Web 30 May 2009.
- <sup>15</sup>Shashi Despande, “The Writer as Activist”. *Literary Review. Hindu online Edition*, Sunday July 6, 2003. Web 26 October 2009.
- <sup>16</sup>Arundhati Roy, *The Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi:Penguin Books,2008) p18.Print.
- <sup>17</sup>Arundhati Roy, “The End of Imagination” *Algebra of Infinite Justice* (New Delhi: Penguin Publication, 2002) p22. Print.  
See also “A Moment of Pride”, *The Hindustan Times*, Editorial, 12<sup>th</sup> May 1998

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.p.4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.p.56.

Also see C.V.J. Sharma(ed),1989, *Modern Temples of India: Selected Speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru at Irrigation and Power Project*.  
Central Board of Irrigation and Power, p.40-49.Print.

<sup>20</sup>Arundhati Roy, “The story of Rumpelstltskin” *Power Politics*:  
(Kottayam:D.C(p)Ltd, 2001) pp53-58.Print.

<sup>21</sup>Arundhatii Roy, “The Outline of the Beast”, p.163. *The Shape of the Beast*  
in conversation with Antony Arnove, April 2003.New Delhi:  
Penguin,Viking,2008.Print.

<sup>22</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Instant-mix imperial democracy” *An Ordinary Person’s*  
*Guide to Empire* (New Delhi: Penguin, Viking, 2005)p169.Print.

<sup>23</sup>Mahasweta Devi, “The Call Never comes”, *Dust on the Road* (Calcutta:  
Seagull Publications, 2000) pp81-86.Print.

Also see Arundhati Roy, “Walking with the Comrades”, March  
29, 2010,*Outlook*,p.26.

<sup>24</sup>Enakshi Chatterjee, “Mahasweta Devi in Splendid Isolation.” *Indian*  
*Review of Books*, Volume 6 No.9, 16 June to 15 July 1997.

<sup>25</sup>“Mother of big case to donate hard-won inheritance”, *The Telegraph*  
October 26<sup>th</sup> 2010.

<sup>26</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Walking with the Comrades”, March 29, 2010,  
*Outlook*.p.44.

<sup>27</sup>Mining Company based in London. It was engaged in bauxite mining and  
refinery project in Kalahandi in Orissa, Web 20 January 2010.  
[www.vedantaresources.com/management-structure.aspx](http://www.vedantaresources.com/management-structure.aspx)

Also see Lola Nair with Anuradha and Smriti Koppikar” *Butterfly*  
*Effect*”, August 30<sup>th</sup> 2010, *Outlook*, pp.48-49.

- <sup>28</sup> Mahasweta Devi, "Contract Labour or Bonded Labour?", *Dust on the Road*, (Calcutta: Seagull Publication, 2000) pp30-40. print.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid. p.64-68.
- <sup>30</sup> Arundhati Roy, "Independence Day Special", in conversation with S. Anand, *The Shape of the Beast*, August 25, 2005. (New Delhi: Penguin Publication, 2008), p. 183. Print.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.93.
- <sup>32</sup> Arundhati Roy on Shekhar Kapur's "Bandit Queen".  
[www.sawnet.org/books/writing/roy-bq/html](http://www.sawnet.org/books/writing/roy-bq/html).  
See also "Bandit Queen through Indian eyes: The reconstruction and Reincarnations of Phoolan Devi". Web 16 March 2010.  
[findarticles.com/p/articles/mi-hb6655/-2-24/ai../pg-14/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi-hb6655/-2-24/ai../pg-14/)
- <sup>33</sup> Arundhati Roy, "Power Politics" *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, (New Delhi: Penguin Publication, 2002) p146, p153. Print.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.191- 92.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.193.
- <sup>36</sup> Arundhati Roy, "Colonisation of Knowledge" *Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi: Penguin Publication, 2008) p36. Print.
- <sup>37</sup> Arundhati Roy, "The End of Imagination" *Algebra of Infinite Justice* (New Delhi: Penguin Publication, 2002) p37. Print.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid. p.197.
- <sup>39</sup> Arundhati Roy, "Scimitars in the Sun" *Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi: Penguin Publication, 2008) p24. Print.

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"Being Indian, You have no right to be cynical." Mahasweta to Anosh Malekar  
(Interview)

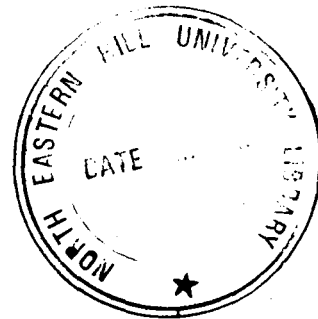
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**ARUNDHATI ROY AS A WRITER-ACTIVIST: A STUDY**

**LAKHIMAI MILI**

**Submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**



**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY**

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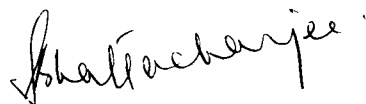
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This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

  
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Shillong  
The 20<sup>th</sup> December, 2010.

**LAKHIMAI MILI**

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Studies in the literary canon over the years have shown that literature cannot be read without reference to the complex wave of socio-cultural, political and economic situations in which it is produced. Literature reflects societal realities through a play of several ideologies and the factors that constitute these ideologies. Literature becomes a site for creative resistance through immense possibilities and so literature has always been closely associated with social and political activism.

Activism in general can be described as a form of action that aims at ‘transformation’ and ‘emancipation’ of an existing social context. It begins from an intentionality of the human subject to enact cultural, economical, social and political change. These enactment or actions would be either in support of or in opposition to a social, political or cultural cause and manifest itself in a wide range of forms.

Historically, the term ‘activism’ and ‘activist’ in a political sense first appeared in the Belgian press in 1916 in connection with the Flamingant movement.<sup>1</sup> The word ‘Activism’ is often used synonymously with protest or dissent but activism can stem from a

number of political orientations and take a wide range of forms from writing letters to newspaper columns and articles or political campaigning, economic activism, rallies and street marches, strikes or even guerrilla tactics. Such attitudinal and contextual interpretations of activism find their political expression in genres of writing that may belong to fiction, non-fiction, poem, essay or even music.

Activists often react to a political or social issue by expressing their opinions through writing. Prose is one such genre of literature which has readership at different levels of the society in people who are aware of the existing social and political conditions. Using the medium of prose, the writer often exposes injustice done towards an individual, group or to the society. There are various forms of oppressions which lead to different forms of resistance. In most of the political forms of oppressions, the government takes up certain measures which violate human rights. And very often writers call for a change and protest against the socio-political and cultural oppression through their works.

Activists are people who seek to affect positive change. Activism goes beyond voicing of rights to protest for existence. Activism can also

be seen from a broader spectrum which includes the positive and courageous actions of ordinary people in their daily lives.

Activists may form radical cooperatives working within universities and schools to educate others, working through the legal system or government to create institutional changes, maintaining cultural practices and music as an act of resistance, developing national and international networks and forming alliance across movements. Activists can be people from varied age groups too. They can be students, residents, traditionalist, unionists, aboriginals, right campaigners, environmentalists, lesbian and gay campaigners, peace and social justice workers; they may work in funded non-governmental organizations(NGO's), in grass root affinity groups or autonomous networks, in political parties or lobby groups in local resident associations or in a trade union.

If we take a glance at the contemporary global stage there are activist -writers of one type or the other from all sections in the society. There are environmentalists who turn their writing into activism and lead the way towards balance and sustainability of nature. These nature writers echoed their opinions and positioned themselves on the front lines of various battles to save and preserve the environment. Through

their writings, they have motivated the minds of the people to bring about organic ecological movements, private foundations and governmental programmes focused on long view plans for the welfare of the country to preserve the natural landscape. Some of the worth mentioning American environmental activist writers of late 1800's and early 1900's are John Burrough, John Muir, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who are not only emissaries of nature but who also set the standards for those who would follow their footsteps, such as Aldo Leopole, Rachel Carson, Loren Eisley, Frank Waters and Teihard de Chardin. All these writers have over the years created permanent impressions on human consciousness and American landscape. John Burrough's work like *Indoor Studies* (1904), *Breath of life* ( 1915 ), *Under the Apple Trees* (1916) and *Field and Study* (1919) is engaged with the issue of environmental balance. Emerson's essays on *Self Reliance* (1841), *Nature* (1836) and *Prudence* (1841) also advocate the preservation of environment and its impact on human life. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* first published in 1962 brought about bioregional movement on the west coast, led by poet activist writers such as Gary Snyder, Peter Blue Cloud, Peter Burg and Lee Swanson. Snyder in particular showed keen interest in the necessity of maintaining balance

and participated in protest marches and social actions. In his work entitled *The Practice of the Wild*, (2004) he has, in a way laid down the foundation of sustainability to a whole new generation of activist naturalist. In Thoreau's view, if one could learn the secrets of nature, one must practice more humanity than others. In a nutshell, these nature writers are not only involved in writing prose and poetry that evokes the spirit of the old naturalists but are also engaged with a kind of activism that is a combination of the literary and the activist.<sup>2</sup> They, through their works and deeds, have inspired the organizing and participation of people to think and provide alternatives to community apathy and the distraction of natural habitat. Some of the worth mentioning artists and educationists who use art and literature as work of activism are Biodun Jeyifor, Sokari D. Camp, Lambard, Thierry N. Landu and Doris Sommer.

Biodun Jeyifor is a professor of African and African American studies and of literature and comparative literature at Harvard University. He works on the complex connections between literature, critical theory, and radical humanities of twentieth century progressive and revolutionary social philosophy. Again, Sokari D. Camp is the award winner of the British Empire Award 2005 for work of art. With

her award she made a place for herself to create a living memorial for the Nigerian environmental activist and writer Ken Saro Wiwa in 2006. She infused through her work the sense of cultural, religious and theological nature of activism.

Thierry N'Landu, a Congolese play wright and socio-political activist, is the founder of the Kinshasa – based theatre troupe, “Le Groupe Amos”. This theatre performance provides grass root activism in the form of video documentaries, plays, paintings, radio broadcastings and publications on topics such as free and democratic elections and local history and culture. Going beyond the democratic republic of Congo, he has been an activist and trainer on human rights, the rule of law, and conflict resolution and has been a program officer for the International Human Rights Law Group. Doris Sommer is another academician who through his research has developed 19<sup>th</sup> century novels that helped consolidate new American republic through the aesthetic minoritarian literature including bilingual virtuosity, to more general pursuits of constructive rights and resources that the arts and humanities contribute to developing societies. Sommer authored several books like *Foundational Fiction: The National Romances of Latin America* (1990) and *Cultural Agency in the Americans* ( 2004). Likewise, Master

Danongan Kalamduyan, is a well known educator of 'Kulintang' music at Skyline San Francisco State University<sup>3</sup>. Through his teaching of 'Kulintang' music and Ethno musicology in the Unites States, has been able to educate the Filipino American youth and inspired them to learn more about their culture and heritage. In his various teaching engagement he tried to remind his people of the pre-colonial Filipino traditions that remained unblemished by western ideals in American society which gradually united the scattered Filipino American community together by promoting their culture on the stage. In short Danogan's effort have turned into a forum of cultural activism that was not so much felt in Filipino emigrants who had migrated to America during the same era i.e. 1990's. All the above mentioned personalities have used art as their tool for activism. So as we see activism can be of varied forms.

Activism and literature are deeply linked. Activist writers find their perfect platform through their writings. Their voice and their sense of resistance is created both through their writings and actions. As Andrea Chow, an Asian week staff writer says that 'The Annual conference' on Lao language and Laotian American literature convened in the Bay Area, discussed literary pursuit with the topic firmly rooted in

regional activism. These annual conferences sought to link Laotian voices through literature and activism. These conferences encourage more Laotian American voices in literature which in turn serves as an empowerment tool for the largely refugee community that arrived in America. So putting thought into paper became an action and action in turn became activism. There are scores of writers who turn their pen into activism for resistance and social change.

Zitkala-sa (Gertrude Simmons Bonnin), from south Dakota Sioux was an educator, musician, writer and activist. In her work *American Indian stories and Legends*(1985) and other writings, consciously made significant changes to the traditional tales in order to address key political and social issues like land infringement, challenges to tribal sovereignty and the effects of missionary boarding schools on Yankton on Sioux culture more generally. She advocated for Indian citizenship, their basic rights in a democratic land. She also voiced her concern on the laws against Indian dance and culture of the Californian Indians. She felt that Indians could never be counted equal with the whites in any field, until they took actions to educate themselves, secure their rights, and obtain the power of legislative and legal representation, they would continue to be helpless to manage their future.

Susan Sontag is another author activist who used her pen as a sword to criticize the various injustices in the society and the governmental policies. She was a provocative writer, who became a leading intellectual and an influential author. Her work *Notes on Camp* (1964) established her as a major new writer who popularized the “so bad into good” attitude towards popular culture. She also wrote such influential works as *Illness as metaphor* (1978) in which she examined how disease had been alternatively romanticized and demonized and in *On Photograph*, (1839) she argued that pictures sometimes, distances viewers from the subject matter. From 1907-89, Sontag served as a president of American Chapter of the Writers’ Organization PEN. When Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called for Salman Rushdie’s ‘Fatwa’ (death) because of the alleged blasphemy of *The Satanic Verses* (1988), she helped lead protest against it in the literary community.

Sontag was also a campaigner for human rights cause and travelled to Yugoslavia, to call for international action against the growing crisis at that time due to war. In 1993, she visited Sarajevo and staged a production of *Waiting for Godot*. Her best selling literary piece *The Volcano Lover* (1992) won her National Book Award. She wrote an acclaimed short story about AIDS in *The Way We Live Now* in (1875)

Sontag was a fearless writer who did not follow any restriction in her process of writing. In 1960's her writing about Vietnam War she openly criticized America and declared that the "The white race is the cancer of human history". A day after September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, she criticized U.S. foreign policy and praised the hijackers who dared to attack the WTC- and acknowledged that it was not an act cowardice act but an attack on the world's self proclaimed super-power.

Writers also become rebels in some situations. One such example is Emma Goldman, an anarchist known for her political activism, writing, and speeches.<sup>4</sup> She was called a free-thinking 'rebel woman' by admirers and violent revolutionary by her critics. This strong headed anarchist suffered from all sorts of difficulties since her childhood days. She had a father who refused to allow her higher education. In spite of everything she read voraciously and educated herself about the politics of her time. Goldman was imprisoned along with her anarchist companion and lover Alexander Berkman for attempting to assassinate Henry Clay Frick. In 1906 Goldman founded the anarchist journal "Mother Earth" (1906). Again in 1917, Goldman and Berkman were sent to two years in jail for conspiring to "induce persons not to register" for the newly instated draft. After their release from prison, they were

arrested with many others and deported to Russia. Initially supportive of Russia's Bolshevik revolution, Goldman quickly voiced her opposition to the Soviet use of violence and repression of independent voices. In 1923, she wrote a book about her experiences, *My disillusionment in Russia* (1923). While living in England, Canada, France, she wrote an autobiography called *Living my Life* (1931) and eventually traveled to Spain to participate in that nation's civil war.

Goldman played an important role in the development of anarchist political philosophy in the United States and Europe in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although she distanced herself from the first - wave feminism and its efforts towards women's suffrage, she spoke on a wide variety of issues including prisons, atheism, and freedom of speech, militarism, capitalism marriage, free love, and homosexuality. After decades of obscurity, Goldman's iconic status was revived in 1970's when feminists and anarchist scholars rekindled popular interest in her life. Her whole life was an example of resistance through literature and activism.

We also have the example of Barbara Smith who is an American lesbian feminist. She was a natural activist. She has played a significant role in building and sustaining Black Feminism in the United States. She

has been active as an innovative critic, teacher, lecturer, author, independent scholar and publisher of Black feminist thought. Smith's essays, reviews, articles, short stories and literary criticism have appeared in a range of publications including *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Black Scholar*, *Ms Gay Community News*, *The Guardian*, *The Village Voice*, *Conditions* (magazines) and *The Nation*. In 1975 Barbara played an important role in reorganizing the Boston Chapter of the National Black Feminist Organization to establish the Combahee River Collective. It worked on revolutionary issues such as 'reproductive rights, rape, and prison reform, and sterilization abuse, violence against women, health care and racism. Smith and Combahee River Collection have been credited with the coining of the term 'identity politics', which they defined as 'a politics' that grew out of their objective material experiences as Black women. Smith received the 1994 Stonewall Award for her activism.

To address the needs and problems of women of colour, Smith in 1980, along with Audre Lorde and Cherrie Moraga Co-founded *Kitchen Table: Women of Colour Press*, the first U.S publisher for 'women of colour'. Smith continued to write and collection of her essays, articles and reviews are found in *Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race*,

*Gender and Freedom* (1998). Smith's article "Toward a Black Feminist Consciousness" (1982) first published in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Brave: Black Women's Studies*, (1982) is frequently cited as the breakthrough article in opening the field of Black women's literature and Black lesbian discussion.

Tess Lewis in his article "Literature as Resistance" talks of Hungarian novelist Peter Nadas and the Chinese writer Gao Xingjian. Xingjian's collection of essays entitled *The Case for Literature* (2006) and Nada's political essays in *Fire and Knowledge* (2007) whose writings reflect on the role of literature as witness and the incompatibilities of ideology and individual voice. This is a cursory glimpse of global scenario in terms of activism through literature.

India has a long history of social upheaval and resistant movement and such greater conflicts have increased more than ever before. There were many resistant voices across the country against the political oppression, social inequality that led to these conflicts. Individual people or groups of committed people who are disturbed by the atrocities done against mankind by the government or any such social organization and who worked towards affecting change are called activists. There are writers who through their literary works express their voice of concern

and resistance. Social activists are those who fight for justice and equality in the society through their activism but they need not necessarily be writers in true sense. There are writers who blend their writings and actions together and their activism become a part and parcel of their life. We have a number of Indians who are social activists. One such person in the contemporary times is Medha Patkar who is leading the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Patkar in her article in “India Today” reiterates that every citizen should strive and dream for a better India whether it is to save the environment or fighting for the rights of the people and enable the state to meet the needs of the citizens. She says that every third illiterate in the world lives in India and two hundred ninety six millions of Indians are still illiterate. So it is a dire necessity and all efforts should be made to facilitate mass education<sup>5</sup>. She asserts that much of her endeavor has been to create awareness about the injustice done to the environment around. She also speaks for women’s empowerment and greater opportunities for them, especially in Panchayatiraj, to free them from the bondage of patriarchal oppression. She opines that politicians and voters should look beyond party lines and think of the interest of the nation. It is to be recorded that, before she took up this massive struggle for NBA, in 1920’s the peasants of Mulshi

Peta, near Pune, had protested against the construction of a dam by the industrial house of the Tatas with governmental support. The struggle was led by Pandurang Mahadev (Senapathi) Bapet, a socialist and nationalist who had been educated in England. Bapet was a leader of immense charisma and courage who identified completely with the peasants who fought to save their ancestral land from being submerged. All these accounts of anti-dam struggle is written in the English version by Professor Rajendra Vora under the title "The World's First Anti-Dam Movement"<sup>6</sup>. As Ram Chandra Guha says, the Mulshi Satyagraha was not merely a precursor to the Narmada Bachao Andolan; it anticipated the protest in Singur, Nandigram and a dozen other places where the state intended to transfer land owned by small peasants to a single privately owned company.

Some of the worth mentioning Indian writers who deal with the present social and political issues are Dr. Amartya Sen, a nobel prize winner, Amitav Ghosh, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy. Amitav Ghosh, in his work *Countdown* (1999) writes about the aftermath of nuclear test at Pokhran on May 11, 1998. He also gives a vivid account of people who lived in and around the site of explosion and their sense of insecurity and nightmares regarding the consequences of the nuclear



testing. Similarly Vandana Shiva, a well known ecologist and author and an activist, in her work *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (1997), traces the history of international patents to European colonization of “native” people. Amartya Sen in his lecture, entitled “Beyond Liberalization: Social Opportunity and Human Capability” delivered in New Delhi on 29 June, 1994 gives analytical assessment of literacy in India.

Mahasweta Devi is another indomitable writer who used her writings as a power of resistance. She uses her writings to bring about awareness in the society about the suffering sections of society and calls for struggles for the liberation of tribal masses. Her writings acted as a voice for the muted section of the downtrodden and the underprivileged in the society. Mahasweta and Arundhati Roy belong to that rare category of writers who put their writing into action. They make their writing and physical participation blend, to bring about changes in thoughts and actions of others. These two writers are the finest examples of activist writers in India.

In recent times writings and activism of Arundhati Roy whom Noam Chomsky has called ‘a wonder’, generates a lot of intellectual curiosity and interest in the context of using literary writing for social

transformation. The ideological position of the author is expressed in the use of language and images used both in her fictional and non-fictional work. She shot into international limelight with her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, a booker prize winner book in Oct.1997. Spun in a unique narrative mode this book is a critique of social issues and portrayed class antagonisms', class exploitation and hypocrisy of the so called big man –Marxism, patriarchal domination and callous police administration; the problem of love laws, and the forbidden and never accepted theme of incestuous relation between the twins. All these issues and political ideologies are representation of India in general and Kerala in particular. It presents the realistic view of dalits and the untouchables who have given up their hope of seeking an identity in a cruel and callous society.

In the years following her success, she has turned to focus on social and political activism, *The Cost of Living* (1999) a book comprising of two essays, “The Greater Common Good” and “The End of Imagination”, the former against Indian Government’s dam building projects and the latter testing of Nuclear weapons. True to the titles of these essays, Roy proposed a social epistemology of the ideas of ‘good’ and ‘imagination’. The novelty lay in mingling a norm mode. Thus she

opened up a new paradigm of writing: activism stretched into a fortuitous literary representation of lived experience of social reality of the immediate societies. She has donated a substantial amount around 1.5 million rupees, equivalent to her Booker prize money for the cause. She was also arrested along with the others for the cause. Roy's *Power Politics* (2001) takes on Enron, the power corporation based in Houston, for trying to take over Maharashtra's energy sector. Another essay written in early 2002, "Democracy: Who's She When She's at Home" examines the horrific communal violence in Gujarat. Here she urges the citizens to keep an eagle eye on public institution and demand for accountability; which means putting one's ear to the ground and listening to the whispering of the truly powerless. It means giving a forum to the myriad voices from the hundreds of resistant movements. And "War Talk: Summer Games with Nuclear Bombs" (2002) gives an analytical view about the threat of nuclear war in the subcontinent and their future effects. She has also spoken on and published several articles such as 'Promotion of equal Rights' 'Supporting equal Rights for lower castes in India' 'War on Terrorism' in 2001 against the people of Iraq.

Erica Wagner, literary editor of *The Times* said "I think Arundhati Roy herself probably prefers to be known for her activism rather than

her novel writing. I know that when she won the Booker prize, she wondered whether she would write another novel again. I don't know whether she will, but certainly, she is known as the novelist in this country, she is very much seen now as a political figure". Wagner justified the coverage given by the press, "well, certainly for the British media, winning a Booker prize is a great accolade, that tends to make the novelist straight away a very famous novelist and it is quite unusual for a novelist to do other things than write novels. And so I think, really that is the reason". Harriett Gilbert who presents the show "Meridian Writing" on BBC said, "Arundhati Roy is a high profile celebrity, certain section of the media instinctively sympathized with her cause."

Arundhati Roy refutes criticisms of historians like Ram Chandra Guha and B.G. Varghese who say that in her essay "The Greater Common Good", it's all sentimental without being factual, that it romanticizes Adivasis life style. She answers :

when I was writing The Greater Common Good I was acutely aware of two things: One, that I was not going to write on behalf of anyone but myself because I think that's the most honest thing to do in our society particularly, the politics of "representation" is complicated and fraught with danger and dishonesty. Two, I was not writing an anthropological account of the life style of the people that I knew very little about. I was writing about social justice, about the politics of involuntary displacement, about what happens to people who are forcibly uprooted from an environment they know well and dumped in the world they know nothing about—a world in which, instead of a forest and a river and farmlands, they have unemployment and tin shack. It is an unfair, unequal bargain for anybody — Adivasis or agarwal.<sup>7</sup>

She claims that at no point in her writings she had attempted to describe Adivasi life style, let alone romanticize it. As for the charge of being unoriginal she asserts that when one is writing to advocate a political position, or in support of a people's movement that has been yelling its lungs out for the last fifteen years in order for them to be heard; almost by definition, one is reiterating what they are saying. She states, "My essays are not about me or my brilliance or my originality or lack of it. They are about saying the same things over and over again".<sup>8</sup> She also responds to Guha's criticism of her essay asserting that she has used relative analogy when she compared the relationship between two things i.e. Big dams and Nuclear bombs. In short she is saying that big dams and nuclear bombs are both political instruments, extremely undemocratic which does not literally mean that bombs are dams.

Arundhati Roy's activist writings deal with several social and political issues. She uses her pen with graphic description and minute details where she perceives the political and hidden motives behind government policies and schemes of development. In other works she talks about military occupation in Jammu Kashmir, neo-fascism in Gujarat, civil war in Chattisgarh, plunder of natural resources in Orissa,

the submergence of hundreds of villages in Narmada valley, people living on the edge, in starvation, the devastation of forest land and about victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy.

She also makes a sarcastic comparison between the Chinese communists who are turning out to be the biggest capitalists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and CPM (parliamentary) Left whose policies follow suits. She cites Nandigram and Singur as clear examples of advanced capitalism. To a questions by David Brasamian , ‘Why were you drawn to the Narmada issue? Why has this become such a powerful symbol, Roy’s immediate response was:

Because I believe that it contains a microcosm of the universe. I think it contains a profound argument about everything – power, powerlessness, greed, deceit, politics, ethics, rights and entitlements.... To me, understanding the Narmada issue is the key to understanding of the world at works. The beauty of the argument is that it isn’t human centric. It’s also about things that most political ideologies leave out. Vital issues – rivers, estuaries, earth, mountains, deserts, craps, forests and fish. And about human beings that most environmental ideologies leave out. .... So the real issue is not how ordinary farmers in Gujarat will benefit from the Sardar Sarovar, but how they will eventually suffer because of it.<sup>9</sup>

Arundhati Roy with her linguistic skill uses literature to a height of understanding things from kaleidoscopic view. In her essay “The Greater Common Good” Arundhati Roy gives an analytical view of the dam projects of the Indian Government, sees through the pros and cons

and of course brings to light the disadvantages of the people; who are likely to be more at loss than gaining from it. Roy sees the layers of other problems behind the veil of the so called developmental programmes by the Indian Government. She observes and states:

The fact that they do more harm than good is no longer just conjecture. Big dams are obsolete. They are uncool. They are undemocratic. They are a government's way of accumulating authority. **They are a guaranteed way of taking a farmer's wisdom from them. They are brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich. Their reservoir displaces huge populations of people, leaving them homeless and destitute. Ecologically they lay the Earth to waste and cause floods water logging, salinity and spread of disease. There is mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earthquake.**<sup>10</sup>

Roy argues the fact that big dams do the opposite of what people say about them and gives the reason that it is this reason why dam building is not the first priority of the developed countries. First world encourages the poor world to make more and more dams only to become more poor and dole out aids with strings attached for business enterprise. She also points out that the government has maintained statistical data's and figures of production of food grains but has not a figure for the number of people displaced by dams or they are just sacrificed in the name of "national progress". She views that the millions of displaced people in India are nothing but refugees of an unacknowledged war and we like the citizen of white American and French Canada and Hitler's

Germany, are condoning it by looking away. And all these are with the 'excusable excuse' of being done for the sake of greater common good. That it is being done in the name of progress, in the name of national interest. She also opens our eyes to other the associated problems with dam project i.e. the heavy loan India has taken from the World Bank and the double interest repayment it has to make. The other scientific drawback is the earthquake caused by reservoir of the dam. Activists protesting against the construction of dams on the Narmada (in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh), Tehu (Uttar Pradesh), and Bedthi (Karnataka) argue that dams would lead to R.I.S. (Reservoir- Induced – seismicity) and subsequently cause earthquakes. Roy calls for consciousness of the people to be aware of this universal problem and she states her belief that:

The war for Narmada Valley is not just some exotic tribal war or a remote rural war or even an exclusively India war. It is a war for the rivers and mountains and the forest of the world. All sorts of warriors from all over the world anyone who wishes to enlist will be honoured and welcomed... doctors, lawyers, teachers, judges, journalists, students, sportsmen, painters, actors, singers and lovers<sup>11</sup>.

Arundhati Roy reveals her individual skill and her clear conscious stand on taking sides as a writer who participates in activism through her writings and action as she says:

Once you've seen certain things, you can't un-see them and saying nothing is as political an act as speaking out... There is no innocence and there isn't any sense... When I pay tax, I'm investing in projects I disagree with. I'm not a completely blameless person campaigning for the good of mankind. But from that un-pristine position, it is better to say nothing or to say something.<sup>12</sup>

She makes it very clear to the readers that whatever she says or expressed may not always be accepted. But she is not a writer who will say what people want to hear.

Roy finds interesting combination of being a writer and what does a writer do. To her, a writer hones his or her language, makes it as clear and private and individual as possible. And looking around finds himself or herself in the heart of crowd, and it does not remain private and individual any more. And she raise probing questions into the reader as to how do a person hold up those urges to intervene in the immediate things around us.

It is a known fact that it is this situation that make many writers frightened of political engagement as they feel it a risk, and she confirms her stand 'I rather do it than not'. She is also acutely aware of the big struggle in this position as a writer activist but often is drawn to the happening in the life around her. She gives her personal example of how she tried to avoid writing about Mohammad Afzal's judgment. But as

she followed up the case in the news she had a natural urge to intervene as she says – “They will hang him and if I don’t write now I will never be able to live with myself... I know that urgent intervention is important”.<sup>13</sup> And when questioned about her sense of place or her engagement in India and what connects her to it; she says that she probably qualify for being an anti national as she does not have a nationalistic bone in her body. Yet it is inconceivable for her to not to be here, because it contains everything that she loved.

In the book “*13 December: A Reader, The Strange Case of the Aattack on Indian Parliament*” (2006). Arundhati Roy along with other academics, journalists and writers examines closely at the case and finds the loopholes – violation of legal safeguards, fabricated evidence and extraction of false confession. The circumstances under which Mohammad Afzal is convicted without having a proper representation and sentences to death without having had an opportunity to be heard without a fair trial, she argues in favor of the victim in the preface of the book. She argues, “To sentence a man who has not had a fair trial and has not had the opportunity to be heard, to life imprisonment is less cruel but just as arbitrary as sentencing him into death”.<sup>14</sup> And she demands for justice into the whole matter. She believes that the right thing to do

would be to order a re-trial of Afzal's case and an impartial, transparent enquiry into 13 December Parliament attack. Her sense of justice makes feel that it is utterly demonic on the police department to leave a man locked up alone in a prison cell, day after day, week after week, leaving him and his family to guess which day will be the last day of his life. She hope and vouches for justice to prevail and the truth of things should be revealed as deserved of being a citizen of a democratic country.

Arundhati Roy with her skillful play of language draws our attention with vivid but realistic picture of the resettlement of Narmada people as she uses poetically:

In several settlement sites, people have been dumped in rows of corrugated tin sheds which are furnaces in summer and fridges in the winter. Some of them are located in dry river beds, which during the monsoon turn into fast flowing drips. I have seen the film footage of others: shivering children perched like birds on the edges of charpais, while swirling waters entered their tin homes. Frightened, fevered eyes with pots and pans carried through the door way by the current floating out into the flooded fields, their fathers swimming after them to retrieve what they can.<sup>15</sup>

These lines certainly show the ability of the writer who can create living memory of action in the mind of the reader. Roy is a writer-activist who stands by what she says and feels. There is an unwavering conviction in what she tries to drive home and does not get swayed by the pressures of criticism she faces for voicing her opinion. She uses her

natural instinct and intuition from where she can keep her ears to the ground and hear the cry of the muted and the powerless. In her own characteristic way, she refuses to accept the Sahitya Academy Award offered by the Congress government. During the BJP regime she was convicted for contempt of the court and sent to jail. For her the award does not hold much importance though she appreciates it. And she says that to her mind these seem different ways of dealing with the author but they are both ways to neutralize a troublesome writer.

Keeping in mind the nature of activism that Arundhati Roy's works reveal both in her famous novel *The God of Small Things* and her Political Essay collections like *The Cost of Living*(1999), *Power Politics*(2001), *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*(2002), *War Talk*(2003), *An Ordinary Person's Guide to the Empire*(2005) *The Shape of the Beast*(2008), *Listening to the Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (2009), the thesis has tried to place Arundhati Roy as a writer activist.

Roy herself stated:

First, because it is strategically positioned to diminish both writers and activists. It seeks to reduce the scope, the range, the sweep of what a writer can be. It suggests somehow the writer by definition is to effect a being to come up with a clarity, the explicitness, the reasoning, the passion, the greed, the audacity and if necessary, the vulgarity to publicly take a political position. And conversely, it suggests that the activists occupy the courses, the cruder end of intellectual spectrum that the activists are by profession position takers... And therefore

lacks complexity and sophistication and is instead fuelled by a crude, simpleminded, one-sided understanding of things.<sup>16</sup>

In a corrective mode, Roy rather uses her writing to understand a situation and its problems and present them graphically. She says: “When I write, I write it for myself, not just in order to let people know because writing clarifies things to me” .This personalization of the thematic is part of greater representational artifact that she develops in her textualisation of experiences. She uses her skills in creative writings and explores the gaps, the silences, the ambiguities, the complexities and the contradictions that have no concrete conclusions. As writer - activist, her writings are seen as an influencing factor on the social and political life. In other words, she looks for a reasonable blend between her writerly self and activist concerns. However, the term writer activist seems to come closest to describe her ideological engagements and the nature of identity and for looking into the unstated area in which her works operate simultaneously. In order to graft this process of Roy’s creative blending between issues and imaginations, the thesis tries to study Roy as a writer-activist.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Flamingant Movement was originally initiated by priests in Flanders Under the French occupation in 1792. [www.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/2187576](http://www.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/2187576). Web 28 December 2008

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Rain Crowe, “The New Naturalists” *E journals*. Volume 50 Number 1. Web 20 January 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Danongan Kalamduyan, “Cultural Activism through Kulintang Music” Skyline college.edu/library/oralhist/Eco-Santiago/essay.htm. Web 8 February 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Tess Lewis, “Literature as Resistance” Britannica Online Encyclopedia. [www.britanica.com/bps/additional\\_content/...Literature-As-Resistance](http://www.britanica.com/bps/additional_content/...Literature-As-Resistance). Web 8 February 2009.

<sup>5</sup>“10 most powerful movements: Environment, India Today. [Indiatoday.intoday.index.php?issue=132&id...task](http://Indiatoday.intoday.index.php?issue=132&id...task). Web 15 February 2009.

<sup>6</sup>Ram Chandra Guha, “The World’s First Anti-Dam Movement”. The Hindu Online Edition. Sunday, July 06 2008. Web 10 March 2009.

<sup>7</sup>Arundhati Roy, *The Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi:Penguin Books, 2008) p.16.Print.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.p.18

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.p.208

<sup>10</sup>Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good” *Algebra of Infinite Justice* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002) p.57.Print.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.p.93

<sup>12</sup>Arundhati Roy, “The Colonization of Knowledge” *The Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi:Penguin Books, 2008)p.49.Print.

<sup>13</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Ten Years On” *The Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi:Penguin Books, 2008) p 239.Print.

<sup>14</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Breaking News” *Listening to the Grasshoppers* (New Delhi: Penguin Books,2009) p90.Print

<sup>15</sup>Arundhati Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (New Delhi: Penguin Books,2002) p104.Print

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.p.209

## Chapter II

### Activism and Literature

Activism has always contributed to literature as literature refers to socio-cultural, political and material conditions in which it is produced. The life and work of a number of artists reveal that their physical and emotional participation in people's struggle had sharpened their artistic sensibilities and reflected their ideological stance in their writing. Writer-activists like Toni Cade Bambara used writing as a way to participate in the Black Freedom Struggle. In her words, - 'Writing is one of the ways I do my work in this world'. In her story "Broken field Running" under the collection *The Sea Birds are Still Alive*, (1977) Bambara celebrated the tradition of resistance and attempted to tap Black potential and tried to join the chorus of voices to argue that exploitation and misery are neither inevitable nor necessary. Writing is one of the ways in which she participated in the transformation – one of the ways she articulated her commitment to explore bodies of knowledge for the usable wisdom they yield. Similarly T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1987) is based on a feminist perspective towards the stagnant social status of women (considered as third world inhabitants) in post feminist societies. Minh-ha's work is viewed as similar to Judith Butler's *Dawn*, where also the major

focus is on the changing role of women in today's society. Again, writer and activist Marty Jezer also through his works reflects his deep involvement in the civil rights and anti war movements of the 1960's. He says that works like *On the Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac and *Walden* (1845) by Henry David Thoreau inspired him to be a writer as, he says "I always felt I had something to say and writing is an obvious compensation for a person who stutters."<sup>1</sup> He was a co-founding editor of WIN (Workshop In Nonviolence) magazine, a publication sponsored by the War Resisters League that outlasted the antiwar movement and survived until 1983. He also wrote for other magazines like Ray Mungo's 'Liberation News Service' and Paul Goodman's 'Liberation' magazine. Some of his well known biographies are *Abbie Hoffman: American Rebel* (1992), *Rachel Carson: Biologist and Author* (1988) and his 1982 history of post world war II America, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States (1945 – 1960)*.

It may be mentioned that British writer, Patrick French has earned a reputation as a brilliant historian for his books on the Indian Partition and the biography of Arthur Young Husband. He has also led a life of an idealist for the Tibetan cause as evident in his book *Tibet, Tibet: A Personal History of a Lost Land* (2003). In a likewise manner, Sonia Sanchez who in 1969 was awarded the P.E.N. Writing Award apart from other awards

for writing was very influential part of the Civil Rights Movement. Sanchez was an advocate for the cause of civil and political rights and against racism. She wrote many plays and books that had to do with the struggles and lives of Black Americans. Sanchez has edited two anthologies on Black literature, *We Be Word Sorcerers: 25 stories by Black Americans* (1973) and *360 of Blackness Coming at You* (1990). Thus activism has been an engagement with <sup>the</sup> author who drew inspiration from their activism and vice versa.

Literature has always played an important role in shaping the future of a community, society and the nation as a whole. Literature becomes an agency in the hands of writers to enrich and transform society through myths, legends, folk- tales and culture. In the third world – development of literature was a shift from colonialism to nationalism. Use of English language became important in igniting the mind of the writers. Educated people under the English colonies tried to express their thoughts and ideas through writing. This gave them a sense of nationhood and inspiration for preserving their own culture and tradition. In the early stages of the development of new identities, colonial exploitation compelled people to be assertive and bring about change and writers of the third world started thinking of influencing people through their literary works. Their main purpose was to bring back cultural dignity and to mediate between the old and the new values to

reconstruct and affirm cultural stability of their society. This is evident in Kofi Awoonor of Ghana when he expresses in his book *The Writer in Modern Africa* (1968) that an African writer must be a person who has some kind of perception of the society in which he is living and the way he wants the society to go. Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe also echoes similar concern in defining the role of the writer in society. In his work, '*The Novelist as Teacher*' (1965) he opines that a writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration. Here there is an adequate revolution for him to espouse – to help his society regain belief in itself. James Baldwin, a 20<sup>th</sup> century American author and a civil right activist in his work, *The Price of a Ticket*, (1985) discusses and praises the lasting impact that Lorraine Hansberry ( author and activist playwright and a friend ) had on the American theatre. To Baldwin, Hansberry was not only an artist who was successful in bringing about changes in American theatre, but a witness for the blacks who struggled to breakdown the hindrances and institutions of racism and oppression. Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) displayed for the first time a moving portrayal of African-American life. She was highly devoted to the causes of social development and used her plays to raise important questions on race, politics and culture. In a way she had a great purpose in her use of art to materialize them into action. She had

believed that art contained the energy necessary to produce action which would create social change. Baldwin says that Lorraine Hansburry was a visionary, concerned with the human race that used the theatre as a stage for social activism.

Alice Walker is another well known writer and activist involved in Civil Rights Movement in America. In her work, “We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness” (2006), she writes about her experiences as an activist. Even as a young college girl she had involved herself in registering voters in Georgia and Mississippi. She was also a participant in the famous March on Washington in 1963. She raised her voice against the unjustified war on Iraq. So on 8<sup>th</sup> March, 2003, International Women’s Day on the eve of the Iraq war, Alice Walker along with Marine Hong Kingston, author of *The Women warrior*, (1995) Terry Tempest William, author of *An Unspoken Hunger* (1994) were arrested in the anti-war protest rally outside White House. Walker and five thousand other activists of the organization named “Code Pink” (Peace Organization) and women for peace marched from Malcolm Park in Washington DC to the White House. In an interview with “Democracy Now”, Walker justifies her protest and participation in the following words:

I was with the other women who believe that the women and children of Iraq are just as dear as the women and children in our families, and that in fact, we are family. And so it would feel to me that we were going once to actually bomb ourselves<sup>2</sup>

Her sense of responsibility and commitment did not stop her from writing an open letter to Barack Obama, the then newly elected President of America. Addressing the President as ‘brother Obama’ she wrote “Seeing you take your rightful place, based solely on your wisdom, stamina and character, is a balm for the weary warriors of hope, previously only sung about.”<sup>3</sup> She travelled to Gaza Street along with a group of sixty other female activists from the anti-war group Code Pink in the wake of the controversial Israeli offensive of December 2008 to January 2009.

Another author of rare distinction is none other than Zahida Hina from Pakistan. Hina is a short story writer, a novelist, a columnist and peace activist. She has been involved in both literature and journalism since the age of sixteen. Her writings are of diverse nature. Much of her works challenge the cultural and ideological position of the state, attacking and suppressing women. Some of her works are ‘*Zameer ki Awaaz*’ (Voice of the Conscience), ‘*Pakistani Aurat Aazmaish Ki Nisf Sadi*’ (Pakistani women: 50 years of trial), ‘*Zuban Kay Zakhm*’ ( Lesions of Language: Women in Classical Urdu Poetry ). Some of her short stories are ‘*Qaidi Saans Laita Hai*’ (Prisoner’s Sigh), ‘*Rah Main Ajal*’ (Meeting Death) and her novel ‘*Na*

*Junoon Raha, Na Pari Rahi* (Passions and the Beauty have Fled). Her collections of articles on women's issues titled '*Aurat: Zindagi Ka Zindan*' (Women: Prison of Life ) deals with social issues which involve the manipulation of women in patriarchal society. She is one of the few female writers who dared to refuse the Presidential Pride of Performance. Through her literary works, Hina strives for her commitment towards development of the society in general and empowerment of women in particular. Mention may be made of the exiled Bangladeshi writer Tasleema Nasreen, the author of *Lajja* and a number of fictional and prose work who has risked her life to write fearlessly against fundamentalism and the right to expression.

Activism calls for struggle against war, terror, racism, sexual abuse, suppression and poverty to bring about radical change. Any productive activism tries for transformation and work towards bridging the gap between theory and action. Therefore the relationship between activism and the literary production of writers has to be such that it is capable of giving shape to social and political aspirations of people. Karl Marx in his '*Theses on Feuerbach*' under the Eleventh philosophical note – "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it",<sup>4</sup> is of the opinion that in present world, only radical activism can aim to change the world. The intellectuals and academics who are in the business of

producing jargon packed research should link production of knowledge and societal good. Writers and academicians of today work for the production and promotion of their products. Karl Marx cites the example of the effectiveness of the student movements in the sixties which was successful because the universities and academicians supported and helped students grow with their activist concerns in writing and action. Marx is critical of universities where knowledge is produced and guarded only to be branded and marketed with their rights and names but closed to the world, leaving no contributions to the society. He is of the opinion that the production of knowledge and activism is often funded and capitalized by the business foundations for their own interest. He cites the example of the World Social Forum that was held in Port Alegre – a network of movements from South and the North that had come together to oppose the very global capitalist forces that attempted to divide them. He finds that the academics and activists have traditionally divided theory and practice in the North and the South where theory is produced in the North and practiced in the South. Alf Gunvald Nilsen and Laurance Cox in their paper titled ‘Why do activists need theory?’ (2004) tries to answer these questions with the following statements:

Initially, one becomes ‘activist’ because he finds that something is not right in the world, and more specifically that it cannot be fixed within the normal ‘channels’. To become an activist, then, is to learn that the system does not

‘work’ as it claims, and to move towards the understanding that to achieve change we need to organize and create pressure<sup>5</sup>

Here he dwells on the need for theory within activist experience, and to characterize the ways in which social movements, seeking to transform the world, have found themselves forced to engage in the process both of developing theory to reach beyond their local situation and building links of solidarity with other movements.

Thus the essence of a writer can be reflected through various perspectives. He can also be a critique of national policies which are harmful for the society. We can cite the example of Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the people* (1966) which castigates post-independence Nigeria. Wole Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy* (1973) shows the destruction of an idyllic village community and voices his horror with respect to the Nigerian Civil war. Indian writers like Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable* (1935) *Coolie* (1936) and *The Village* (1939) demonstrate political atrocities under the British rule and social problems in the caste ridden Indian society. We can see here that writers in literature play the role of social reformers through work which calls for activism and change.

During the nineteenth century, the intellectual Indians in the society led the regeneration (development) of national spirit. The western educated elites

began to critically discuss issues in the Indian social system, particularly about the position of women and the caste. Writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in *Raj Mohan's Wife* (1864), Lal Behari Dey in *Govinda Samanta*(1874), K.K. Sinha in *Star of Sikri*(1893), Krupbai Sathiananda in *Ramla: A study of Hindu life*(1894) and Saguna: *A story of Native Christian life*(1895). Shevantibai Nikamlo in *Ratnaba*(1895) deal with the evils of child marriage, contemporary prejudices against women's education and caste system. Novels like *Into the Sun* (1933) by Frata Das depicted the impact of freedom struggle on the social fabric of the country.

And thus, Literature reflects the mood of the nation, its political, economical and social condition through writer's creative use of idioms and phrases. As Saroj Sharma puts it- "Literature is a response to the stimuli of life experiences which he has acquired from his times and the world around him. We can discern through it not only the identity of the artist, but also the essential spirit of life around him". Through his essays – Nirmal Verma explores the perennial human search for humanistic values in literature that struggles against the experience of hegemonic structures imposed by history and society. Literature, Verma says plays a significant role in providing many possibilities of knowing his potential limit of growth into greatness through its portrayal of mythical, religious and secular facets of experiences.<sup>6</sup>

Shashi Deshpande, a noted Indian novelist tries to voice her opinion on the relationship between writing and activism.<sup>7</sup> She says that her writing comes from her confessed angry feelings about the roles that her gender identity seemed to have shut her into, roles which she crafted against. She also feels that writing is a process of discoveries often serendipitous ones, a groping in the dark, during which unexpected gifts falls into her hand, her love of words – inextricably linked to the urge to say something i.e. ideas and words yoked together and it is a symbiotic relationship. So when she writes, she tries to find the soul of the word itself. In this context she finds writing, a self contained activity in pursuit of its own sake. At the same time she accepts the facts that writers have written to express their anguish about social problems and their work is often intimately connected to human feeling. She cites the example of Toni Cade Barbara's writing as "participating in the struggle" or of celebrating the "tradition of resistance" to her specific situation of being a coloured and a woman. In her opinion, personal reasons often trigger off the writing. The writer first sets out on a personal and solitary quest. She talks of writers who are activists as well; she attributes their activities as part of their personal agenda as they see the subject of their work through human lives. Deshpande is also of the opinion that a writer sieves through the ambiguities,

complexities and contradiction often without conclusions. So what really matters is understanding and reconciliation of this fact.

Deshpande is critical of the writers of the present day as she opines that writing today is not only a self indulgent, but also a self-promoting activity. A writer's voice is lost in the cacophony of voices through the politicians, journals, celebrities and media. She has her reservations on literary awards and sees them as poisons destroying the strength of literature, which comes from the direct response of readers to the writing. Hence most writers do not have the confidence in themselves and in their ability to play any role. In her opinion, writing alone cannot change anything. It needs collective voices to make it effective enough to build up a movement. It is through giving expressions to human feelings that the writer becomes a part of a movement for social change. She cites the example of Mary Wollstonecraft's work *A Vindication of the Rights of women* (1792) not recognized for many years. So a writer needs to work as a community. She refers to the success of the Dalit movement which reflects collective voices. Lastly she concludes that there is a role which writers can play; that is to give voice to the voiceless, to speak on behalf of the people who cannot articulate their ideas or feelings.<sup>8</sup>

Roy also imagined of the feasibility of the variety of roles that writers and activists can slip into. As Kim Well (Another Author –Activist) says that

internet and her website is also another kind of place for activism because community-building is possible in the internet which can be a forum for solidarity. According to her, what the third wave feminist has most is the choice to be many different kinds of women. In her opinion feminism is simply the desire to have a 'choice to truly be equal'. Everything else falls in line behind that struggle, when one gets down to it. As she says:

Activism is both political and personal as the old saying goes. On a daily basis I switch between being a mom, a wife, a college professor and a writer. I see no restriction in mixing all of those roles; for me, feminism guarantees the choice to everything.<sup>9</sup>

She asserts herself as an activist by accident through a sideline. And so she does not need to march up to Washington DC but she works to change society for the better. According to her, transformation of the world takes place in small unexpected ways and one of the ways that activism can take place is on the internet. Arundhati Roy too uses all her ways and means to get her voice across the society. Her essays and articles are read and reviewed by all; general readers, scholars and academicians alike.

To study Arundhati Roy as a writer-activist, we can see these traits from various angles. There are many instances where the activist in Roy is predominantly displayed. She states:

I am called a writer-activist because after writing *The God of Small Things* I wrote three political essays. The truth is that fiction is my big love. But often you are in a situation where it is very hard especially because I live in India; not to intervene immediately when someone is shot or police have opened fire... we have the greater custodial death in the world...<sup>10</sup>

Here Roy tries to assert and justify her relationship with her literary activism. Roy started her career as a screen writer for the film *In which Anne gives it to those Ones* (1988) Even as a child, Roy had great interest in reading and writing and allowed her flow of thoughts without any restriction. It is perhaps because she had studied in her mother's Corpus Christi School which had western style of imparting education. It would also be because of her own experience as a child from a broken family, the amount of social stigmas that her sibling had to go through which made her aware of the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged that made her look into the world around her with minute details. Roy took up Architecture as her major subject which developed her skill in her graphic like presentation in writing. As a student in Delhi University she went through tough days as she tried to be independent and earn her own living. Her works on T.V. serial entitled 'Bargad' (The Banyan Tree) was nipped in the bud due to financial problems. Her screenplay for the film '*The Electric Moon* (1992)" was also a failure. Roy also tried her hand into journalism which kept her keen and agile to the world around her as reflected in her essays like '*The Afghan War*' or her

scathing review of Shekhar Kapur's film '*Bandit Queen*' where she charged Kapur for misrepresenting Phoolen Devi's real life experiences. Roy also had her share of tussle with the Supreme Court landing her into many controversies. Roy's only fictional novel *The God of Small Things* brought her to the limelight with great success. The book is an infusion of feeling experiences crafted meticulously and it reveals a myriad layer of possible interpretation. Shirley Chew points out the substance of the book when she says- "Some of Roy's finest touches spring from her skill at registering the unutterable terrors lodged below the surface of everyday things, in particular the terrors, which take hold of the children. *The God of Small Things* is cleverly crafted, often witty and moving first novel by a talented new writer." (Times Literary Supplement, May 30, 1997:23)

The novel is shaded in layers of meaning which has regional as well as universal, political and domestic themes which cross boundaries and restrictions of thoughts. Roy does this with the depiction of her characters in the background of socio, political and economical condition of that time. Ammu's unspoken and forbidden love for Velutha, the untouchable, the incestuous union of dizygotic twins, which can be taken as the unexpressable silent desire of the subaltern. Her rebellious attitude and her unspoken assertion bring about the spring of liberation from the conventional set up in

the society she lived. In other words through these characters, Roy's streaks of activism is presented in subtle shades here.

In India Roy's novel received mixed reactions. She had to bear the brunt of the communist government in her own state Kerala. Academicians like C.D.Narasimhaiah, Ramchandra Guha and Rukmini Bhaya Nair found the book as faulty and termed that it was based on Roy's mere 'feeling of words' and her consequent failure to 'mediate' experience.<sup>11</sup> Veteran critique and scholar Sukumar Azhikode expressed his discontent in the following manner-  
"She is a prisoner of reality and triviality... though there is nothing artificial about her *Ayemenem*, everything about is superficial."<sup>12</sup>

To her respite, she is equally praised by novelist like M.Mukundan who said that she has included all the right ingredients in the correct doses whether it is about sexual perversion,communism,the caste system...all in correct doses. In spite of the heavy doses of criticism on her plate, one must acknowledge that Roy's achievement brought about new importance to Indian writing in English at the international arena. She is able to gain this skill with her unpretentious tenacity and full exploitation of her flair for writing effectively that evoked emotions and feelings. She has made the Queens English sing and swing to the rhythm of the lives in the *Ayemenem*

house and its locality. She plays all kinds of acrobatics with the words and sentence construction to give it a typical flavour to the surroundings of Ayemenem. Availing all the flexibilities of post modern writer she uses her knowledge and insight in skillfully crafting the story of *The God of Small Things*. One can agree with Jason Cowley (one of the five Booker Prize judges) when he justifies his selection of Roy's *The God of Small Thing*' over others when he says

*The God of Small Things* fulfills the highest demand of the art of fiction: to see the world, not conventionally or habitually but as if for the first time. Roy's achievement is considerable, is never to forget about the small things in life, the insects and flowers, wind and water, the outcasts and the despised. She deserved to win.<sup>13</sup>

Arundhati Roy's literary contribution lies in making people **think** and not just bear witness. She in her writing often pricks the conscience of the reader, the forces, and the leaders of the nation who formulate policies that are suitable to them. She brings about awareness to the common people through her writing, their rights as citizens of democratic country. The importance of Roy's writing brings forth the unique interconnection between writing and activism. Award winning Australian writer Eva Sallis says that a writer is neither exactly private nor exactly expert. A writer can do his or her best to represent, communicate and develop an emotional bond with the people.<sup>14</sup> Another Australian writer Bridgid Rooney in his latest work *Literary Activist: Writer, Intellectual and Australian Public Life* (2008) deals with

interweaving aspect of writers and their activism. It gives us insights into the life of activist, public-intellectual career and writings of Judith Wright, Patrick White, Oodgeroo, Les Murray, Helen Garner, David Malouf Tim Winton. It explores the intimate connection between writers and their activism and asks what this reveals about the future of Australian literature. It is often said that the writers use their literary writing to bring about social problems and ways for change.

Tim Winton is another such writer (mentioned above) who uses his writing as a platform to bring about action and activism. He justifies that his sense of social responsibility and his concern for the environment that give him the right to speak. He uses his position as a writer to communicate to the people which other ordinary person may not have the privilege to do. His writings have influenced and inspired the common people to think of protecting the environment from all kinds of corruption and pollution. His writings act as a mouthpiece for the people who can feel and understand the problems of the environment and the eco system but cannot articulate it in public. In various ways each of these writers saw that the subject matter of their writing is to reach out to the common masses and the leaders and the government alike. Their writing and engagement was for bringing about change and better policies and better life, no matter how much they had to

face the critics for their writing. They leave behind activism through literature worthy of emulation.

When Roy started writing non-fiction, it was her conscious effort to use her public stage as a writer to probe, enquire and question the national policy of the government on various issues. She openly criticizes the policies of the US in dealing with war and on India's relationship with USA which she predicts as a disaster. She is a critique of India's neo-liberal industrialization and development programmes like the Sardar Sarovar Project with Dam building across the Narmada River. She is equally critical of Indian government's suppressive policy in dealing with affairs of Jammu and Kashmir. She is snared at by the politicians and the elite alike for her support for 'Azadi' Kashmiri cause. She opines that 'Azadi' is the only thing the Kashmiris want. And so denying them freedom would be a delusion and would lead to committing political suicide. In a likewise manner she mocks at the Indian establishment and their capitalist respond to the 9 November attack in Mumbai in her article- '9 IS Not 11' and November isn't September. (Outlook, 22<sup>nd</sup> December,2008, p.38). Her voice of dissent also reaches across the shores of the island nation and India's neighbor Sri Lanka. She openly criticizes the Sri Lankan government for all the inhuman atrocities which brought the Tamils endless sufferings without any ray of

hope for their future. Through her political essays and speeches Arundhati Roy has managed to emerge as a central activist voice in anti-globalization movement. In the process she expects and invites evocative and action oriented responses from her arguments about economic, political and social problems.

*The Briefing* (2008) is Arundhati Roy's second fiction after *God of Small Things*. The story is written in an allegorical form. Through the story about missing gold and snow wars taking place in the Alps region, Roy presents a powerful fable about climate change, the war on Terror and the Corporate World. The backdrop of the story is a fort that **has never been attacked** is allegorical representation of Capitalism. She talks of how the effects of global warming change the marketing strategies (Policy of opportunity) of the Corporate World. Since the onset of snow melting taking place all over the globe due to global warming there is setbacks in business of skiing holiday. Various companies are involved in cut throat competitions in producing artificial snow to run the business. Each company has its own brand and suitable slogan. Brand like 'Mountain White Snow' is made from protein located in the membrane of bacterium called 'Pseudomonas Syringae'. The companies advertise that the 'Mountain White Snow' is different from other ordinary snow as it is directly taken from the drinking water network.

Hence free from water born disease. 'Mountain White Snow' is owned by corporate giants like Guenther Holzhausen. Another brand of snow is 'Scent n' Sparkle', a new product by Peter Holzhausen. 'Scent n' Sparkle' promises whiter and brighter snow that comes with fragrance. It promises to satisfy tourists who want to go for skiing and have good time.

Roy goes into the details of artificial snow making and the kind of destruction it can bring in the end. Artificial snow is generated by treating nucleated water in high pressure power-intensive snow canon at high speed. When the snow is ready, it is stacked in mounds called 'whales.' These snow whales are groomed, tilled and fluffed before the snow is eventually spread on the slopes that have been shaved of imperfection. Soil is then covered with a thick layer of fertilizer to keep the soil cool and insulate it from the warmth generated by hot snow. So every holiday resort in the Alps has a snow canon to produce artificial snow. The snow wars have spread its tentacles to the planes as well. Like 'Mountain White Snow' brand has dominated the market in Dubai and Saudi Arabia. Negotiations are on for setting up its branches in China and India too. In a likewise manner, the other brand 'Scent 'n' Sparkle' has also multiplied its business source. In the backdrop of all this happening is the picture of the fort which has never been attacked. Through this fable Roy gives us the terrible predicament of doomsday when this

beautiful earth will be sucked up in corruption, chaos, pollution and destruction. The fort is a symbol of mother earth which carries the burden of unimaginable imbalance in nature and destruction caused by men. Roy sees the future of this earth when it may not be able to bear the burden anymore and shrink into rubbles. Nevertheless she leaves a ray of hope that perhaps after the destruction of everything there will be snow again in the mountain just like the phoenix which rises from its ashes.

In her another work (Collection of Essay) *Listening to the Grasshopper: Field Notes on Democracy* (2009). Roy talks of Genocide as being an human habit that is in search for Lebensraum, (Living Space, Dominant Human Species). Here Roy traces the origin of genocides in different parts of the world and the genocides committed in India like the one in 2002, Godhra Massacre in Gujarat and the Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984.

Roy in her essay entitled “Mr. Chidambaram’s War” attacks the working of government policies on the naxalite problems and critical of it for unduly branding them as terrorist organization. She highlights the extreme condition of poverty and hardships that the tribals of Orissa, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh live.

Roy is skeptical and critical of the governmental position on operation Green Hunt as a declaration of war against the Maoist rebels. She seeks a conflict resolution between government and anti-establishment organizations like the Maoists urging the government to see the rebel's point of view. She cites the examples of peasants of Singur who are deprived of their farming land, the dalits in various parts of the country who are fighting for the survival of their dignity, the weavers, the homeless and the oppressed workers who are fighting for their justice. These are people who are deprived of their rights by the policies of the government and also exploited on economic grounds. So it is not in annihilating one rebel group that peace can be restored. She asks- "Is it because they are striking back for their survival?...Is it not their birth right to retain what is theirs or fight for what is being taken away?"

Roy in her typical razor sharp language brings to the attention of the plight and suffering of the Dongria Khond tribe of Orissa for whom the hills and forest are their homes for generations. They are born and nurtured in these hills and forests and depend on it for many reasons. But when these hills are destroyed and mined to collect the bauxite they contain, they are left with no option to live. These mining corporations she argues are owned by the Indian billionaires who live outside India and do not know the nuances, the customs

and tradition of the tribals and do not have any consideration for their affairs. She puts up her argument in a logical manner. She says that if the flat-topped hills are destroyed, the forest that cloth them will be destroyed too. This will be followed by the destruction of the river and streams that flow out of them to irrigate the plain below. And it is not only the case of Dongria tribe getting destroyed but all the people who live in the forested areas of India where similar mining takes place. She also snaps at the snobbish people living in the cities who do not feel the heat of the sufferings of the tribals for whom forest and hills are like their god, their source of existence.

Roy also gives a sociological argument for the uprising of tribal guerrillas. They are made up of mostly poor desperate tribal people living in desperate condition of hunger and starvation. They are people who do not have the access to education, health care or legal redress. They are people who for decades have been exploited by the small businessmen, money lenders and land lords. So their only way to regain their dignity is to fight back. So if they have taken up arms it is because they have for long felt neglected and subjected to exploitation and suppression. So in a way she rationalizes the causes for their war against the government and questions the naming of such groups as terrorists. Here perhaps even Edward Said would agree with Roy in

his influential work *Orientalism*, criticizes the western notion of the Middle East and the Asian countries when he says:

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight over statement to say that Moslem and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arabs-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialised caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar line Roy would urge the government to understand the condition of the naxalite problems of Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh. Roy equally blames the news media for putting up slogan against the Maoist terrorism instead of focusing on their problems and possible solutions. Roy accuses the government for its inability to rehabilitate thousands of displaced people in Narmada in the name of developmental project.

Roy with her exceptional analytical skill reveals the values and the free market policy of the government and the corporate companies on the wealth (bauxite) of the mountain. For the tribals, the mountains are the living deity, the source of their faith and living, their natural developing place to which the corporate would take it as a storage facility. So there comes a point when an agreement has to be made between the corporate companies and the tribals

who do not wish to give away their source of living. The companies then resort to all kinds of mechanism to make them agree. For all these purposes the government helps the companies even if there is violence outbreak. In a similar manner the iron ores of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand are mined and sold to the corporate world by the government, all in the name of development. She says that beauty of the forest is enhanced by the large number of tribals living in it, a sanctuary of nature. So it becomes a matter of concern when the dwelling places of the tribals are destroyed in the name of developmental projects. Many of the corporate companies are in steep neck competition in the homeland of the adivasis to bring about destruction and doom in the entire eco-system as a whole. Roy is therefore a very strong critic of the development discourse of the Government. There would also be enormous wastage of money and resources for crushing rebellions if an amicable climate of dialogue is not established. If not taken care, Roy predicts, there would be huge losses in terms of life and property. It will have its adverse effects on the country also as a whole. Roy sees a doomsday when there will be a huge gap between the rich and the poor and it will come to such a pass that the buying and selling of weapons of destruction like guns will be a common feature. And in the process whether it is the army fighting

against the rebels or the civilian fighting against the terrorist; it is the poor who will die in the violence.

In the end of her essay, Roy hints at a possible solution i.e. negotiation which is perhaps one thing that keeps the world going. She also urges the Indian representatives for common sense at the climate talk conference on global warming and reduction of emission. She jibes at the Indian delegates who vouch for environmental preservation and practice the opposite at home. She request them to mind their business at home in India (practicing) by letting the bauxite in the mountains and the iron ores in their natural base .because charity begins at home.

Roy's skill as a fictional author have enabled her to produce a reflexive writing which probes the reader leave a space to share in her process of analyzing and findings beyond the surface level of things which support and vouch for activism. According to her, the fact that she is called as a writer-activist is because she cares and dares to take sides in her essays. She says-"I have a point of view. What's worse, I make it clear that I think right and moral to take that position and what even worse, use everything in my power to flagrantly solicit support for that position."<sup>17</sup> She also asserts that her approach is different from political party ideologue when she says, "when I tell a story, I tell it not as an ideologue who wants to pit one absolute

ideology against another, but as a story teller who wants to show her way of seeing.”<sup>18</sup> There is no reason, she asserts why writers should be ambiguous, for intellectuals and artist to take sides. So, Roy by using the technique of storytelling invites her reader to deconstruct the intricate power system and find means to alter it and affect change. She refuses to compromise on issues like gender, caste and globalization, nor does she hesitate to criticize the hyperbolic claims of any ideology but tries unmask those areas where people are oppressed and exploited even after professing ideology. When talking about Narmada, she says that displacement and dispossession of the people of Narmada is a barbaric and inhuman beyond human dignity. The people of the valley have taken up non-violent protest and have become symbols of a global struggle against what they claim to be an unjust form of development. Roy joined the NBA protest and she became a public figure to lend her voice for subdued and suppressed and oppressed people of the valley. All this issues find manifestation in her essay collection “The Cost of Living” Problems of resettlement policies of the government, low and unequal cash compensation which have made many adivasis destitute who are left with no other alternative to fend for them.

Roy joined the people of the Narmada valley as a novelist who uses her writings in essays to engage the reader not by detailed descriptions of poverty

or indebt interviews with the people but allow the reader to understand the use of power, the brutalities of power in the name of development. Roy through the literary technique of metaphor and irony express the contradictions in existing government policies. In her arguments she tries to find the unholy connection between religious fundamentalism, nuclear nationalism and the pauperization of the whole population because of corporate globalization. She uses all her skills in maneuvering, to get her voice across the common people who have access to the latest information on technology. With her presence at the Rally for the valley she used her public position as a well known writer to contribute to the anti-globalization movement with all its baggage full of evils and destructions. Roy's writings are translated into many languages. They appear in Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, Bengali and Assamese in India and in other parts of English speaking world. Since most of her essays and articles are of global themes, they find space for wider reading public. This is her effort and way of reaching out to the masses and appeal for activism.

In her journey as a well known writer and activist Roy has faced all kinds of brickbats from her peers, critics, academicians and political establishments alike. Activist writers around the world face similar cases. Some of the worth mentioning activist writers facing harassment and threat are

Colombian playwright and activist Patricia Ariza, Peruvian student poet Mellisa Patino and Mexican authors and journalist Lydia Chacho and Sanjuana Martinez Montemayor. Patricia Ariza is a renowned playwright, dramatist, poet, actress, political and human right activist. She has been harassed since 2008 including an alleged investigation seeking to link her with the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) guerilla group. Lydia Chacho is an author, journalist, women right activist and winner of the 2008 Tucholsky Prize from Swedish Pen and the 2007 Oxfam/Novib Pen Award for free Expression. Following the publication of her book on Child Abuse and Pornography rings in Cancun, *Loss Demonios Del Eden: el Poder detras de la pornografia* (The Demons of Eden: the Power behind Pornography) in 2005. Chacho was illegally arrested and detained, physically ill treated and threatened with rape and death. Her ordeal reportedly took place on the orders of Mario Marin, Governor of the state of Puebla, in coalition with Kamel Nacif Borge, a Puebla businessman implicated in her book.

Similarly writer Sanjuana Martinez Monte Mayor has reportedly suffered harassment including death threats for writing about the alleged links between child sexual abuse and the Catholic Church in Mexico. In the publication of her book *El Manto Purpura* (Purple Cloak) which documents

alleged abuses which had apparently been covered up by the Catholic Church authorities in Mexico and United States. She was also fired from Monterrey based newspaper 'Milenio' because of the publication of an article criticizing the federal government's handling of the death of a 72 year old indigenous woman who allegedly died after being gang raped by Mexican soldiers. One knows the fate of the Bangladeshi writer Tasleema Nasreen who is still in exile.

Arundhati Roy also faces all kinds of similar criticism from many departments. Some of her detractors even called her as 'Language Terrorist' who exploits her language skill to terrorize about terrorism. Her defiance of the Supreme Court's verdict on Narmada Bachao Andolan she was treated as the 'other woman' and they termed her as the 'Hooker who won the Booker'. In spite of all this set back, Roy continues to write to expose the hypocrisy, injustice and suppression in various fields. For her writing was about bridging the gap between thinking and language. Since all her writing has to have a political dimension, reaching her inner self was more necessary and by doing so touching the lives of others, thus writing was activism, but not the other way around. Roy says that a writer should not be used by the language but use the language to get back to what she wants to convey. English is the language of the people who can speak, who can articulate and

who have the power. So she uses the language of the empire to get back to the empire and demolish the empire. In her speech in Ferrara in October 2007 her paper on Literature, 'A World of Stories: Narrative and journalism' Arundhati Roy says:

I am not so sure about the space between fiction and the other kind of my writing, but none of my writing fiction or nonfiction is something that comes out as a policy decision... When I had written the 'God of Small Things' in 1997, then came the Booker that was a period when we were beginning a journey in India, the Hindu nationalist right wing had come in the government, in 1998 there was the nuclear test which was celebrated with the kind of sexual orgy of pride... at that time I was the darling of the middle classes, that I had made India proud. I saw that I had a platform, a space to raise a voice of dissent. I knew that to say something will be political, without being political. I can't say anything still to allow them to go on was something terrible for me and so I wrote *End of Imagination* it was my dissent.<sup>19</sup>

Roy's range and understanding of social and political issues are remarkable perhaps because of her mixed genetic and activist upbringing, the influence of having a mother who was also an activist. But Roy has also on her own developed a very sharp capacity for political analysis with which she has matured over the years. This finds reflection particularly in her political essays which is being discussed in the next Chapter.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Journalist, Political Activist and Author Marty Jezer.

[http://www.martyjezer/activist\\_author](http://www.martyjezer/activist_author). Web 12 January 2010.

<sup>2</sup>Democracy Now, Interview with Alice Walker by Amy Goodman, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2009. alice Walker wn.com\_walker

<sup>3</sup>Democracy Now, Interview with Alice Walker by Amy Goodman, 14<sup>th</sup> November 2008. www.democracynow.org/features/alice\_walker

<sup>4</sup>Karl Marx, "On Activism", Ahilan Kadirgmar-*LINES* August, 2002. Web 30 May 2009. [http://issues.lines-magazine.org/Art\\_Aug02/Ahilan.htm](http://issues.lines-magazine.org/Art_Aug02/Ahilan.htm)

<sup>5</sup>Nilson Gunwald Alf, Laurence Cox. "Why do activist need theory" 2004. <http://www.euromovement.info/html/index/htm>. Web 14 March 2010.

<sup>6</sup>Nirmal Verma-E Notes.com Reference  
www.enotes.com/topic/nirmal\_verma

<sup>7</sup>Shashi Despande, "The Writer as Activist". *Literary Review. Hindu online Edition*, Sunday July 6, 2003. Web 26 October 2009.

<sup>8</sup>Shashi Despande, "The Writer as Activist". *Literary Review. Hindu online Edition*, Sunday July 6, 2003. Web 26 October 2009.

<sup>9</sup>Kim Well, "This IS Feminism:A Third Wave Women Writer And The 500 Pounds of the Internet".Speech at the author!author book festival.Shreveport, LA July 2008.

<sup>10</sup>Arundhati Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002) p196. Print

<sup>11</sup>Nair, Rukmini Bhaiya. "Twins and Lovers." Review of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. *Biblio* (May 1997): p.4-6

<sup>12</sup> Rangarao Bhongle, ed. *Inside View- Native Response to Contemporary Indian*

*English Novel.* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2003) p.107.

<sup>13</sup> Cowley, Jason, "Why We Chose Arundhati?" *India Today*. December 27, 1997

(<http://www.Indiaaj.com/aaj/india/index/html?campaign=timesofindia>).

<sup>14</sup> Adair Jones, "Literary Activism" <http://www.adairjones.wordpress.com>.  
Web 14 March, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards W. Said, "Islam Through Western Eyes," *The Nation*, April 26, 1998, first posted January, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Arundhati Roy, "Mr. Chitambaram's War" *Outlook*, 9 November, 2009, p.34

<sup>17</sup> Arundhati Roy, "The Ladies have feelings, so.." *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002) p.197. Print.

<sup>18</sup> Arundhati Roy, "Come September", *An Ordinary Person's Guide to the Empire*. (New Delhi: Penguin, Viking, 2005) p.14. Print.

<sup>19</sup> Kalpana Writers: Sunil Deepak: Arundhati Roy's speech in Ferrara, October, 2007

[http://www.kalpana.it/eng/writer/sunil\\_deepak/arundhati\\_roy.htm](http://www.kalpana.it/eng/writer/sunil_deepak/arundhati_roy.htm).

### Chapter III

#### The Algebra of Infinite Justice and Roy's Political Essays

Arundhati Roy's writings got prominence within the spectrum of Indian writing in English after her much hyped novel, *The God of Small Things* received the Booker Prize in 1997. It is very rare that a single novel, that too for a first time writer attains such prominence, adding a new dimension to the literary world. The Euphoria that she brought with her fiction made writers, academicians and critics alike to find a field to explore.

Her writing brought a breath of fresh air into the literary arena. She chose to travel the path, less taken by the writers. One observation is that she managed to outshine her peers because of the new dimension she brought in the literary arena by the skillful use of her language which brought her winning edge. The *God of Small Things* is a novel written at the backdrop of Aeyemenem, Roy's native place in Kerala with the Communist political climate existing at that time. The story deals with feelings and experiences crafted meticulously by the author who seems to have the personal passion for the harmonious design. So when it flows down the mind of the reader, it reveals the ripples of unspoken realm of human nature which remain a universal mystery in life. The novel is wrapped in layers of possible meaning which has regional as well as universal, political and domestic themes which cross barriers of thoughts. Roy is able to do this with the

depiction of her characters at the backdrop of socio, political and economical condition of the time. In the process it brings out her rebellious attitude and her unspoken assertion, manifesting further how desire for liberation can spring from a very ordinary strata of the society that experiences suppression of freedom for a long time. In other words, through the characters Roy's streaks of activism come alive without being very propagandist.

As mentioned earlier, in *The God of Small Things* she made the English language dance to the tune of her pen that brought rhythm to the lives in the Ayemenem house and its locality. She plays all kinds of gymnastic with the words and sentence construction to give it a typical flavor to the images of the surroundings. Availing all the flexibilities of the post modern writers, she uses her knowledge and insights in skillfully crafting the story of the novel.

Arundhati Roy plunged into writing political essays after one year of basking in the glory of the *God of Small Things*. For almost a year she went around the world promoting her book. On returning she began her journey of political writing which she felt was a conscious effort and immediate response to the happenings in India and the world.

Using her celebrity position as a writer, she began to raise her activist voice on several issues. With the Booker Prize she had become the darling of the

Indian middle class. So it had given her a platform to voice her dissent on various unjustified issues on social and political problems. In her first essay entitled “The End of imagination” after the Booker Prize, Roy emerged as a critique of Indian Government’s nuclear policies. In this essay she argues against India’s nuclear test and nuclearisation and the arm race that is sweeping the world over. She satirizes upon the reaction and the euphoria made by the ruling government after the successful test at Phokhran on 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1998.<sup>1</sup> Moreover she reveals through her essay the short-sightedness of the government to think that nuclearisation of India will make it richer, better and powerful. In her opinion it is a kind of retardation on common sense, gross ignorance on the part of the government and the scientists alike to ignore the result of nuclear testing and the use of nuclear weapons. She aptly states, “once again we are pitifully behind time – not just scientifically and technologically, but more pertinently in our ability to grasp the true nature of nuclear weapons. Our comprehension of the Horror Department is hopelessly obsolete.”<sup>2</sup>

So Arundhati Roy feels that with the advancement of science and technology, men have chosen to have a blurred vision of things like nuclear war, which can bring about a catastrophe to the humanity. It will be an end to imagination of things. She criticizes the government for its blunder and wasting energy, resources and money on nuclear tests and weapons production. In her opinion it

could be foolish on the part of the leaders to think that the stock of atom bomb will bring to an end to terrorism. Her protesting voice rings aloud against the colossal production of weapons of mass destruction which could cause immeasurable miseries in the world. And this would not only undermine human existence but will affect the environment and the eco system. She states :

If there is a nuclear war, our foe will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the 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.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar manner she trivializes the ideas of a deterrent theory and terms it as a perilous joke where iodine pills are prescribed as a prophylactic for nuclear irradiation. Roy pays her tribute to the endless mass resistance movements, peace organizations and social and human right activist leaders who have courageously opposed to the use of nuclear arms. Roy gives out an apocalyptic view on the future nuclear-weapons and its markets spreading like the several tentacles of the octopus. Now that India and Pakistan are nuclear countries, it will not take long for the octopus to extend its infectious arms towards other nations like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Nepal Bhutan or any other second and third world countries. She foresees a time when nuclear technology will be available in the market and to survive the steep competition, prices would come down and the availability of arms would be a normal case. As a result there will be

constant fear among the public and possibly one country will be threatening the other. So, according to her in this man-made uncontrolled violence, fear psyche will engulf the human system and that they will die several deaths before real death due to nuclear warfare.

Roy's shrilling voice of protest against the nuclear test finds its manifestation in her writing. In her opinion India's nuclear bomb is a betrayal on the part of the government on its people. It is one of the most anti-democratic, anti-national, anti-human, outright evil things that man has invented. She questions the right of any man to destroy everything that is human which includes the earth, the skies, the mountains, the rivers, the cities and the villages. Roy's clarity of mind and clear sense of judgment does not make her timid but bold and confident in her statements. She asserts, "If protesting against having nuclear bomb implanted in my brain is anti-Hindu and anti-national, then I secede. I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic."<sup>4</sup> These are utterances which can place a writer of her caliber in a risky situation, but Roy as typical of her kind does not hesitate in taking a position. To her keeping silence on these serious issues would be accepting defeat without even putting up a fight. To her it is better to stand up and say something at least for the sake of the future generation whose voice may die away even before they manage to utter. While putting her in awkward and controversial situations these strong political

statements by the author has also earned her admirers. One cannot but admire the immense courage of authors like Roy and therefore she has admirers all over the world who are as many if not more than her detractors.

Roy's activist voice reaches out to the valley of Narmada and merges with the protest movement of the Adivasis and the downtrodden whose life has been sent to the brink of despair and dismay. All her endeavor in giving a voice to the muted makes her an author who is completely committed to the uplift of the less privileged. She takes up the position of the subaltern who has no right to speak. In the essay 'The Greater Common Good', Roy breaks down the traditional notion of Dam building as the "temple of modern development" which is based on hegemonic viewpoints, carried down the centuries by the leaders of the colonial nations.<sup>5</sup> Dam building was taken as a scheme with the celebrated notion of building a nation. She researches upon dam building projects in the world to find factual realities. And with her findings she manages to dismantle the illusion and calls for awakening on the part of the leaders, governments and the nation as a whole. As a matter of fact she comes to the conclusion that big dams have not benefited the common people. Dam building industry in the first world countries have almost ceased to function. So they have exported it to the third world who according to Roy is often the recipient of the first world's obsolete items, like outdated weapons, aircraft, banned medicines and pesticides

of which India is a major importer. She tries to open the eye of the readers to make them aware of the slow pace of development India made in the agricultural sector in spite of the government spending crores' in the irrigation sector. She reveals that dam building projects have not improved the life of people but resulted in national calamities like flood and famine due to sand sediments in the agricultural lands. As a reader one is inclined to agree with her, when she points out that the government of India has all the detailed figure for the millions of food grains and the edible oils that India has produced since 1947, but the government does not have any figure or record for the number of people that have been displaced by the dam project and sacrificed in the name of national progress. She takes up the commonsensical question, "How can you measure progress if you don't know what it cost and who has paid for it?" The people who have gone through the ravage of displacement are not the high-class or the middle class but are the dreg of the society , who are deprived of their rights even before they are born. They are the Adivasis, the Dalits and others belonging to other under privileged classes of the society. Their abject poverty has driven many of them into selling their own babies for living. She shakes up the world's great democracy with mocking tone. She highlights about the farmlands and forest of the Adivasis have turned into sand beds making it impossible to grow any food crops. To fill their hunger, they flock to the urban areas to work as

cheap construction laborers and are made to live in dreadful condition. The unemployed gather themselves in groups in the streets and city centers and wait for the rich employers to give them labor. The reader is made to realize through these images, the psychological trauma and the physical handicaps of these unskilled labourers, who are not used to the restricted, congested and polluted urban life. They are emotionally routed and forcefully disconnected from their natural surroundings. They are compelled to adjust to the new surroundings to which they are alien. To illustrate the poignancy of the situation she uses comparative images when she states, "It's like using a pair of hedge-shears to trim an infant's fingernails. You can't do it without shearing its fingers off."<sup>6</sup>Roy's scathing attack makes both leaders and government uneasy. She argues that the millions of displaced people in India due to dam construction are refugees in an unacknowledged war

Roy also strongly disagrees with the idea that India lives in the villages, as parroted by conventional politicians before every election. According to her, India dies in the villages because she gets the maximum kicking around in her villages. And India's villages live only to serve the cities. So towards the end of the essay she declares that the war for the Narmada valley is not just some exotic tribal war, or a remote rural war. It's a war for the rivers and the mountains and the forest of the world. From Ecological point of view,

dam building causes floods, water logging, salinity and the spread of various diseases. In all these Roy sees through the contradictory policies of the government framed up in beautiful noble-sounding clauses and seemingly democratic in flavour. In her opinion big dams and nuclear bombs are both weapons of mass destructions and so all should join hands to arrest this monster that devours people, their livelihoods and their living environments in the name of development.

In *Power Politics*, Roy brings alive Rumpelstiltskin, a character in European folklore to create an image of power-hungry political and corporate world. Roy tries to illustrate how power corrupts man and his real purpose of serving humanity vanishes along the way, making him unconscious to the pain and miseries around him. Rumpelstiltskin is a powerful and heartless man, who takes advantage of a helpless and miserable woman. The favour he does to the woman is only on condition suitable to him. The woman he helps out is left with a condition that she would give him her first born child. So in the name of bailing out the miserable woman, she is made to sacrifice what is dear to her, her child, her source of happiness. Roy compares the helpless women to India and the powerful little man (Rumpelstiltskin) to America who makes all kinds of political deals with little option for India. America plays the role of the powerful little gnome in interfering in the affairs of the world. Roy alleges America as the

progenitor of wars, manufacturer of arms and ammunition, whose sole aim is to conquer the emerging markets, acquire the maximum profits at the cost of the third world nation. His love for power and greed is sarcastically put in by Roy when she states that:

He has a bank account heart, a television eye and a newspaper nose in which you only see what he wants you to see and read only what he wants you to read...It ranges across seas and continents, sometimes majestic and universal, sometimes confining and local.<sup>7</sup>

Roy cites several examples where America's selfish designs get manifested in unsuspecting ways. One such example is the speech delivered at the World Water Forum Convention in Holland by Bill Clinton, the then President of America. Clinton's speech touched upon women's empowerment, people's participation but the real purpose of the meeting was to work out of a possibility for the privatization of the world's Water System. She is anguished at the thought of 'water' which is supposed to be one of the most available sources in the world is priced at market value. Roy's argument scales down to India where dam builders try to control public water policies. She reasons out that seventy percent of India lives in rural areas and their lives depend on the natural resources. To take away all these resources and to sell out as private companies is a barbaric act on the part of the government.

In a similar vein Roy takes on India's electricity policy on Enron plant where America receives the maximum benefits along with the few rich Indians. Enron venture as a matter of fact has never reached out to the masses. She compares the expensive Enron plant to an albatross on the neck of Maharashtra government. She virtually mocks at the Enron contract as the 'Sweet heart deal', a rape without redress. She brings to our notice the similar stories about various schemes and developmental programs which caused the government with loses and wastage of public fund and resources. In all these endeavors of the capitalist game, the poor are the most affected and they are at the receiving end of the miseries caused by the rich and the powerful. Hence Roy calls for participation and activism to bring about changes in the system and anticipates revision of strategies and policies. She invites everyone to help bury Rupelstiltkin once and for all.

In another essay titled "The ladies have feelings,...Shall we leave it to the experts?", Roy focuses on globalization and how it has widened the gaps between the rich and the poor. In her opinion corporate globalization has not worked for the eradication of world poverty but it is a mutant (silent) variety of colonialism which is remote controlled and digitally operated by America. Globalization brought about immense sufferings and loses on the agricultural economy. The landless agricultural laborers have all flocked to the cities in

search of employment and end up in miseries of different kinds. She refers to the Supreme Court Order to close down 77,000 polluting and non-conforming industrial units in Delhi. The Order would put 500,000 people out of work. They are the teeming millions who have migrated from their villages. They are the people whom the government has not entitled citizenship. Roy put in a poignant scenario when she states:

They're the people who aren't supposed to exist, the 'non-citizens' who survive in the folds and wrinkles, the cracks and fissures of the 'official' city, they exist just outside the net of the 'official' urban infrastructure... These 'non-citizens' are employed in what economists rather call the 'informal sector', the fragile but vibrant parallel economy that both shocks and delights the imagination.<sup>8</sup>

In a similar manner, Roy registers her protest against **the government** and the court for not taking action against the big factories run by the big industrialists who have for years polluted rivers, denuded forest, depleted and poisoned ground water and destroyed the livelihoods of thousands of people who depend on these recourses for livelihood. She cites the example of the Grasim factory in Kerala, the Orient paper Mill in Madhya Pradesh, the noxious 'Sunrise Belt' industries in Gujarat, the uranium mines in Jadugoda and the aluminum plants in Orissa. She does not stop here but pauses for answers to question about the role of a writer or how a writer could continue writing fiction and shut herself from reality in a situation like this. Many writers contain

themselves by taking ambiguous positions to keep themselves safe from criticism and the troubles that come along in taking sides. She says:

I take a position – I have a point of view. What is worst, I make it clear that I think it's right and moral to take that position and what's even worse, use everything in my power to flagrantly solicit support that position. For a writer of twenty-first century, that's considered a pretty uncool unsophisticated question... I love the tender shard of an incomplete dream.<sup>9</sup>

According to Roy, the dispossession of the people of Narmada is barbaric and inhuman beyond dignity. The people of the valley have taken up non-violent protest and have become symbols of a global struggle against what they claim to be an unjust form of the development. So she is determined that the story of Narmada should be told and retold until it is heard and some kind of changes are brought about. Critics like ecological historian Ramchandra Guha and his friends denounce Arundhati of being hysterical and irrational. She retorts:

"I am hysterical, I am screaming from the bloody rooftops. And he and his snug little dub are going 'Shhh... you'll wake the neighbours! I want to wake the neighbours, that's my whole point. I want everybody to open their eyes.'<sup>10</sup>

In her essay under the title 'Algebra of Infinite Justice' Roy talks about the attack on the world Trade Centre that gives out an analytical view of aftermath consequences and the possible motives behind the attackers. She highlights how America justifies its numerous wars against different countries. She also attacks American- Afghan policies with all its brutalities and trivial reasons for waging

war to fulfill its imperial design. She considers the attack on World Trade Centre as a desperate attempt on the part of the powerless people whose lives have been suppressed and ruled over by the iron hands of the powerful. She tries to get into the psyche of the attackers who took up this dangerous mission to kill as many people as possible knowing fully well that they too would die. Roy denounces the military operation against Afghanistan and Iraq which is unethical and cynical on the part of America. Along with military expansion and imperial motives America creates its own calculated ground to sell arms and ammunition to keep itself economically safe and sound. Roy goes on to explain that America is the mother of nuclear weapons. They had used it at Hiroshima and Nagasaki which left the world filled with **gasp**ing horror. Roy disputes the assertion of USA calling itself 'peace loving' nation when it is engaged itself in war against many nations (13 countries) since the Second World War. Roy's protest against American imperialism is a part of her activism against oppression, deprivation, brutalities and injustice committed in many forms.

Roy's activism can be traced from the various interventions she makes through her writings. Her participation in Narmada Bachao Andolan is a part of her activism to lend her ear to the cries of the helpless. In her essay 'Democracy'- who's she when she is at home? - Roy talks about the misuse of democracy in the name of religion. She attacks political parties for the mass

massacre in Gujarat after the Godhra incident where 56 pilgrims were burnt alive in the Sabarmati Express. The state government did not do anything to prevent the aftermath of this incident which resulted in the hellish destruction of the Muslim community where they were looted, raped, killed and slaughtered. Roy vehemently criticizes a political leader, and questions his integrity for his negligence of a serious national issue as she further attacks another leader saying that he was “on MTV promoting his new poems. It took him more than a month and two vacations in the hill – to make it to Gujarat.”<sup>11</sup>

Roy is dismayed with the kind of Fascism that is eating into the policies of the leaders and the entire system and the **working of the state power**. In her opinion, it is sipping into every system in the **government** in many unsuspecting ways. In the process there is slow sap erosion in civil liberties and injustice is meted out to the common people. She argues that one cannot put off the communal fire by banning religious and extremist outfits. She opines that these are caused by the religious sentiments which would run deeper when tried to crush down. To bring solutions to situations such as this, Roy calls for awakening and alertness on the part of the general public. Roy also calls for keeping an eagle’s eye on the public institutions and make them accountable for transparency and responsibility, she states:

It means putting your ear to the ground and listening to the whispering of the truly powerless. It means giving a forum to the myriad voices from the hundreds of resistance movements across the country who is speaking about real things – about bonded labor, marital rape, sexual harassment, Women’s wages, uranium dumping, unsustainable mining, weavers’ woes, farmers’ worries. It means fighting displacement and dispossession and the relentless, everyday violence of abject poverty.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Roy believes that there is conscious responsibility on every Indian, especially the leaders to lend their ears to ground realities and work for peace and prosperity.

Thus Roy’s writings on big dams, nuclear bombs, war and terrorism have brought about a lot of speculations and debate. Her causes have in fact landed her in trouble many a time. The politicians and **bureaucrats called her as the ‘Language Heist’**. Since all her writing has a **tinge of political dimension**, writing is a part of her political activism just as her physical participation. Her essay “Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire” is another volume of collection of essays published in 2005. In this book Roy gives an insight into the working of the new empire being planted and nurtured by America under the leadership of George Bush the senior and his son George W. Bush. She tries to sketch the American empire through seemingly unconnected and unnoticeable areas, exposing the links between America’s war on terror and the ever growing threat of the corporate power, the influence of the corporate mass media, and the world’s response in the form of resistance. Roy in her anger and indignation of

US's attitude breaks down the theory of empire, new liberal policies, capitalism, corporate globalization and policy on terrorism in a scholarly analysis. She also makes the reader aware of grounds that make America powerful and the ways it uses its super power status in designing the imperial policies in world affairs for its own gain.

Her argument centers around the unjustified invasion on Iraq which brought about untold disasters and miseries in that country. Roy also cites similar examples of the countries that are under the U.S.A's influence. With her erudite argument and passionate urge for world peace, Roy gives us an insight into the theory behind America's empire which may bring about a predictable catastrophe in the world. She calls for collective effort on the part of the world nations to fight against the evil design of this empire.<sup>13</sup> Through an imaginary tour she guides the reader to the drawing room, the bed rooms, the kitchen room and the planning room of the imperial palace of America (White House) from where it draws the map, the journey, the navigation and negotiation with the world to conquer and helps the reader to understand its evil designs.

In her essay titled 'Confronting the Empire', Arundhati Roy gives us the idea of confronting the forces, the agencies, the politics that undermine world democracy and democracy in India. She makes a critical analysis of India which is called the world's biggest democracy becoming a frontrunner of

corporate globalization project. According to her the structures of democracy is breaking down in such a speed that it is sapping into every affair of the country. It is affecting the life of the people everywhere. New rules and policies of labour privatization of many industries are making the agricultural farmers commit suicide because of the unfavorable condition they are pushed into. She examines the huge gap between the haves and the have-nots. While the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer. While the political chanting, sloganing, nationalizing religion continues to play its music, there are increased numbers of discrepancies that people have to suffer. Civil liberties are violated. These unequal injustices find its manifestation in the way the Indian government responded to the Gujarat massacre in 2002. In her opinion if the same incident occurred in Iraq during the reign of Saddam, it could be splashed across the world. But since India plays itself as a host to the global market and its vast empire, the brutalities committed on the muslims with the support of the government does not seem like an impediment or an ashamable things. She claims that the other name of corporate globalization is imperialism, a pretentious democratic vessel for delivering justice. As a result there is lack of space for basic human right or humanitarian concern. All the major global meetings or conferences; decisions are decided and taken in terms of money, marketing and profit. Therefore no proper steps are taken up on the issues of the

racial discrimination, or the use and misuse of chemical and nuclear weapons or on the concerns of climate change. In all the world confederations and international meet, it is America which makes all the necessary decisions as it wields its own power by reserving its rights as a super power in the world.

And the rest of the developing countries like India and others are subservient to the empire whom they pay their tribute. So there arises a great gap between the decision maker and the people (sufferers) on whom these decisions are implemented. She thinks of the way how these disparities can be eliminated or at least be reduced.

Roy also opens our eyes to some of the resistant groups **who** are trying to confront the empire and readying themselves to strike back for their existence, for their peace and their love for liberty. She takes the examples from the other parts of the world where similar resistance are taking place to fight back and challenge the empire. She traces the example of Latin America – like Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela and Argentina who were wrecked to great poverty by the IMF. She sees similar situation in India too. India is also raising its horns against corporate globalization. She cites the examples of Enron, Bechtel, WorldCom, Arthur Anderson the symbol of corporate globalization losing its luster in the long run. While trying to confront the empire it may seem like losing a well fought war, nevertheless it is worth the effort to expose the ugliness of the

empire as she states: “We may not have stopped it in its track- yet- but we have stripped it down. We have made it drop its mask.”<sup>14</sup>

Arundhati Roy’s understanding of America’s playing the role of empirical expansionism and its policy of brutality along with enormous lies and the arguments put up to find the reason to wage war against Iraq and other troublesome nations becomes an important issue to the world. The USA in its war against Iraq tried to get military support from many allied nations and came up with fictitious- facts against Iraq to gain moral and material support. As a lover of liberty, Roy raises her voice of resistance against imperial policies and designs of the USA. She does not miss the chance to strikes back at the empire by asking the common people, leaders of India to say a firm –“No thank you” – when America says- “You are either with us or you are with the terrorist”<sup>15</sup> (Reference of George W.Bush’s speech). She vouches for strategies which are not only for confrontation but to lay siege on the empire. She asserts that these can be done through our art, our music, our literature, our aggressiveness to stand for the right cause, our brilliance and our relentlessness, our ability to tell our own stories. In her opinion corporate world cannot survive without the majority of the common people. They will have their own fall when we refuse to buy what they are selling – their ideas, their version of history, their wars, their weapons, their notion of inevitability.

In the same essay, Arundhati Roy traces the means and ways in which America tries to gain support in its propaganda to wage war against Iraq. She dwells at length on the unjustified war which destroyed the very foundation of civilization, like Mesopotamia, Babylon, Tigris and Euphrates. With the illegal invasion, came the destruction of a sovereign country which had its own independent existence. America's arrogance and imperial design is vehemently criticized by the author. She shows how USA in its thirst to take revenge for 9/11 tries to find loopholes to wage war. She argues that it was unfair on the part of USA to blame Iraq for the terrorist attack on September 11. She also indicates the amount of torture and atrocities that Iraqi people had to go through as a result of the war. US with its ally Britain with the mission to destroy Iraq had economic sanction on Iraq breaking down the very structure of the country. Millions of people were starved to death and all the major infrastructure like medical institutions and industries were broken down from all sides. In short Iraq was squeezed of its air for existence. Absence of proper media coverage rendered the lives of the people helpless and meaningless. American government manipulated the media through journalist who are at liaison with the arm forces to cover news that they wanted to show; thus buying the freedom of press with false reporting.

In the process of displaying his mighty power to the world, George W. Bush did not follow any procedure of the Geneva Convention treaty on war. When invading American soldiers were taken prisoners and shown on Iraqi T.V., George W. Bush majestically reminded them that it was violating the Geneva Convention. Again, when Al-Jazeera showed civilian casualties, its action was condemned as emotive Arab propaganda aimed at garnering hostility towards the "Allies". The enormous destruction brought about by the American war machine with its latest technology capable of "collateral damage" when shown on American and British T.V, were condoned because they represent all the ugly truths of war. In the eyes of the world, USA and Britain played many games to get a morally acceptable strategy to justify the necessity of war in Iraq. Since the beginning of the war already there has been shortage of food and water and other basic necessities. With the war, life has been made miserable and unbearable due to the consistent bombing and missile attacks. Food supplies from many parts of the globe were blocked and were conveniently silent about it. But when it was sent from Britain it got the highest media coverage. This war has not only brought destruction to Iraq, but also killed many US soldiers and left many lamed and disabled for life. The UN who is supposed to play a great role to stop the war has been made silent or ambiguous about it. The reason is USA did not allow the UN to play any role, neither before the attack nor after

the destruction. After toppling Saddam, US motive became clear to the world when it took up all the contracts for the 'reconstruction' of Iraq. All these hidden agendas remain unknown to the world because most of the USA's corporate media is owned and managed by the same interest. To Roy's understanding of the ploy of USA, the focus of the world that war against terror was not the real reason; it was to gain control over the oil fields of Iraq and be the super power in its journey towards self destruction in the process of a hegemonic dimension. For instance, Roy cites the example of Argentina which had to suffer economic breakdown because of the loan it had taken from IMF and how it reduced the country to a state of poverty and misery. In case of Argentina, **IMF Cheque** book brought the destruction and in Iraq the cruise missile. Till the **end of the war**, USA never found the weapons of mass destruction on which ground the war was started in the first place. The world was made to think that either Saddam Hussein was an extremely responsible tyrant or he simply did not possess weapons of mass destruction. Towards the end of the essay, Roy calls for support from peace loving people to fight against this dangerous monster of war. She also points out that it is not George Bush 'who is the most dangerous person'; the real danger is the machine he handles which will threaten the very existence of this world.

Another essay titled “Instant Mix of Imperial Democracy, Buy One Get One Free,” lashes out at the American government under the leadership of George W. Bush. It was a speech given in May, 2003 at the Riverside Church in New York City. She begins her speech taking herself as a subject of the American empire. Her speech dwells at length of the American empire’s imperial power, how the accepted notion of the theory of democracy get diluted with the purposes and designs tailored for the benefit of the empire. She starts with a critical point of argument; that it is a normal scenario in every state to have political problems, hypocrisies and brutalities that comes as a part and parcel of functioning in a government of a nation. But when a country stops to remain a mere country and asserts itself as an empire, there is huge change in the system and everything under the system becomes brutal.

So Roy takes the position of the oppressed, the subaltern who dares to stand up and speak up and face the empire. In a sense she writes back to the empire an anti-imperial discourse on the strategy of postcolonial theory of writing back to the British Empire. She states, “May I clarify that I speak as a subject of the American Empire. I speak as a slave who presumes to criticize her king”.<sup>16</sup> Roy is conscious of the fact that she is a women from India (previously under British Empire) speaking about the American Empire to an American audience from a platform in an American Church. In a way Roy reverse the

tables on the notion of postcolonial thinking where the non-European people could talk only about themselves and were not allowed to speak about the empire or represent the empire. Firstly she speaks up against the arrogances and the snobbishness of the American empire. To support this, she cites the example of the mistaken killing of 290 Iranian civilians by the American cruise missile stationed in the Persian Gulf. When senior George Bush was asked to comment on the incident, he said that he would never apologize for the United States and he did not care what the facts were. In a similar manner Madeline Albright when questioned by Lesly Stahl for “60 Minutes” on May 12, 1996 on the issue of economic sanctions on Iraq and death of 50 0000 Iraqi children she replied that, “ that it was a very hard choice, but the price was worth it”.

Roy also registers her sense of anger over injustice meted out to people of Iraq where lakhs were killed and destroyed under the debris of the rubbles of bombing by USA. War on Iraq was waged on false propaganda by the press bought by the American government. She cries foul at USA’s garnering of public support which were all based on falsehood and deceit. Virtually USA had to invent proofs and datas to show the world that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. It also makes its own policy of pre-emptive strike without consulting the world authorities (UN) and even after the war was fought, there seems to have no solid evidence of Iraq having weapons of mass destruction.

Roy gets back to Bush for calling Saddam Hussein “Homicidal Dictator”. She opens her eyes to the public about the previous policies of USA on Iraq, how it constantly tried to change the regime in Iraq. In President John F.Kennedy’s regime, CIA had tried to influence to change regime in Iraq and for this Saddam’s Ba’ath party came to power in a military coup. With the help of the same CIA, Saddam regime meticulously eliminated hundreds of doctors, teachers, lawyers and political figures known to be leftists. As a result many from the intellectual community were slaughtered and wiped out. Saddam Hussein was said to have hand in directly involving in all these bloodshed. So Roy argues that Saddam Hussein is a product of USA’s interference in the international policies. He was financed, equipped with the arms by the USA, so they are directly or indirectly responsible for his excesses. USA also had the record of supporting the 8 years war against Iran and in the 1988 gassing of Kurdish people in Halabja, crimes which were later taken as reasons for invading Iraq. In the event of the Gulf war, the allied forces encouraged the uprising of Shias in Basra which Saddam Hussein crushed mercilessly. Roy bluntly put it as a policy of the USA government to ignore their own misdeeds but wants to find fault with the other sovereign nations and to punish them. In the process Roy clarifies that she does not mean to support the brutalities committed by Saddam but certainly she wants to voice out to the USA

government that they too are responsible for being a partner in crime along with its 'Big Brother' England under the leadership of Tony Blair.

Roy also spells out a futuristic catastrophe of similar nature looming large in the western horizon. She indicates that countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, and the Central Asian Republics are groomed to face similar situations in the near future wherever U.S A. plays a major role. So Roy makes a clarion call to the people of the world to confront the empire who claim to be armed with a mandate from heaven. Roy with her sharp sarcastic wit, questions the right of the American empire to wage war at will, play as the judge for everything that happens around the world. She assesses Iraq in the eye of the modern world as it is a seat of ancient civilization where world's first writing, first calendar, first library, first city was found and so it is the world's first democracy. With an eye for detail, Roy traces the history of this ancient civilization where she says king Hammurabi of Babylon was the first to codify law governing the social life of citizens. This code gave equal rights to everyone, including animals. So Hammurabi code is acknowledged not just as the birth of legality, but the beginning of an understanding of the concept of the social justice. She virtually mocks at the American empire for its disdainful disregard for the culture and tradition of Iraq and the type of injustice meted out to them. America in all its destruction brought to Iraq, its sole aim was to protect the oil

fields and the oil ministry. Its business purpose never lost its sights even in a crisis such as this. Roy also gives us the glimpse of how American empire works under different circumstances. Before the war, several negotiations were made with the international community to win alliance for supporting the war with other ingredients of business contracts share. Countries like France, Germany and Russia which refused at first allowed the final resolution for legitimizing the war to be passed in the UN Security Council. They gave their support in several ways – air space for the elite army, arms and ammunition and sent their army. All these were done with the expectation to have their lion share in the spoilt of the war and getting acknowledgement for the same. So the mentioned allies who in spite of the protest from fellow countrymen supported America had to swallow their bitter pills. Roy also puts up probing questions to the public about the definition of democracy and how country like America uses it in its own context. She argues that the sanctity of democracy has been reduces to the status of a ‘whore who is used, misused and abused in many forms by the imperial America’. The neo-liberal capitalists had meticulously suppressed and subverted democracy in different shape. They have managed to intrude into every nook and corner of democratic institutions like the freedom of judiciary, the press and the parliament for their own benefit. She also reminds the public of the 300 years of the white rule in South Africa. After achieving freedom, the various

democratic parties in that country came to power in 1994, its programmes and its infrastructure has fallen into privatization and liberalization. These have deepened the gap between the rich and the poor because most of the land, factories and other rich institutions are owned by the white minority. So the number of suffering people is mostly the black majority who has to face the brickbats of the imprudent blunders committed by the existing policies of the government. If there is any change in the regime the white do not suffer because they are rich and owners of many private institutions. So democracy and its highly valued principles are made profane by all kinds of assault from the politicians. She aptly puts it- "Democracy has become empire's euphemism for neo liberal capitalism."<sup>17</sup>

Roy is also skeptical of the manner in which George W.Bush was elected president of America, where Blacks were barred from voting in his constituency. She also indicates his policies on war and invasions where the economy of America was razed to the ground. Billions of Dollars were being used for military expenses alone. It was not only loss of money and material but also loss of life as so many soldiers engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan and in many other parts of the world where America has set its mind on imperialistic design are killed and maimed for life.

Roy in a way writes back to the empire. She displays her character of a rebel and an activist. In her opinion by waging war against the nations, America under the presidency of George Bush the senior and his son George W. Bush the junior rendered many jobless, plundered the economy and jeopardized working system of the country leaving it vulnerable in many ways. It is the common people who pay for all the imprudent war plans. The man who fight in the war are also young men of America who are jobless Whites, Blacks, Latinos and Asians who want to earn their living. About 21% of the total armed forces are African-Americans. After the war George Bush promised to return the Iraqi people its oil fields but it is the corporate multinationals like the Bechtel, Chevron and Halliburton who took up all the reconstruction works in Iraq. Fundamental civil liberties have been curtailed with the implementation of the Patriot Act. The freedom of the people to have some privacy is intruded and invaded by FBI from all directions throwing normal life out of gear. It controls, maintains the surveillance of the day-today buying and selling of commodities as they suspect them to be used by the terrorist network. In the process many are detained illegally under suspicion without any access to legal representatives. The common Americans have been suffering at the cost of their own freedom and practice of democracy. President George Bush's whimsical plan for the reconstruction of Iraq's agricultural sector is entrusted to men like Shell and

Fluer who have made themselves infamous because of their exploitation and brutalities done to the South African workers. Roy virtually snarls at the high headedness of the American government. They always look for an opportunity to wage war and create chaos and distability in the name of wiping out terrorism from the globe. Roy terms this condition (Aggressive War) as a paranoid aggression which is an indication of nervous insecurity. To this effect Roy has foreseen the economical downfall of the America though it may be secured in terms of having nuclear capability and military force. The global market trend by then had already been rejecting American products. Companies like Coke, Pepsi, McDonalds and government agencies like US AID, British DFID, British American Banks, Arthur Anderson, Merrill Lynch, and American Express could find themselves in vulnerable condition. All these prophetic imagination which are manifested in her writing saw its fructification in recent global recession that started in American economy.

Towards the end of this essay, Roy suggests to the subjects of the empire, the ways and means to confront it. One such strategy is to isolate and cripple the empire's working parts. To face the challenges the economical sanctions imposed by the USA on the third world countries, people should oppose the various contracts of rebuilding of Iraq which is biased policies of American dominance interfering in the affairs of a sovereign nation. They

should be exposed and forced out of business. This way the common people's verdict can become very powerful. Another immediate challenge is to attack the misrepresentation by the media where it is managed and run by the empire.

In the midst of all these Roy raises her voice in support of the freedom writers' press like the "Democracy Now", "Alternative Radio" and "South End Press" which give right to the people to speak out and express and debate on burning issues of the day. Roy insists that our freedom was not granted to us by the government. It is our birth right. It has been taken away from us and so we should retrieve with even if a revolution breaks out. The battle for reclaiming democracy should be fought by all the nations across the globe without any boundary. And Roy also stresses that this fight for freedom, if it had to be successful, it has to begin from America itself where the civil society is a powerful institution to overthrow the forces of the empire. She makes this point from her position of belonging to a subject of a slave nation. She called upon the American civil society to fight for democracy as they are at the brink of losing it. She emphasizes that they can do it because they have access to the White House which Roy calls as the imperial palace. She states:

Empires conquests are being carried out in your name, and you have the right to refuse. You could refuse to fight, refuse to move those missiles from the warehouse to the dock. Refuse to wave that flag.<sup>18</sup>

Roy also reminded the American audience listening to her speech, of its rich history of resistance. So, she appeals to the American public to join their hands in the fight for the retrieval of democracy, not in the way that the empire conquers but with a weapon of non-violence. As he states, “And you will see how beautiful it is to be gentle instead of brutal, safe instead of scared. Befriended instead of isolated. Loved instead of hated.”<sup>19</sup>

Lastly she puts in record her inability to agree with President George Bush. She also acknowledges America as a powerful nation but she insists that it could also be a nation of great people and history has given them the chance to be called as “great people”. Thus Arundhati Roy uses **her art of writing to express her emotions for the suffering millions due the ravage of war**. Her sense of **humanity and her participation in the fight for mutual existence** finds its manifestation in the chorus of resistance voices that she tries to raise through her essays on national and international matters. So it would be unfair to look upon Roy as a mere an anti-American or an American basher. Her protest against American imperialism is but an extension of her fight against war, oppression like oppression of the female gender, the untouchable, the tribals dispossessed in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa or the rebellious citizens of a great democratic country like India who had taken the path of nuclear weapons. In her capacity as a writer-activist she has managed to fight her war of written and spoken

resistance. It is interesting to note that there are many intellectuals like Edward Said, Howard Zinn, and Noam Chomsky who have joined her in supporting and raising their voice of dissent.

Thus, Arundhati Roy's writing often pricks the conscience of the reader and compels her attention. There is a unique persuasiveness with sincerity and genuineness in her reasoning and arguments.

The importance of Roy's writing brings forth the unique interconnection between writing and activism. According to Roy, there is no difference between her fiction and non-fiction writings because the method she uses is to 'tell politics like a story'. In today's world specialists and experts end up severing the links between things, isolating them and creating barriers that prevent ordinary people from understanding the happenings around them. In the case of Roy, she creates links, to join the dots to tell a story. She appeals the people to fight and dismantle not just the small or minor oppression, but also the big tyranny and big oppression:

"The dismantling of the big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes and big mistakes."<sup>20</sup> Thus, she calls the public, the ordinary people, the educated, the lawyers, the Engineers, bureaucrats, leaders etc. to lend their ears to the ground realities of life. Roy

through her unique blend of the literary and activist situates herself in the tradition of other writer-activists like Mahasweta Devi of India and so the following chapter will make a comparative study of both the authors.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Arundhati Roy, “ The End of Imagination”, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*.

( New Delhi: Penguin Publication,2002) p.22.Print

See also “ A Movement of Pride”, The Hindustan Times, Editorial,12<sup>th</sup> May 1998.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.p.4

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.p.5

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.p.21

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.p.56

Also see C.V.J.Sharma (ed),1989, *Modern Temples of India: Selected Speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru at Irrigation and power project*.Central Board of Irrigation and Power.p.40-49. Print.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.p.107

<sup>7</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Power Politics”, *Algebra of Infinite Justice*. (New Delhi:

Penguin Books,2002) p.146. Print.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.p.206.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.p.197.

<sup>10</sup>Arundhati Roy, “ Scimitars in the Sun”, *The Shape of the Beast* ( New Delhi: Penguin, Viking, 2008) p.13.Print.

<sup>11</sup>Arundhati Roy, “ Democracy”, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* ( New Delhi: Penguin Books,2002) p.269.Print.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.p.286-287.

<sup>13</sup>Arundhati Roy, “ The Outline of the Beast”,in conversation with Antony Arnove,

April, 2003.( New Delhi: Penguin ,Viking, 2008) p.163.Print.

<sup>14</sup>Arundhati Roy. *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to the Empire.* ( New Delhi: Penguin Books,2005) p.83.Print

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.p.85

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.p.138.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.p. 155.



<sup>18</sup>Ibid.p. 169.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.p.169.

<sup>20</sup> Arundhati Roy, “ The Greater Common Good”, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (New Delhi: Penguin Books,2002) p.53.Print.

## Chapter IV

### **Writing as Activism: Arundhati Roy in the footsteps of Mahasweta Devi**

Any attempt at making a comparative study of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy is a daunting task owing to the vastness and variety of the literary realms that both the author embraces. However, it would be a productive project to discern difference and commonality in both the writers. Both Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy's writings and activism have touched and inspired the lives of common people especially the dreg of the society and brought about collective consciousness to the elite as well as to the government. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, who has translated two collections of Devi's stories including those in *Imaginary Maps* (1995) into English, suggest that these interplay of activism and literary writing in Devi's fiction can be of substantial interest to current academic discourse and practices. Spivak insists that Devi's work suggest a model in which activism and writing can reflect upon each other, providing necessary visions of international and the possibilities of constructing a new kind of responsibility. Therefore, it is an imperative that Arundhati Roy (b.1961) who represents the contemporary generation of writer-activist be compared to Mahasweta Devi (b.1926). It is interesting to know that both Roy and Devi have a history of activism and literature in

their family but Devi was an activist before she came to limelight as a writer unlike Roy who became an activist after her prominence as the first Indian to win the Booker Prize in 1997. In response to a question, “What would you like to do for the rest of your life?” in an interview in 1998, Mahasweta Devi replied, “fight for the tribals, downtrodden, underprivileged and write creatively if and when I find the time”. Roy also reveals such passion of an activist in her writings and interviews and therefore one feels inspired to place Arundhati in the tradition of Devi on the questions of such a fusion of writerly and activist responsibilities as mentioned by Spivak.

In Roy, there is an activist zeal not only in her political essays as mentioned in the previous chapter, but also in her only and award winning novel *The God of Small Things*. Roy in *The God of Small Things* depicts and critiques social and political structures through her deft characterization; the system of the gendered oppression and problematizes the association between feminists, liberalists, ideologists and activism and the ideas of ‘modernity’. She also depicts and emphasizes the Marxist political situation in India in general and Kerala in particular. Her creativity finds expression in her weaving of the autobiographical elements with social and political realities in India. She says,

Lot of the atmosphere in *The God of Small Things* is based on my experiences of what it was like to grow up in Kerala. When you see all the competing beliefs against the same background you realize how they all wear each other down. To me, I couldn't think of a better location for a book about human beings...<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, Mahasweta Devi's first work *Jhansir Rani* (The Queen of Jhansi) was published in 1956. This work also marked the beginning of her prolific literary career. In the last forty years, Devi has published twenty collections of short stories, close to a hundred novels, primarily in her native language Bengali. She has also been a regular contributor to several literary magazines such as 'Bortika', a journal dedicated to the cause of oppressed communities within India. In 1984, she retired from her job as faculty to concentrate on her writing. In the last decade, Devi has been the recipient of several awards. She was awarded the Padma Shree in 1986 for her work for the tribals. She was honoured with Sahitya Accademy in 1979, Jnanapeeth in 1996, India's highest literary Award and Raman Magsaysay in 1996 which is considered to be the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize. She was conferred the title of Officer del' Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2003 and the Nonino prize in 2005.

One important theme in the works of Mahasweta Devi is the positions of the tribals and the marginalized communities within India.

She is a long time champion for the political, socio and economic advancement of these communities whom she characterizes as “suffering spectators of the India that is travelling towards the twenty first century”.<sup>2</sup> These concerns can be seen in her works such as *Aranyer Adhikar* (1977), *Dust on the Road*(1997) *Chotti Munda O'Tar Tir* (1980), *Bitter Soil* (1998) *Breast Stories* (1997), *Mother of 1084* (1997), *Baith-Four Stories* (2005), *Imaginary Maps* (1993). In all these works Mahasweta Devi reveals a sensitive conscience towards the society she lives in. However in this chapter Mahasweta Devi’s activist writings like *Dust on the Road* and Arundhati Roy’s collection of political Essays like *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Listening to the Grasshoppers: Field Notes On Democracy*, *The Briefing* a short fiction written in 2008 and *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire* and other independent essays are examined for study. The common themes in the works of these authors are analyzed and an attempt has been made to place them as writers whose writings find manifestations in activism. Thus there is lot of common characteristics between these two writers.

Mahasweta Devi belongs to the group of unconventional writers who does not always go by the accepted norms in the society. She has a unique individual characteristic in her approach to life and understanding

of things around her. Arundhati Roy too has the reputation of being defiant and rebellious in the way she tries to analyze and see things from different angles. In her early career, Mahasweta Devi was termed as a mere writer of fiction who was writing for a living and they were written mostly in Bengali and hence her works were confined to Bengali readers only. She tried her hands in journalism, teaching, writing.

Arundhati Roy too had an unsteady career before she rose to limelight. At the age of sixteen she had left for Delhi to study Architecture, led a bohemian life, tried to eke out a living by selling empty beer bottles and later on went to Italy on a scholarship to study on monuments. After her return, she had tried her hands in journalism, wrote screen plays for director Pradeep Kishan her present husband and also acted in his film titled 'Masay Sahib'. So in the early stages of their career, Devi and Roy wrote basically for their living but their literary journey did not remain restricted there. They continued to indulge in creative writing and research on the life around them.

Mahasweta Devi comes from an activist family. Her father Manish Ghatak was a writer who wrote about Calcutta slums and her mother was a writer and social activist too. She belonged to an affluent middle class Bengali family with secular mindset. So the sense of social consciousness

was already imbibed in her at a very young age. It was also a time of great upheaval in Bengal. Her stories are written on the backdrop of these socio-political scenarios namely, The Quit India Movement in 1942, The Great Bengal Famine in 1943, The Horror of Partition of India and after the partition the Tebhaga Peasants Movement led by the CPI(M). She was very much affected by these changes and had nurtured herself to involve personally in the future. She saw hunger and death from close quarters, people dying on Calcutta street and dead bodies around her. The streak of these socio-political conditions is found in her writings and they form the basic structure in the weaving of her stories.

Arundhati Roy too comes from a family where her mother was a well known activist. Her mother Mary Roy was the first woman who fought for the women's right to property in a patriarchal Syrian Christian society. The Supreme Court ruling in her case gave women equal inheritance with retrospective effect from 1956. This was indeed a record breaking feat in the male dominated Kerala society.

Mahasweta believes in doing detailed research and so she took up a lot of pains to record and collect materials on the topic she wrote about. So there is a participation and personal experience in the process of her writing. Most of her non-fiction works are of first hand information and

personal recording. For her historical fiction, *Jhansir Rani*, Mahasweta travelled to the land of the historical queen trying to get information from the local and the folks there. Arundhati Roy's works also show lot of detailed analysis of things and she presents facts with razor sharp objectiveness blended with, wit and humour. In her early years Mahasweta Devi's creative expressions were revealed at various stages. She was inspired by the numerous happenings around her as already mentioned above. She was also inspired by poets like Mukundarama and other areas of literature like history and geography but all along conscious and curious about the realities around her.

Roy too had her share of sad tales to reveal when she says that she and her family had to grow up knowing that no one could be there for them or protect them as they are not supposed to expect from their societies. She studied in her mother's school, Corpus Christi School where there was no formal learning. Her mother had persuaded the Rotary Club of Kottayam to rent them their premises in the daytime. Roy used to call it a sliding folding school because by morning they had to clean up all the rubbish that was left by the men folk like empty whisky bottles and cigarette butts in the evening. The fact that her mother had broken the tradition of marriage and had to stay with her maternal grandparents itself

was a kind of stigma on young Arundhati Roy and her brother. They were the unwanted burden in the Ayemanam family. All these experiences find expressions in her first ever written novel *The God of Small Things*. The book is semi autobiographical and the story is set rolling at the backdrop of the caste ridden society and politically volatile communist party in Kerala and India in the larger context. She reveals that even among the Syrian Christians, there is a caste issue which extends to the level of electing political leaders. Most of the leaders from the communist party are from upper cast a practice of dominant cast vote banks under the guise of democratic representative.

Again, Mahasweta Devi's writings reveal social consciousness and her personal interest in intervention in an arena writers couldn't venture out. It brings about self awareness in the readers. We can see it in her works like *Breast Stories* translated by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and also in her other story like *Nairity Megh* (Omnimous Cloud) where Devi describes a young relief officer's heart wrenching encounter with a group of tribals who were on the verge of extinction. These were tribes who lived in prolonged hunger and starvation. For them eating rice was only in their dreams because they never saw it in real life. Chronic hunger and starvation left them with no hope of going through the process of

procreation and multiplying their own tribe. Her work *Breast Stories* also describe how a tribal subject is exploited physically, mentally and left as a whore. Her presentation of reality at times is too gory and shocking that it often awakens the reader from her slumber. In her work-“Stanadaini”(The breast Giver) Devi brings to light the given realities of the amount of exploitation on women in the Indian society. The victim who takes up the job of breast feeding of a rich and spoiled Halder family is Yashoda. She dutifully breastfeed her own children, and the whole brood of Halder family. The Halders made this arrangement to keep their wives healthy and beautiful and also to keep the Halder man from going in immoral ways. Jasodha had to go through immense suffering in the process. As breastfeeding is subjected to biological demands – she has to conceive babies to feed more babies. So is the reason for the torturous routine of breeding children annually to keep her job going. What Mahasweta wants to drive home is the amount of exploitation meted out to the poor. Through the story, Mahasweta tries to unveil the levels of injustice and exploitation that takes place in India. The protagonist being named as Jasodha stands for Lord Krishna’s mother. The status of mother as divine with the virtue of dignity and service is indicated as the reader is made to believe. So she is taken as a mother capable of nurturing her children, an

honourable job for womanhood. But Mahasweta breaks this accepted notion through the exploited Jasodha who is forgotten and left by her own children to die as she suffers from breast cancer. This brings into play the meaning of 'mother India' as a woman who is put to an acid test. It is an India where only few are favoured to enjoy all that is there and not because it is secular or giver of justice. So it is only a constituted framework before the world. So the idea of India stands vulnerable. Mahasweta Devi herself says, "I am a woman, and I am writing but I am not writing of women alone. What I am writing is about class exploitation" which certainly mean exploitation at all levels. She depicts the unrevealed realities of India especially the deprived class of people. In her preface to *Agnigarbha* (1978) (womb of Fire) Mahasweta Devi says that rural India resembles a crematorium ground. She depicts the Indian villages where the landlords, the petty officers and the upper caste community who plays the dirty role in consuming most of the developmental fund and aids that comes from the center. In her work 'Draupadi', the naxalites and the deprived tribals unite to fight against the land owners and their goons, the police and the army. The story is about Draupadi or Dopdi's heroic naxalite career. She manages to give a major blow to the army and the landlords. At last she is captured by the police

when someone from the group informs her whereabouts. She is then taken into police custody and deprived of all her dignity as she is raped and her sex mutilated beyond recognition. In spite of this inhuman torture, she picks up her courage stands before her captor and brushes the officer with her naked breast and rings out in peels of laughter. This shocking scene stuns the police officer who is perplexed and breaks down only to realize the atrocities committed by the landlords, the police like himself, the army and the state. Through this story Mahasweta exposes the hypocrisy of the Indian society and tears down the garb of the nation- state which wears a secular face.

In similar vein, Mahasweta deals with a moving story in the wake of the naxalite movement in India in her work- *Hajar Chaurasir Ma* (Mother of 1084) which is translated by Samik Bandyopadhyaya. The story revolves around Sujata, an anguished mother whose son Bharati a naxalite supporter is killed in an encounter supported by police, goondas and political parties. Since Bharati's death, Sujata was always in search of the truth behind his death. She finally manages to unearth some of these truths on his birth and death anniversary which falls on the same day. After his death, to avoid social embarrassment, her husband and the whole family hushed up the incident by bribing the police to erase Bharati out of

the family name. So the deceased body of Bharati had no name on it but Corpse No-1084. The brutal killing of Bharati leaves the mother with many unanswered question. She had several questions in her mind, question like -Why did Bharati lose 'faith' in the system, in his family, in his nation? Why did he opt for a dangerous life when his future looked so secured? In the process of her search for answers she finds that it existed in the society she lived. Most of her answers were provided by Bharati's activist girlfriend Nandini who has been released from the jail. The question that the grieving mother raises does not remain confined to her alone. It gains bigger dimension of a nation. For instant, there is the question of young men and women losing faith in the Indian System which is as equal to losing faith in India. So these restless youths try to find meaning in joining the rebellious forces who wants to bring about changes. They take up the painful, unpleasant and the rough road with the hope of positive changes rather than embracing the comfort of material richness and security of easy life at home. Mahasweta reveals that such rebellions are wiped out time and again but they refuse to die and resurrect like the story of the phoenix. These are people who have kept their conscience above the frills and frivolities of the privileged class of the society. Sujata's private emotion is the depiction of many Indian

mothers who may have gone through such agonies of having lost their loved one in the naxalite movement. It is not merely the question and problems of the tribals but a whole lot of questions on the various injustices done to the lower and unprivileged class in the society. It is a question of even the ordinary common people of India like the farmer, teachers, doctors, engineers who suffer under the atrocities of the political pressures and joins hands with the rebels to find meaning in their existence a normal reactions of the conscience. So Mahasweta Devi's activism and writing do stir the conscience of every mindful Indian and compels one to see the reality around with open eyes.

Arundhati Roy too depicts such issues of social consciousness in her writing. Her 'single' but important work *The God of Small Things* depicts the evils of caste exploitation and how it antagonizes the ordinary, those considered as 'Small' things in life. The central theme in the *God of Small Things* revolves around the big characters (the important) people in the society who suppress, oppress and exploit the small and insignificant characters. These small characters whose lives are made miserable at every walk of their life as they struggle to exist against all known and unknown odds. The dominant characters are Pappachi, Baby Kochamma, Mammachi, Chacko, Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew. The

marginalized characters are Ammu, Velutha, Rahel, Estha and Sophie Mol. Pappachi often bet his wife and daughter Ammu who had come to the paternal home after her broken marriage. Chacko the Oxford student failed in his marriage with Margret an English lady. He often claimed his rights to the Ipe-household and made other members live under his dictate. Baby Kochamma an ex- nun who also dominates the others like Ammu and the children. Against this backdrop is the forbidden love story between Ammu and Velutha. She was condemned as someone who went against the family and social norms and Velutha had defiled the tradition by loving a lady from an upper caste as he was a 'Paravan' (untouchable ) by birth. Velutha's sincere love for Ammu, his integrity of mind and resourcefulness of skill does not sustain him or their relationship as it is weighed down by the untouchable social tradition under which they fall. Characters like comrade Pillai, Inspector Thomas Mathew represents the dominant and the hypocrisies of the communist politics in Kerela. Estha and Rahel who suffer not only from Baby Kochamma but they are considered as outsiders and are not supposed to expect any type of considerations. So Roy through her work makes a scathing attack on the patriarchal notion of the society, the high caste Hindu, their many duplicity and hypocrisy. The communist party and their politics of

preaching the ideologies and the stark opposite in practice is highly depicted and criticized for their non performance for the welfare of the society. It also depicts the realistic view on the treatment on the dalits and their endless struggle to exist and create their own identity.

As already emphasized, Mahasweta Devi also carries a strong and rebellious attitude in her works especially when she deals with issues like corruption in the government, the police, the bureaucrats, landlords, contractors, caste system under which India burns. Her creative writing centres on the social, economical, political and psychological issues which affects the real India of our time. These issues are manifested in works like *Baith- Four Stories* which is translated by Sumantra Banarjee. It depicts the events and happenings in West Bengal during 1960's and 1970's. Those were the years of Naxalite uprising in Bengal from where it spread to Bihar, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. The governments of West Bengal in those days ran the administration in nexus with the underworld goons. The politicians and the administration sought the help of the underworld to destroy and wipe out the Naxalite movement. The underworld with the help of their patron politician eliminated many peasants and students cadres of the naxalite organization as they posed a challenge to the establishment with their agenda of putting an end to the

feudal and capitalist oppression. The administration also used the jobless Bengali middle- class youth who often took to antisocial elements like robberies, extortion and looting due to poverty. Thus they worked for fast money for their survival. They were mostly from educated middle class families. These youths were used by the politicians to carry out their dubious jobs and in the process were protected from the police. Sources in the texts narrate that these same youth who involved in criminal activities were secretly recruited by the government to kill and destroy the naxalite organization. Some of them were even made to join the rebels to kill their leaders from within. These brutalities committed on the part of the police and the politician is depicted in Mahasweta Devi's story "Fisherman" (Dheebār in the original Bengali) though it is not explicitly mentioned. Many youths who were suspected to be involved in naxalism were killed and their bodies were dumped into the tank by the police. One suspicion was enough to round them up and eliminate them, disposed their bodies. The "Knife" ("Chhuri" in Bengali) is an account of gang warfare in the suburban town of West Bengal, bordering Bangladesh. Mahasweta depicts the daily routine life of underworld warfare involved by the politician and police rise of several political groups, rivalries and numerous happenings and increasing number of anti-social elements which the Left Front

government of Bengal did not take interest in containing them. There is also mention of women characters being used in this warfare as a part of these realities. They often acted as messengers and secret agents. In another story “Body” (“Shareer” in Bengali ), Mahasweta Devi narrates the story of a girl name Ketaki whose parents were hanged for committing murder. When she grew up to be an adult she had taken to stealing as a profession. She was caught by the police but was rescued by a man called M, who sends her to a politician whose name is Nripati (emperor). She is exploited physically and mentally as she becomes a victim of the brutalities of male chauvinism. She commits suicide as a protest against the male establishment. The characters in Mahasweta Devi’s work ranges from historical figures of anti-colonial struggle to the present day rebel against oppressive political establishment. It includes the modern India’s marginalized rural communities like tribals and the dalits to Bengali middle- class families fighting desperately to be recognized in society. In her fiction, gender exploitation cuts across class and caste barriers. They consist of girls from poor sections who are the victims of male predators of socio-economic orders, housewives from middle-class families harassed by a patriarchal domestic order. The issue of motherhood, which pops up in many of her stories and novels, is not confined to a critique of

the exploitation or taken as vessel of procreation but also portrayal of the mother as a rebel. This is very much present in her sensitive novels *Hajar Chaurasir Ma*. It gives the reader an idea that it may have been the condition and experience of every mother in West Bengal in those days of anxiety and the agony of losing their dear ones in the anti- Naxalite persecution campaigned led by the state police.

Arundhati too is leveled as a rebel by her critique, colleague and the establishment for her position against the establishment and supporting the cause of various anti-government forces. At the age of 16 she left her mother's home and left for Delhi to study Architecture. The girls of her age would never embrace such adventurous ideas. The caste and the burden of the hypocrisies of constructed social issues which made her suffocated made her take the decision to live her own life. The character of Ammu in *God of Small Thing* is considered as a rebel as she goes against the traditional social norms with her decision to love an untouchable Velutha. Her sense of justice and rebellious nature also finds its manifestation when she condemned Shekar<sup>h</sup> Kapur for filming the Bandit Queen without her permission. Roy courageously accepts the fact that she writes about contagious things.

Another common link that we find in these writers is their soft corner for the indigenous tribals of India and support for their cause. These are the class of unfortunate people who have been oppressed from all sides and displaced from own land and forest. Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy vouch for these indigenous people in their writing whose lives have been made miserable by the enormous exploitation and the inhuman treatment. Mahasweta's work like *Araneyar Adhikar* (1975, Right to the Forest), *Agnigarbha* (1978; womb of fire) and the novels like *Chotti Munda Ebong Tar Tir* (1980; Chotti Munda and his arrow). *Araneyar Adhikar* which won her the Academy Award is a novel based on the tribal uprising of 1899, led by Birsa Munda was published in 1977. *Chotti Munda and his Arrow* focuses on some of the gravest of contemporary threats, not only to individual nations and the civilized world, but to the long term survival of human race itself and it explores the dangerous waves of terror that has established itself across the globe. Her work, *Five Plays* is rooted in history and folk myth as well as contemporary social reality. The true picture of socio-economic condition depicted in the plays with its package of nitty- gritty is reflected through social issues like inequality, injustice, caste and oppressions. Through these plays Mahasweta gives the dimension in which caste and class

system exists for centuries. In all these works Mahasweta does not advocate solutions to the problematic issues nor does she try to take sides but plays the role of a witness through her medium of writing. So her writing and experience translates into activism.

Arundhati Roy too in her fiction *The God of Small Things* does not engage herself in trying to bring about drastic solution pertaining to the issues whether it is political, social and caste problems. But through her characters she helps us draw a complete picture of real Ayemanam Kerala. In the process her real life experience is infused into the art of her writing which makes her a witness as well.

*Agnigarbha*, also deals with such issues. There were peasants' revolts in many parts of the country due to the exploitation of the tribal land and the feudal system which gave birth to the Naxalbari struggle. The struggles were organized basically to demand for their fundamental rights. The population of the various districts of Darjeeling, Naxalbari, Kharibari, Fashideya consisted of lakhs of landless tribal peasants. Various tribal groups like Lepcha, Bhutia, Santal, Oran, Rajvanshi, Medi and Gorkha have been exploited by the local land owners for ages. The Adhikar system which existed did not work in favour of the peasants as the surplus amount went to the land owners. Due to such pressures and revolts the

government was compelled to pass the Estate Acquisition Act in 1954 which would prohibit an individual from possessing more than 25 acres of land. But in practice it did not affect the affluent land owners nor did it work in favour of the peasants and the landless farmers. Most of the land was acquired by the rich through 'benami' transactions. The law also did not protect the landless mass to relieve them of their crisis.

Devi shows how the immediate cause of the Naxalbari movement was due to the owners of the tea plantations. Many generation of tribals labourers had settled down and worked on plantations. They became local residents in due course of time but they were treated like slaves and made alien in their own land. Moreover the plantation owners distributed the excess land only to a few favourable retainers. So they demanded that the excess land be taken over by the government and to be distributed to the landless labourers. But the tea estate owners forcefully evicted the Adhikars from their land which escalated into violence. The peasants of Naxalbari region rose in arm rebellion which in turn encouraged the revolts from the similarly exploited peasantry in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Orissa and Bihar. Thus Mahasweta Devi tries to make the readers aware that the problem of Naxalism is not a new thing and it continues to exist but the government has failed to

address this issue. Many a time they have been mercilessly crushed down by the administration. But there is always the remains of the burning ember of rebellion which fails to die off. Perhaps one would metaphorically say it as the spirit of the revolt which refused to die. Mahasweta Devi invokes the readers and the public to look into the deeper realities behind these revolts and seek the truth instead of turning a deaf ear to its shrill cry. She would also like us to believe that it is not always the case of the problem of the land; it is a case of basic human needs. The labourer is denied of his own land where he tries to eke out his bread and butter. Devi highlights the dire condition of the tribals. Their condition is such that they never reach a level where they can sufficiently sustain themselves. On the other hand the rich became richer by leaps and bounds and the poor remain poorer and landless forever. So the ultimate path they take is the path that breaks away from this tradition to the part of revolution. She espouses that it may not be a question of only wants and desires but a question of freedom, question of preservation of identity and dignity, question of being recognized, question of love and respect and a sense of belonging. They dream about bringing changes and to create a new kind of world. To support this, Mahasweta Devi says:

Life is not arithmetic, and human beings are not made for game of politics. For me, all political programmes and creeds should aim at the realization of the claims of human being to survival and justice. I desire a transformation of the present social system.<sup>3</sup>

Arundhati Roy's attitude towards the Naxalite movement is also in many ways similar to that of Mahasweta Devi. Roy seems to have a soft corner for the naxalite and their cause for struggle. In fact she has been accused of publicly supporting the outlawed organization which is a violation of any responsible citizen. But she went ahead and made a personal journey to the jungle from where the Maoists lived and operated against the government. She wanted to have a firsthand knowledge of the Maoist organization and find out why they do what they do. (Naxalism) After her sojourn in the forbidden jungles of Chhattisgarh where even the most sophisticated machine guns of the state and the central government combined fear to penetrate, Roy wrote an essay titled 'Walking with the Comrade' published in the *Outlook* which talk about her experience with the Maoists. She tries to depict the real picture behind the jungle warfare between the government and the Maoists. She did not mind the volley of scathing criticism, accusation from the government, the police, the electronic media and her own contemporaries. All she wanted the public to do and understand is the other side of the coin; to see the naxalite problem from their perspective and not treat it as a disease which is to be

destroyed or eliminated. They too have their stories to tell. In an interview with Chris Lydon in Cambridge, April 2, 2010 to a question about naxalite and insurgency problems – she said, “Something in me flinches when they (Public, Government) call the Maoists as insurgents or the problem as insurgency problems because that is their forest. It is not about guerrillas or Maoists either. It is about their struggle to get back what they lost which is rightfully theirs”. She reveals that 99% of the Maoists are local tribal people. Most of the Maoists living outside the forest are killed in the various encounters with the government supported police and army. Along with this she also jibes at the much hyped aspect of Globalization which came with its baggage of privatization. With privatization it brought about commercialization of essential free gifts of nature like water which became a commodity to be bought and sold. This includes the mineral rich forest of the tribals who depend on the forest for their living. In course of her conversation, Roy also traces the history of the position of the tribals in India. She says that even after Indian independence, the upper caste, the rich, the politicians treated the tribals as their property by making the forests as reserve forests; thus, depriving them of their livelihood. What she wants to drive the readers’ home is to understand that the tribals do not want the bauxite inside the forest to be

taken outside. But the capitalists, Industrialists supported by the government are hell-bend on ravaging the forest and lay it plundered. Roy's arguments seem illogical for the fast developing world. But when we look at these issues from the tribals' point of view, they have their valid reasons. She stresses that they have their own world, their own imaginations and dreams. So it is our duty to let their imaginations and dreams keep alive. Hence the necessity of keeping the minerals of the forest inside the forest. To reinforce this idea Roy cites the example of Nyamghar hills of the Orissa where companies like Vedanta were engaged in extracting bauxite. For the Khond and the Dhongria tribe it is their God, their source of existence.

Mention must be made of *Dust on the Road which* is an important path breaking activist writing of Mahasweta Devi. The book documents the history, geography and social condition of the most neglected tribes in West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. She initiated her interest in writing for the tribals after her visit to Palamau in 1965. She began to have contacts with the tribals at grassroot level. Since then 1981, she started to send in reports of her experiences in the tribal areas of Bihar and West Bengal through her Bengali Quarterly journal 'Bortika' (Torch). It was a forum for peasants, agriculture workers, the urban sub proletariat,

middle-class activist and conscientious Government. As mentioned earlier, she took leave from teaching in the college to join *Jugantar*- a Bengali News paper as an investigative report writer. She took the initiative to start this investigative, interventionist journalism as a mission to voice against the social injustice and the ill treatment of the unprivileged, the low caste and the tribals. Thus she began her personal involvement with the tribals and other marginalized and oppressed section of the society and joined hands in their struggle to establish their own right and identity.' Bortika' is used as a mouthpiece for all their plans and programmes. In it, the peasants, agricultural labourers, tribals, workers in factories, rickshaw pullers, wrote about their life and problems. The Lodha and Kheria Tribals of Medinipur and Purulia district also began to express their grievances through this pro-people journal. It depicted the life of the poor and the rich, the oppressed and the oppressor in their brutal reality, exposing the exploitation and cruelties subjected by the dominant sections in the society. Through her medium of writing she exposed the nexus between the dominant class like the landlords and the police officers, the contractors and the politicians. She also encouraged people to raise their voice about their problems and issues that needed immediate attention. Mahasweta Devi's activist writing does not get confined to

some specific issues alone. She deals with diverse problems that needed interventions. At times it could be police atrocities on tribals and non-tribals, lack of drinking water in some village, problem of someone who could not get a government credit card despite fulfilling all norms. She acts as a resource person to guide and motivate the illiterate to make themselves useful. She even drafted letters for them, such as applications for government recognition to a school, letter of complaint from marginal farmers. All those who comes to her, always get a patient hearing and got their work done. Although all her efforts do not always bear fruit but she has been able to move the establishment to do the needful and bring about results.

*Dust on the Road* also deals with number of articles written between 1981 and 1984 which focused mainly on the bonded labour system in Palamau district of Bihar. Under the bonded labour system, a person loses his status as a free labour and virtually become the 'bought labour' from whom he has taken the loan. So he forfeits the right to seek employment from anywhere else. He was also not in the position to bargain over their wages and was left with no option. This system operates in many parts of India like Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh.

Mahasweta Devi's association with various grassroots tribal organizations started in the early 1980's. Palamau Bandhua Mukti Morcha was set up in 1981. This organization brought about some kind of redemption to the labourers and farmers from the clutches of sarpanch and Mukhias of the villages who would often trap them into bonded labour. But the woes of these these labourers never ended here. The few who were liberated faced unemployment problem as they are refused job by land owners and are not given a chance to reconstruct their life. These Banduas were given names like Kamia, Seokia, Harwaha, Charwaha and Dharumaru. Of these, Dharumaru were forcefully made Banduas and so is the name. The Sarpanch was held as the most powerful man because through him all the developmental scheme from the government came. And he took the initiative to distribute to the people of the place. Mahasweta finds faults with the state government who did not take any measures to end this evil system. She also took an initiative in reviving the Lodha Shabar Kalyan Samiti in 1982. The Lodha tribes were often treated as criminals and their population decreased due to continuous persecution and atrocities meted out to them by other communities. Thus the Lodha parents have gradually stopped sending their children to school for fear of their life. Similarly, the Kheria Shabar Kalyan Samiti was set up as a grass root organization in

1983 for the Kheria tribal welfare. The developmental scheme under the centre for science and technology programmes gave this tribe necessary training for crafts and materials to earn their livelihood. These are some of pertinent issues that Mahasweta directly involves.

Mahasweta also raises her activist voice with the issues concerning the contract labour system in Bengal and Bihar. In this system labourers from Bengal and Bihar were sent to other parts of India for better facilities and better wages. They were sold away by petty landlords giving them the hope of lucrative job and better life. But most of the time these labourers were made to live a life of unimaginable miseries under their masters. The women labourers under this system became the worst victims of rape, sexual abuse and mental torture. So, in the face of this God forbidden system, many parents lost their daughters and young children without having to see their secure future. Mahasweta lashes out at the Bihar Government for their failure to cure this chronic poverty which led them to such miseries. This is not only a burning issue in Bihar but also in West Bengal where Mahasweta plays the role of a witness and activist. In several cases she gave her personal intervention to save some of the labourers who were at the mercy of the construction Babus (Contractors). The contractors exerted lot of hard labour out of these

workers but in return paid them very little. They were very powerful which made them do anything with money and political connection. This makes Mahasweta shudder in sheer disgust. She states – “India is truly mortgaged to the contractors. The only commodity the contractors have failed to lay their hands on as yet is the air we breathe”.<sup>4</sup> Another area of Mahasweta’s concern which is central to her activist writing is the land and employment problem of the tribals and their displacement. For a long decade tribals are displaced from their original places in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra and Gujarat. Due to the growth of industries and building of factories, most of the forests rich in minerals are raged to the ground for extracting mineral resources like the coal, bauxite and iron ores. Various dam building projects have also displaced thousands of tribals from their land and rendered them homeless. Mahasweta Devi points out that the tribals have been alienated in their own land. On the top of this terrible existence, the unemployment problem made their life a continuous struggle. In her article ‘The Call Never Comes’ deals with the problem of unemployment of educated tribals in West Bengal. She reminds the reader of the constitutional provision on reservation for the STs and SCs for their development and employment. But these reserved quotas are never filled mainly because they are manipulated by the

beaurocrates who take the advantage of the illiterate majority tribals. The few educated register their names in the employment exchange for years but the 'call never comes'. Corruption and misuse of privileges takes place at several levels in the establishments. As a result the tribals remain poor and illiterate and are compelled to work as labourers all their life.

Roy also echoes similar concerns for the thousands of people displaced by the Narmada Dam building project. The cultivable land and their houses are destroyed due to the flood caused by the dam waters. So to sustain their existence these labourers flock to the cities and towns in search of jobs. Being alien to the new environment and the adjustment, they go through all sorts of jobs that are available to them at a very low wage. In the cities like Delhi, the labourers are made to live in the streets and makeshift tents in dreaded conditions. As Roy points out that they are treated like some unacknowledged citizens in their own countries.

Reading of her texts show that Mahasweta Devi also protests against the extraction of rich minerals inside the forest of tribal areas in the name of development. She says that the tribal forest have become the business ground for the rich, industrialists, contractors and politicians. In all these plundering and ravaging of the wealth of the forests, the adivasis and tribal labourers are made to suffer the most. They are employed as

cheap labourers with minimum wage. Devi cites the example of such inhuman exploitation committed by the rich industrialists. One such is the presence of Roro Asbestos – Cement mines of Chaibasor in Singhbhum which are owned by the Birlas. It is known fact that the Asbestos mined at Roro is taken to Hyderabad to manufacture roof sheets A-C, pipes etc. The working conditions of the labourers under the mines are exposed to hazardous health problems. They have to cut the fiber while crawling in the pits because of the low ceiling under the mine. When they cut out the chunks of fibres, they are automatically exposed to Asbestos fibre dust. This dangerous exposure to Asbestos causes Abestosis, a scarring of lungs, leading to death. Mahaswetha records the reports of many people both miners and villagers nearby dying of Abestosis in 1981. In spite of all these health breaking hard labour, the mine owners do not give them any form of compensation. They are not provided with food and accommodation, uniforms, hospital or health facilities. They are made to satisfy themselves with a meager amount of Rs.7-10 on a daily basis. Another example she cites is the cement miners at Jhikpani who suffer from Silicosis. Silicosis is a form of pneumoconiosis characterized by the formation of small discreet nodules. Continuous intake of silicosis leads to impairment of respiratory track due to the fibriotic reactions inside the

lungs. It is produced by the inhalation of silica dust. Mahasweta takes stock of the reports of Jhikpani cement factory which releases cement dust into the air and the adjoining villages and fields and trees that are smothered under the layer of fine cement dust which contact with moisture of the atmosphere. The cement dust causes damage to crops, trees and human beings alike. Mahasweta Devi gets first hand information of the locals who live nearby where paddy fields, trees and plants have gone dry due to the release of cement dust. She reports of the villages who suffer from acute breathing problems. In anguish she virtually lashes out at the industrialists in sarcastic rethoric for their mindless mining venture as she says:

Birla builds temple, prints and distributes the Bhagavad Gita, but the miners and the tribal villagers die, reactionary organizations take care of tribal solidarity; Kolhan, the old woman, wait somewhere and watches the tamasha(game) at her children's cost.<sup>5</sup>

Both Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy have their common interest in using their pen against the kind of exploitation and ravages caused due to man's continuous destruction of nature. Instead of nurturing nature, man has learnt to take the dangerous path of destroying it. Mahasweta raised her activist voice against the plantation of eucalyptus for industrial purposes. She argues that in the forest areas, tribals and non

tribals alike, all of them in one way or other earn their living from the forest. She provides the reader with specific details of the eucalyptus plantations and its harmfulness to the fertile soil in particular and environment in general. Her findings with the environment specialist reveal that eucalyptus consumes about 80 gallons of water a day and it is not good for dry soil but suitable for the marshy land. The forest floor in an eucalyptus plantation are devoid of undergrowth. Nor does it allow other plants and animals to live, as it sucks up water from the soil. It hampers the balance in the eco system wherever it is planted. She cites the example of Terai region in Dehradun and Rishikesh where eucalyptus is planted in large areas. With the reasoning of an environmentalist she says that eucalyptus does not resist strong wind nor it is capable of offering shade. As a result the upper layer of the soil, which conserves water and nitrogen get eroded and dehydrated due to the direct exposure to the sun. She passionately pleads with the government to go for an impartial survey to find out the truth and save the eco -system. Her activist voice rings out loud and clear in the following lines:

I am concerned with India I know. My India is of the poor, starving and helpless people. Most of them are landless and few who have land are happy to be able to make the most of the given resources. To cover Purula, Bankura, Midnipur, Singbhum and Palamau with eucalyptus will rob my India of drinking and irrigation water. These are the areas where there is chronic water scarcity.<sup>6</sup>

She invites one and all to join their hands to organize anti eucalyptus movement because she finds a concealed link between eucalyptus oriented forest policy and forest bills.

Arundhati Roy also echoes similar voice in her article 'Mr Chidambaram's War' published in 'The Outlook'. In her opinion privatization allows the big business tycoons to invade the forests and loot away the natural resources. She cites the examples of coal mines in Bihar, Chhattisgarh and bauxite mines in the forest of Orissa. The tribals living in these forests for generations are deprived of their livelihood and are evicted from their homeland. As a result they raise in revolution against the government for their negligence towards the tribals and their welfare. In her latest fictional piece '*The Briefing*' mentioned earlier, Roy advocates the need for preserving the balance in the eco system. The fiction is presented in allegorical form to depict the savage and destructive side of human nature. The story is about a fort which has never been attacked and it was used as a military base for centuries. It remained closed for public with a tinge of vague mystery in it. Through the story, Roy manages to draw the attention of the public about the evils of capitalism, the cut throat competition in manufacturing artificial snow to keep the business of ski resort for ever growing tourist attractions. Due to

the destruction of natural forest, there is scanty rainfall which contributes to global warming. As a result the snow in the mountain melts down the earth causing flood and destruction. The narrator in the story is a militant commander who plans out evil ideas to plunder and ravage the earth with weapons capable of destroying the earth at the blink of our eyes. Though it is a short fiction, it is powerful enough to capture the imagination of the plight of modern life. Roy's understanding of the world we live is in many ways connected to the unbalanced distribution of natural resources like forest, rivers, mountains which are nature's gift to mankind. So when men destroy it she says nature will show its furious side which would act as an ultimate verdict. She vouches for humility on the part of the human as she says:

There ought to be a balance between curiosity, grace, humility and letting things be". She mindfully warns the reader the dangers of arrogant intervention in the eco system which would bring about enormous destruction. Her philosophy and understanding of nature sums up in the following lines – "Why can't we just be satisfied with not understanding something? It's alright. It's wonderful to not to understand something."<sup>7</sup>

Mahasweta Devi's love also for the tribals can be found in the way she has taken up their cause which is pertinent to their life and existence. She has advocated for the preservation of their language culture and literature. She has lambasted the state government for their step-

motherly attitude towards the tribal people and their literature. She does not spare the central government either. She points out that non-inclusion of the tribal history in the Indian history is a grievous injustice to an already ever decreasing tribal language. A few scholars from Santhal tribal community like Ram Chand Murmur who wrote the Santhal script are not given due recognition. Even the literary awards are given to the scholars from the mainstream. Mahasweta Devi points out that even today the mainstream society is carrying on a continuous shrewd and systematic assault on his social system, his culture his identity and existence. Such exploitations does not have only political, economic and social dimension but extends to cultural field too. She also reveals that under the shadow of these injustice, cruelties, suppression and atrocities led to the raise of Jharkhand Movement; a demand for a separate state. The never-ending slavery under the bonded labour system and attack on their culture and tradition culminated into various rebellions like the revolt of Tilka Majhi, The Kol rebellion, The Hut of Sidhu- Kan hu or Ulgulan of Birsa Munda which she considers as a desperate attempt to retain their traditional rights over forest and land as she states:

The root cause of the Jharkhand movement is the wanton appropriation of tribal land; flouting all legislations...The movement originates in the long history of deprivation and exploitation of the tribals.<sup>8</sup>

Mahasweta Devi in a way also justifies the demand for Jharkhand state and feel that the movement is taken as a separatist agenda of redressing these injustice. She also has always had concern about social issues like the caste system and evils of superstitious practices. These were some of the root causes which played as a hindrance to the growth and development of the tribals. Mahasweta digs into the real scenario behind the practice of witch hunting among the Lodhas, the Kheria Tribe, and the Santhals. To her utter dismay, it was found that in many places witch-hunting was done to take revenge on some people whom they wanted to eliminate. So it was basically a case of rivalry, enmity and instigation. By the stroke of her pen she appealed to the tribal brethren to open their eye to the realities in life and get rid of this 'age old darkness' which will bring about love and understanding among them. She also highlights the existing loopholes which prevented the tribals from getting rid of this evil practice. She reveals that the government's negligence towards the tribals has made them ignorant of the scientific and medical assistance. The government has failed to provide medical facilities or health centres to the tribal population.

Mahasweta Devi is associated with many of the tribal organitiaton. She was founding member for the following---Paschim

Banga Munda Tribal Samaj, Sugar Ganthra, Paschim Banga Lodha Sabar Denotified Tribe Kalyan Samiti, Paschim Banga Bhumji Tribal Samaj Kalyan Samiti ( Medinipur District ); Paschim Banga Bhumji kalian Tribal Samaj Kalyan Samiti (Purulia District) Pashim Banga Oraon Tribal Kalyan Samiti; Paschim Banga Sahis Schedule Caste Kalyan Samiti; Paschim Banga Harijan Kalyan Samiti ( North 24 parganas) Bharat Ker Adim Jaati Tribal Samiti ( North 24 parganas); Adibasi Kalyan Samiti ( south 24 parganas district); Palamau Zilla Bandhua Samiti ( Palamau district, Bihar; Adim Jaati Aikyo Parishad; Berhampur Municipal sweeper Association ( Murshidabad District ); Paschim Banga Baw Fakir Sangha ( Murshidabad district ) and Paschim Banga Kheriafor Sabha Kalyan Samiti ( purulia ). These are her lifelong commitment to the development of these unprivileged people. In these organizations she helps them chalk out plan and discussed ways to fight for their rights and basic needs like tube wells roads, reservation for job and opening up of cottage industries.

Rise of communalism in India is another important area where Mahsweta and Arundhati Roy voice their concern through their writing. They register their protest and fear about the increasing communal elements which is spreading its tentacles like the octopus in almost all the

parts of India. Mahasweta digs at the fundamentalist Organizations who take every chance to create and spread hatred among other religions.. In similar vein, Arundhati Roy too sends out shriller protest against the fundamental elements that have massacred thousands of innocent people in Gujarat. Many were tortured, butchered and burnt alive in this communal fire. In the riot that followed after the Godhra incident, thousands of people lost their life. Pregnant women's wombs were torn apart, children were left orphan and many lost their family and friends. In her scathing attack she points out that communal riots in Gujarat is a case of state sponsored terrorism. So it is important on the part of the good citizens in India to set the system right and tighten its hold on this terror called 'communalism.'

Therefore, it is evident that both Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy are critics of government and its policies. Mahasweta points out that even after India attained its freedom; there are signs of slavery and bondage everywhere. The developmental programmes of the government never reach the poor, the outcaste and the tribals. The tribals know very little about the various programmes- Programmes like ITDP (Integrated Tribal Development Project) and RLEGD (Rural Landless Employment Guaranteed Programme). All these funds are pocketed by the

politicians, the rich man , the middle men, the contractors and the agents who extracted only blood and sweat from the poor and the tribals. As a result of this gross negligence on the part of the government Mahasweta Devi declares that the meaning of India and Independence has lot of blurring contradictions. Mahasweta Devi also does not have much high opinion of the Western and their understanding of the world .In her interview with Gayatri Spivak she says, “ I am weary of the West. I do not know my western readers. In America I found lack of information about the Natives Americans.”<sup>9</sup>

To register her protest she had shot off letters to writers, activist, scientist, fishermen, farmer and housewives to say—“No to the Haripur plant.” So it will not be a surprise if there is another Nandigram like situation when the project is implemented. Arundhati Roy too vehemently protests against the Indian governments nuclear policies which have been mentioned in details in the previous chapter. Nor does she appreciate the Nuclear Test in Pokhran in Rajasthan or Indian Nuclear Treaty with U.S. In an interview with Christ Lyton, she points out, “The idea of India as a tolerant liberal and just society is one of the public relations shams of the century”. . Her latest work is *Listening to the Grasshoppers- Field Notes on Democracy*. In these essays, she takes on

the India and India's policies on various issues and shows the ugly side of Indian Democracy. She traces the history of the beginning and development of Hindu nationalism and neo-liberal economic reforms that began together in the early 1919's and how it has nurtured itself into the shape of a monster of distraction and doom. Like Mahasweta Devi she also opines that in the name of development and industrialization, India has reduced some section of the society at the brink of existence. The forest lands of the tribals have been reduced to a market raising capitalism. Roy analytically argues that 'progress and genocide' has historically gone hand in hand. She cites the example of state backed massacre in Gujarat, illegal detention and murky investigation on Afzal Guru Case on the Indian Parliament attack, the uncomfortable judiciary and the dangerous links that connect the politician (govern), the corporate world and the mainstream media who diligently portray only what is asked for and not what is real.

At personal level both Mahasweta and Roy are known for their controversial positions. Mahasweta Devi has the reputation of being called a radical activist. While Roy is often at the eye of storm for her for open challenge to the government policies, Mahasweta is often taken as an embarrassment, a thorn in the flesh for the West Bengal government for

all her open criticism and her bold statements. Mahasweta does not mind approaching the establishment at all level to fight against injustice of any kind. She fought against the police atrocities on various occasions. In her early stage of literary career, Devi was brushed off as a 'mere writer of historic fiction'. Even the literary contemporaries criticized her as a writer, a mere chronicler of social reality. But with her important works like *Dust on the Road*, readers have been compelled to eat back their words in retrospection. There are gruesome truths in those experiences of reality in Palamau, Singhbani, Roro etc. It is interesting that Shobha De, Indian writer and columnist calls Arundhati Roy 'The Goddess of Strange Things' who belong to that elite league of one book wonders. But it is her political writing that has kept alive her purpose of writing to bring about possible changes through activism. Her writing and her activism keep her closer to the common forgotten, neglected people of the country. Whatever she writes is often at the eye of storm among the critics, media, leaders and beauracrats. But she never recedes into oblivion, takes up controversies in her stride and stand for what she writes or speaks. She courageously expects these aspects as a part and parcel of a writer who has turned into an activist. She states ;

When it comes to my work and to myself, I am ripped apart here. I am called names, I am insulted. The subject I write about raise these huge passions... the point is that

we have to rescue democracy by being troublesome, by asking questions, by making noise.<sup>10</sup>

She always maintains that there are immediate issues that need intervention. The Dalits, the tribals and their suffering according to her falls directly or indirectly under this category. So it is her duty as a responsible writer and a citizen of democratic country to take sides. She manages to voice all these issues through her writing. Though at times her unconventional argument and analysis sounds absurd but we are urged to believe that these are her strategies to make the public see beyond what is at the surface level of issues in today's India we live. Hence there is the need for writer like Roy and Mahasweta Devi whose voices compel others to hear.

In their approach and style of writing Mahasweta often writes in simple and colloquial language. She has the knack for learning the language of the common people which helps her reduce the personal communication gap. It keeps her close to the common people for whom she uses the pen as a sword. At times she uses strong pungent lines to stress her point of view with a sense of immediacy as she states:

Roro and Jhikpani are twin mirrors to Singbham. Inhuman exploitation is to continue and children of Kolhan are to be kept in eternal bondage. In order to keep exploitation running, tribal solidarity must be broken into atoms. The witches will see

to it. Where is Kolhan, the mythical mother of the Kols? What is happening to her?  
Who has the answer?<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand Arundhati Roy's style of writing can be simple, sophisticated and unconventional. Grammar rules and idiomatic expressions are often conveniently done away with. Nevertheless the message she tries to convey is beautifully structured with her diligent use of words and phrases that has a native colouring. These features are found abundantly in her only novel *The God of Small Things*. The language she expresses is filled with feeling and depiction of reality without being fake or superficial. She confirms this attitude when she says- "My language is my style, it's not something superficial, like a coat that I wear when I go out. My style is me even when I am at home. It is the ways I think, my style is my politics."<sup>12</sup>

Mahasweta Devi does not give much importance to the art of writing or going by any theory of writing. She dismisses them and does not wish to spent time on ornamentation of words and phrases. She believes in research and documentation of resource material to write about real people, real problems about real India. So the language she uses is simple straight forward and devoid of much complexity. Both these writers have their unique individual style of writing.

Both Mahasweta and Roy inculcate positive notes in their works and their attitude to life, though they never forget to present the gloomy side of realities in the society. At times they appear radical but never fail to stir the mind and heart of a conscious reader. Mahasweta's activism and writing is basically based in India. Most of her literary outputs are written in Bengali. But with the increase number of translation of her work, there is increased number of readers. Moreover she manages to touch the core of the issues in the society and give them hope and inspiration. We can see this attitude in an answer to a question by Anosh Malekar, whether her appealing and writing alone will make any change as people have become cynical these days. Mahasweta replied:

Look at me. I have never felt cynical. I will write, I will approach, and I will appeal to the people. We have to look for solutions. This country needs sensible solutions. Anyone born and brought up in India, having benefit from education and leading a decent life, cannot afford to be cynical. We are Indians.<sup>13</sup>

Arundhati Roy also follows Mahasweta Devi and has similar views. As already discussed at length in the previous chapter, Roy's *Algebra of Justice* is full of such scathing attack on Indian government policies, dam building projects, nuclear policy, war on terror and corporatization and privatization of market which she calls the Big Programmes in the name of development and security of the country. She

rips through those issues to show the world the real picture and the gloomy India with its weight of miseries. Roy has her base in India though she writes about issues concerning global problems. She finds fascination and wonder and curiosity in writing about day to day joys and sorrows. She states – “I cannot see myself away from India as a writer it’s where I mess around.”<sup>14</sup> At the end she says with a positive note – “At this very moment there is a small god looking down to replace what is Big”.<sup>15</sup> In many of her essays, Roy challenges the idea that only experts can speak out on important issues like the globalization of the world economy, the privatization of India’s power supply by US – based energy companies and construction of dams that have dislocated thousands of poor people. Roy argues and demands for justice and reminds India of its democratic failure. She asserts herself as the added voice of the dissent and the marginalized.

Mahasweta Devi also believes in decentralization of responsibilities and empowerment to the people with their grass root organization. She feels that this would give them experience and confidence to make them feel part of the main stream administration. She expresses her anguish at the fact that even after independence; one sixth of the tribal population of India has not made to feel as a part of

decolonization process. She finds faults with the government and its distribution of power based on caste, creed and communal ideals which keep the society from development and progress. Devi has not stopped working for the people who are oppressed and marginalized in the society. Even at this ripe old age she has not stopped writing and joining in various humanitarian works. Her concern for the denotified Chhara tribal community in Ahmadabad made her travel all the way to fight for the cause of the pre-independent settlers. In spite of warning from Gujarat police, Mahasweta Devi along with her writer activist friend Ganesh Devy went to pay their personal visit to the community. She also distributed books and materials for the Chhara girls and boys who live with the stigma of being called 'criminals' by the British. This attitude is treaded and practiced down the years by the upper caste Hindus. Thus, Mahasweta evi thus can be called an activist- writer in true sense of the term. In the case of Roy, the issues she deals with are both local and global. Since she writes in English, her essays, articles and fictions have a wider audience and readership although Devi's work is also being translated into many languages apart from English. Just like Mahasweta Devi, Roy also travels a lot in her capacity and participates in many welfare organizations. Roy may have earned many names like 'Dam Blaster', 'Language Bomb' and

a 'Firebrand Author'. Whatever it takes, India needs people like Arundhati Roy, a beckon of hope for the people yet to see the light of the day.

So Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy complement each other in many ways; their forte is writing and activism. One is an activist first then a writer and the other is a writer first who became an activist. Both these authors deal with problems and issues of universal appeal like questions of equality, justice, dignity and love for humanity. Their activism and experience emit out through their writings. They use their pen as a sword to slash through the thickness of social injustice, inhuman brutalities and deprivation in many parts of India and in the world. Thus Roy has taken the footsteps of Mahasweta Devi which is a blend of writing and activism.

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Arundhati Roy, "The Colonization of Knowledge", *The Shape of the Beast* in conversation with David Brasman, 2001.( New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2008) p.31.Print

<sup>2</sup>Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak)(Calcutta:Thema,1995) p.XI.Print

<sup>3</sup>Meenakshi Sharma, *The Wordsmiths*. (New Delhi: Katha,Rupa & Corporation, 1996)p.192.Print

<sup>4</sup>Mahasweta Devi, *Dust On The Road* (Calcutta:Seagull Books,2000)p.44.

Print

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.p.56

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.p.67

<sup>7</sup>Arundhati Roy, “The Colonisation of knowledge” *The Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi:Penguin Books, 2008) p 41.Print.

<sup>8</sup>Mahasweta Devi, “Jharkhand Movement and Seperatism” *Dust On The Road*(Calcutta:Seagull Books, 2000)p.97.Print

<sup>9</sup>Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak)(Calcutta:Thema,1995) p.IV.Print

<sup>10</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Development Nationalism” *The Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi:Penguin Books, 2008) p 93.Print

<sup>11</sup>Mahasweta Devi, “Witch Sabbath at Singhbum”,*Dust On The Road*

(Calcutta:Seagull Books,2000)p.57.Print

<sup>12</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Scimiters in the Sun”, in conversation with N.Ram, *The Shape of the Beast*,” January 2001. (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008)p11.

Print.

<sup>13</sup>“Being Indian, You have no right to be cynical.” Mahasweta to Anosh Malekar (Interview)

[http://infochangeindia.org/index2.php?option=com\\_content&do\\_pdf=1&id=8172](http://infochangeindia.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=8172) Web 20 June, 2010.

<sup>14</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Development Nationalism” *The Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi:Penguin Books, 2008) p 93.Print

<sup>15</sup>Arundhati Roy, “The Greater Common Good” *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, (New Delhi:Penguin Books,2002)p53.Print

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusion**

Literature plays a major role in providing us with valuable information and insight into the changes and development in the society. The introductory chapter has traced the growth and development of activism through writing. It provides a glimpse into some of the well known women writers who are activists and how activism through art of writing has added to the already existing voice of dissent. It also traces the origin and development of activism in general and activism through literature in particular. It gives us a bird's eye view of some of the contemporary women writers who through their writing acted as an additional voice to the existing chorus of dissent voice to bring about reformation, emancipation, empowerment and change. Through the agency of writing and literature it has shaped the minds and thoughts of the ever inquisitive human being. It always gave a platform for the activists to enable their voice to be heard. The second chapter has dealt with the theory of activism and its relation to literature, mapping some of the contemporary writers across the globe and in India. Some of the mentioned writers are Toni Cade Bambara, T, Minh-ha, Marty Jezer, Patrick French, Sonia Sanchez, Chinua Achebe, Lauren Hansburry and

Alice Walker. Author of our neighbouring country, Zahida Hina and her works are also highlighted along with the Bangladeshi writer Tasleema Nasreen who is famous for her work *Lajja* and controversial writings like *Nirbachito Kolam*(Selected Columns), 1990, *Noshto meyer noshto goddo* (Fallen prose of a fallen girl), 1992 and autobiography called *Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood), 1999. Though most of Hina's writings are in Urdu, and Nasreen's in Bengali there are translated versions too. This chapter also deals with issues like problem of activism and the kind of roles writers play as activists. It also provides for a clue to the understanding of active activism and how academicians and writers interweave writing and activism. It helps one understand how a writer becomes an activist and what compels a conscious writer to be an activist and how literature and art play important role in shaping the society. It also traces the problem of the need for theory in activism. The essence of a writer in various perspectives is also mentioned in the process. It analyses and takes the role of a critique through literary interventions. In short it shows the relationship between literature and activism, a voice that echoes through the pages of art, finds its manifestation in expression. A glimpse of the works of the Indian writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sarojini Naidu, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan are cited where their

themes of social consciousness and its criticism is brought out with impartial observation. It also traces Roy's place as a writer who uses her art of writing to voice against the operations, injustice that occurs at various levels in the society.

Chapter three has dealt with Arundhati Roy's political Essays like *Algebra of Infinite Justice* and some of her essays of social, political and environmental interventions. It also includes her latest essay collections like *Listening to the Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* and Collection of Interviews titled *The Shape of the Beast*. It discusses in details Roy's politics of writing and her personal involvement in the process. With her intellectual analysis and argument she tries to bring about consciousness in the mind of the reader and the public of the immediate necessity and interventions of the exploitation and suppression of the powerless by the capitalist powerful. These essays deal with varied issues, social, economical and political both of local and global nature. It deals with her conscious and deliberate attempt at using her celebrity status and her art of writing to raise her voice of protest and concern for the most neglected people in India and international policies on war orchestrated by America in the lead. At home ground, her art of writing is used at voicing against the various policies of the government which does

not benefit the common people but the rich, the famous and the ultra rich. The range of issues would be also problems like suppression of women and their misrepresentation of their position, the oppression of the low caste and the exploitation of the poor and the tribals. She also deals with problems of the rise of communal tension and politics of communalization which is raising its ugly head in the various structures of the country.

Chapter four is an attempt at a comparative study of activist and writer Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy. By the way of comparison, the common concerns that these two authors share in terms of the issues and the subject matter that they deal with are discussed and analyzed. It also tries to analyze how these authors use their art; which is used not just for the sake of art alone but something which is grounded in reality by way of expressing their views on issues that are pertinent to the wellbeing of the society. The comparative study also tries to find out the nature of writing which place them as conscientious writers who act as the voice for the oppressed, the deprived and the marginalized in the society. Since both these writers are known for their activism and writing, writing as prior to their activism, an effort has been made to find their common ground on which they can be classified as writer- activist which distinguishes them from activist-writers who are activists first.

In her journey as a writer and an activist, Arundhati Roy has evolved herself in variety of roles. Roy's activism is about integrating the whole of her life's understanding, the power relations which binds her with the society and the state. Before Roy zoomed into the literary arena of Indian writing in English she was involved in journalistic activism though they were not much hyped as *The God of Small Things*. She was a critic of the gendered representation in her two essays called "The Great Indian Rape Trick" and "The Naughty Lady of Shady Lane", about the film *Bandit Queen* made by film maker Shekhar Kapoor. Roy's contention was that 'the question is not whether *Bandit Queen* is a good or bad film. The question is should it exist at all?' Firstly she questions the ethics of making a film on a living person. Secondly she questions the ethics of representing contested issues as established facts in a way that could well have a depilating impact on the person's life. She observes that representing rape in cinema is necessarily a re-enactment and recreation of the victim's humiliation and degradation.

Since then Roy has been engaged in interventionist writing in lending her voice of dissent through her work. Her *God of Small of Things* brought about different dimension to the way we think about our life, society we live, our democratic system and the climate and environment

which influence our life in many ways. The title, *God of Small Things* itself gives us an idea quite contrary to our traditional perception of God- the God of power and might, the God who is omnipotent, omnipresent and everything that comes as powerful and magnanimous. The novel in a way is counter hegemonic. Traditionally God has been always associated with the idea of bigness or greatness. So this concept has been extended to kings, princess and leaders who welded power to rule over the common mass. In the west, it was considered as a divine right of the king to make decisions and give out verdict on its subjects. Even in the modern day context there is the lingering hangover of this idea of bigness among the political leaders. But Roy contests this pretense in modern democracy by giving emphasis on the importance of ordinary people and ordinary lives. So in her novel *The God of Small Things*, Roy it's the ordinary that gets Roy's attention. Though they seem small and unaccounted in comparison to the big- Their grace and beauty in existence deserves love and praise. So Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a tribute to the sufferings and miseries of the lesser known 'gods', gods of small things'. Through the characters Roy speaks for the muted and the suffering and expose the brutalities of the so called big and mighty. In a way Roy's *The God of Small Thing* is a celebration of the ordinary lives and deserves our love

and concern. Though this area of activism is presented in the novel in subtle manner, they are very vocal and clear in her essays. Roy in positive notes expresses that 21<sup>st</sup> century could bring about dismantling of what is considered Big and there would be equality and acknowledgement of the contributions of the small things. She tries to clarify the title of the book in her interviews as she says:

To me *The God of Small Things* is the inversion of God. God is a big thing and God's in control. The God of small things... whether it is the children see things or the fish or the stars-there is no accepting of what we think of as adult boundaries. This small activity that goes on is the under-life of the book. All sorts of boundaries are transgressed upon.<sup>1</sup>

Today if we trace the growth and development of Arundhati as a writer, we find that her leanings are more towards the support and upliftment of the people who comes under the last dreg of social classification. Her writing are an effort to voice those issues that are often neglected under the political cloud where they are treated as minor, at the same time affects the lives of millions of poor and the deprived in India.

The theme she deals with has global dimensions though she is an author based in India. Her writings, which have caught the global attention, are issues dealing with the unjustified Iraq war, America's hegemonic war policies on Afghanistan, unjustified Israel's occupation of

Gaza a disputed Palestinian territory, military atrocities on Tamil civilians in the Sri Lankan war. She also writes about environmental issues like global warming, imbalance in eco-system due to unhealthy policies on industrialization which can destroy nature of its bounty and beauty.

Closer home, Roy through her prose pieces, criticizes the government on many fronts where she feels that it needs interventions. She registers her voice against the destructions and dispossession of the Adivasis and low class people in Narmada, repressive policies of the government towards Maoist Naxalites, army atrocities in Jammu and Kashmir and against the eviction of the tribals from their land in Kerala. She also writes in protest against the government's policies on nuclearisation, corporatization and globalization which have created a great chasm between the haves and have-nots in the country. For all these reasons Roy is called as a political activist, public intellectual and a writer activist. But Roy would not confirm herself into any compartmentalizing her position into any ideological stands. It is perhaps due to the complexities of the present time and flexibilities of situations and nature of intellectual dilemmas one is thrown into that makes her writing devoid of acceding into definite categories. She confirms in many instances where she asserts that her activism does not subscribe to any "big ideology" or a

magnanimous platform wishing to reform and reshape social life. This hint is presented unconsciously in her novel too when she remarks about her childhood in Kerala. She states that she grew up in a state where different 'religions coincide' and co-exist, where Christianity, Hinduism, Marxism and Islam...all live together and rub each other down. Through these statements Roy does not neglect the influence of 'religion' in Kerala politics but relativize them instead of embracing any ideological stand. Thus she enables (free) herself of any limitations of theory or ideologies but operates from a position where she can view the gaps and silences of issues that affect human life. In a nutshell she refuses to take into any dictums offered by our contemporary society and where there is clear cut division between writers, academicians and activist. She also refuses to retreat into ivory towers (art for art's sake) where writers are expected to operate and do their service by producing chunks of literary works. It may sound weird and intriguing but Roy carries of her position with great dignity. The most interesting aspect of Roy is that she is both a celebrity writer and a political activist who vouches for peace. She blends all these aspects of writing and doing, thinking and acting which are cleverly fused together. They neither show radicalism or ideologism. This is clearly evident in her statement in an interview given at the world social Forum in

early 2003. She said- “When I write, I don’t even think consciously of being political-because I am political. I know that even if I wrote fairy stories, they would be political”. She also acknowledges the facts that literature and politics are not ‘two separate things’- which does not mean that there is not a world of “difference between literature and propaganda”. To Roy’s understanding, ‘writing and acting are not at odds but perception of a “way of being”’.

It has been seen in the study that one of the major issues that Roy often strongly writes about is the big corporate world and policies and production of war machine, which are inseparably linked. Roy with her power of pen exposes the often hidden agendas that keep this link intact. She analytically presents that war machine and the policies of war is designed and framed according to whims and desires of the market policies which needs stability and its saleability in the global scenario. For all these, Roy points her finger at America’s selfish interest in creating war climate (its various invasions) in order to keep the business of war engagement and production of mass weapons. To Roy, America has, of recently did not spare India in including it the field of practice in implementing this war climate. She cites the example of the development of the nuclear bomb or the nuclearisation of India, construction of mega

dams and the extraction of rich mineral resources from the poor tribal lands like West Bengal, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. Her vehement attack has been pointed at these issues. In a logical analysis, she has argued that dam construction is a part of the global market dominated by western corporate policies. And nuclear capability (nuclearisation) is an instrument to give the people a sense of security which is once again a psychological strategy. She calls on the readers and the public to see this unsuspecting link in 'privatization, globalization and religious fundamentalism'. In the name of constructing big dams-India is trading its power sector to the multinational firms like the Enron. And on the other hand government is diverting the attention of the volatile situation by putting issues on national security and demonstration on religious propogandas (like election agendas like building temple on the site of Babri masjid. As she states- "With one hand, you are selling the country out to western multinationals; and with the other, you want to defend your borders with nuclear bombs".<sup>2</sup>

Roy throws light on the fact that Dam building policy was taken up as major agenda in India. Politicians like Nehru then the Prime Minister of India had taken it as a mega achievement, a yardstick to measure India in terms of modern development. Nehru even proclaimed

that “dams are the temples of modern India”. India still nurses this ambitious project by sanctioning and giving green signal for many dam building projects. In her work, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*’ under the title “ The Cost of Living”, deals in detail of the harmfulness of dam building projects which causes human destruction and ecological imbalance.

Roy in her typical traits does not just satisfy us with sketchy ideas on dam building projects but also has done lot of research into all her elaborate account of the pros and cons of its results. She reveals (already mentioned in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter) that the benefit that people receive in having dam is outstripped by the cost the government has to incur. She cites the example of the thousands of people being uprooted by the reservoirs of dams in Narmada valley. The continuous agitation in the Narmada Bacho Andolen is a living example of such movement where people are directly affected by dams.

Beside these Roy bring to our notice the policies behind these dam building programmes. In her opinion in India dam construction is aggravated by the impact of globalization which again is link with the policies on neo-liberalism, structural understanding and privatization. Privatization policy is very harmful and affects millions of common

people when essential substance like water comes under privatization. In the process, the policy does not become an administrative arrangement but a brute monopoly over the daily lives of millions of people. It becomes a replacement or taking over of public power and turns into a kind of autocratic rule. In this the meaning of democracy is abused by its misuse. So power politics plays a major role in controlling the lives of the millions. She draws a clear picture when she states-“ Dam builders want to control public water policies just as ‘power utility companies want to draft power policies, and financial institutions want to supervise government investment’”. She throws the question at the reader and answers it also- “What does privatization really mean? And herself deliver the answer to us that:

Essentially, it is the transfer of productive public assets from that state to private companies. Production assets include natural resources; earth, forest, water, air. These are assets that the state holds in trust for the people it represents. In a country like India, seventy percent of the population lives in rural areas. That’s seven hundred million people. Their lives depend directly on access to natural resources. To snatch these away and sell them as stock to private companies is a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has no parallel in history.<sup>3</sup>

Roy suggests several examples of such privatization policies. It affected the lives of the common people. She cites the case of Bolivia government which privatized the public water supply system in the city of Cochabamba and signed a forty-year lease with a consortium headed by

Bechtel, the giant U.S. engineering firm. As she says, “The first thing Bechtel did was to raise the price of water; hundreds of thousands of people simply couldn’t afford it anymore.”<sup>4</sup> Thus she predicts of similar problems in India when universal necessities like water comes under privatization. Roy also points out that millions of people have no access to safe drinking water, while over eighty percent of rural households still do not have electricity. And this depiction most gravely felt by the Adivasis and the Dalits who are affected by dam building projects.

Roy also argues against the Indian governments nuclear policies. In her opinion the construction of mega dams is closely linked with militarism on the advancement of military power- which again the extension of development of nuclear weapons of mass destruction. In her writing Roy voices against the detonation of the first nuclear bomb in Pokhran which she considers as a beginning of a road to destruction. Thus Roy lent her pen to ask for reasoning on the part of the government and the leaders involved to safeguard the integrity of the human interest. Among other things, Roy is also very much concern about governments policies and “war on terrorism’ both in India and abroad. She arrogantly opposes the high-handed and loft-sided understanding and definition of terrorism. She also holds the media responsible for all the

misrepresentations and manipulation of authentic issues and diverting the attention of the problems of real concern. She also raises her concern of the misguided excuses for waging wars in the name of national honour and pride as it would lead to the dead and destruction of many and cause immense suffering of the common people. One can imagine the grim fear and suspicion of Roy over war destruction in the following when she wrote about Afghanistan:

Put your ear to the ground in this part of the world, and you can hear the thrumming, the deadly drumbeat of burgeoning anger. Please, please stop the war now. Enough people have died. The smart missiles are just not smart enough. They are blowing up whole warehouses of suppressed fury.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Roy, through her art of writing makes interventions on issues which may hamper the well being of the common people. Her writing reveals the social conscience and act as weapon against injustice and all kinds of oppression in the society. She in a way plays the role model of a writer who takes up social responsibility with passion. She put forwards question regarding the social responsibilities of writers, literature and art. She says in "Power Politics"- "what is the role of writers and artist in society?" Can it be fixed, described, characterized in any definite way? Should it be?"<sup>6</sup> To make a reference, Edward Said had also raised similar question in his Reith lecturers in 1993, which was published as

“Representation of the Intellectual.” He reminds the reader that though he is known as a renowned writer, he was suspected to be a pro-Palestinian political activist. In the introduction he says, “I was accused of being active in the battle for Palestinian rights, and thus disqualified for any sober or respectable platform at all.” In the lecture he tries to stress the point on the public role of the intellectuals, whether they should be operating from the position of “Insider- outsider” of their domain. He explains that if intellectuals were to be complete ‘outsider’, they would enjoy accolades for their work and safely retreat to the ivory towers from where they displease none. But if the intellectuals were complete ‘insider’ they would become accomplices and sycophants of the ruling power thus a robbery of the intellect of its critical edge. “Insider”, he says, “promote special interest, but intellectuals should be the ones to question patriotic nationalism, corporate thinking and a sense of chase, racial of gender privilege.” In his opinion, the “principal duty” of intellectuals, writers and artist resides in the search for “relative independence” from social pressures- an independence which justifies his characterization of the intellectual “as exile and marginal, as armature, and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power”.

Arundhati Roy's attitude and outlook is similar to that of Edward Said though it is not consciously stated. She seems to take up a position where as a writer, she does not need to be influenced by the pressures of the social norms and the political condition but lend her voice, which is independence and unbiased in its nature. Roy reveals two ideas to provide some clarity about writer's positions in 'Power Politics'.

First she says ;

There are no rules, second there are no excuses for bad art". Both seem to complicate each other especially the first rule. Because the absence of rules does not mean that everything is left to the whims of the writer. So "there is a very thin line," that separates the strong, true, bright bird of imagination from the synthetic, noisy barble.<sup>7</sup>

The point that Roy wants to drive home is that the writer or the intellectual constantly has to search for that thin line and allow one to be measured by its standard. She confirms this in the following:

"The thing about this thin line is that once you learn to recognize it, once you see it, it's impossible to ignore. You have no choice but to live with it to follow it through".<sup>8</sup> Thus Roy believes in cross disciplines to see the connection between the dispossession and the despair created by corporate globalization, flowing into the bitterness of partition, flowing into the rhetoric of cultural nationalism which create such as this.

So when we consider the public role of the writers or intellectuals this means that there cannot be fixed rules dictating either specific social obligation or else mandating radical exile. So it required that a writer should have sufficient knowledge of what he or she writes and fully feels accountable for it. And she adds that whichever way one chooses, there is no escape: “There’s no innocence; either way you are accountable.” Even if one refuses to accept any social responsibility, they are aware that by joining the ivory tower (free from the social responsibility) they inevitably damage their art. In my opinion, perhaps this is an area (thin line) from which Roy’s writing operates. Once again the reader is clarified in the following lines- “There is an intricate web of inordinate rigour, and responsibility that art that writing itself, imposes on a writer. Its singular, it’s individual but nevertheless it’s there”.<sup>9</sup>

Roy’s writings are full of open ended view points and questions which creates rooms for discussion, debate and possible solutions. At the same time she is conscious of the urgencies of situations where one cannot afford to remain ambiguous about or refrain from speaking the truth about matters that need immediate attention. This is the reason, perhaps why Roy cannot be blamed or pinned down by the forces that are against her activism through literary interventions. With time she

has evolved herself in a position where she has the support of large number of common people, scholars and intellectuals who take into account the importance of social responsibility as a writer. She has chosen the medium of writing to speak the truth rather than to bow down to the pressures of power. She has maintained that distinctive uniqueness of an intellectual as per as her literary concerns. This, one can achieve only through sincere love, concern and commitment to humanity where the majority are the teeming large number of downtrodden, deprived and suffering lot. She is an inspiration and hope for people who lives in miseries and loses under the ravages of wars and calamities. (both political and social). Arundhati Roy's writing also is rooted in the many resistance movements in the history of India. She does not conform of belonging to any particular group of dissenters or resistant movements nor does she confess to be a professional activist. At the same time she vouches that each person has to find a way to make active contribution in joining mass voice of dissent.

Roy depicts an objective picture of India where majority live below the poverty line in wretched condition. The development and the fruit of modernization are enjoyed by the elite few. Besides this, India also reels under communal hatred, riots, and bonded labourers, caste problems

which are shocking and disheartening. On the parallel line, there is the meteoric like rising among the rich who are turning to millioners and the urban Indians are busy indulging in the latest benefits of techno savvy world as a result of digital revolution. The situation is such that India is reeling under the dilemma of the traditional pull and the fatal attraction of the techno world. So there is the deepening gulf between the few globalizing Indian elite and the large masses of common people. This widening gap is expressed in the following lines :

It is as though the people of India have been rounded up and loaded into two convoys of truck, huge big one and a tiny little one – with the tiny convoy heading towards “glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world”, while the large one “melts into darkness.”<sup>10</sup>

In describing the situation in India Roy’s writing also reflect the condition in the present world with America playing the leading role in many of its policies. Roy in fact denounces the west and holds it responsible for waging of wars across the world. She personifies America as a person whose histories are spongy with blood of others. She considers it as a manufacturer and inventor of colonialism, apartheid, slavery, ethnic cleansing, germ warfare, and chemical weapons. This aspect is revealed to us in the form of the ongoing “war on terrorism” and importance given for the up gradation of homeland security. In Roy’s opinion: “Operation

Enduring Freedom is ostensibly being fought to uphold the American way of life, their pride in being the super power in the world". She also predicts a futuristic dooms day in the development of the global militarization with the increase in defense marketing. In her appeal there is almost a looming large gloom and danger in the process. Nevertheless she indicates hope and commitment for a better life. And 'hope' as she would like us to understand is not just a fantasy and desire but our readiness to lend our ear to the ground realities around us even in the times of despair. This can be achieved only through our act of love and concern for the suffering majority.

In the process Roy does not exaggerate or romanticize the issues that she writes about. What she expresses is the essential goodness and dignity of being human. She states – "There is beauty yet, in this brutal damage world of ours – hidden, fierce, and immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with grace from ... We have to seek it out, nurture it, and love it".<sup>11</sup> Thus she believes in a democracy (India) which has not only a constitutional framework but also should have a structural promise which will secure the future of our nation.

Roy's work and her growth as an activist can be seen in the ways she participates in the society she lives. At present she is involved in her political activism whenever she felt that it was necessary. There are multi-facet areas where she is involved. For instance, she visited the Maoist or the Naxalite areas to make a fact finding study of the complex standoff between the Government and the terrorist organization. Public accuses her of being a pro- Maoist. But if we look at the bigger picture, even the government, the intellectual, the media and the public is confused about this complicated situation. It is basically because the Maoists are not from the aggressive neighboring countries like Pakistan, China or Bangladesh but our own Indian brothers and sisters. Centuries of deprivation and dispossession have made them come out in rebellion. Roy in her article, "Walking With the Comrade (Outlook, September 2010) gives us the glimpse into the world of the so called Maoist or Naxalites. As Roy tries to interpret the naxalite problem is not a new issue but an old issue which refuse to die because of many grievous problems. So she opines that the government needs to address this burning problem from several angles pertaining to (taking into account) the historical, economical, social and psychological background of these rebels. The complexities of the issues need gentler treatment keeping their interest and

development in mind. Humanistic approach is what she desires from the government. For all these interventions that she makes through her writing, Roy has garnered critics and supporters in equal measure. While one section called her an irresponsible writer, the others think that she is an intellectual with a meddlesome attitude. In the midst of all these circumstances, Roy through her medium of writing highlights real problems of the Adivasis who are oppressed, suppressed and dislodged from their natural habitat which is rightfully theirs. So she evokes a sense of dignity and respect for the tribals. What she tries to drive home, is the tribal majority naxalite organization, more than just getting help from the government it is a question of their living in a particular environment, their sense of culture and tradition and their imagination of a world of their own which are as old as the hills.

The other areas where Roy makes interventions through writing are about preservation of eco system which is an important issue. Its importance gain momentum after the world reports of the grave problem of global warming due to climate change. This particular issue is beautifully depicted in the form of an allegory in her short fiction, *The Briefing* (already mentioned). Besides these Roy also highlights the

problems of big dam projects and illegal mining of natural resources which will cause destruction and imbalance in the eco-system.

Roy's intervention through her writing has given space for thinking and debating over issues that are concerned with human life and environment around us. So the saga of protest against many of the mega power project continues in various part of the country. Even in the North Eastern states there are similar protests by NGOs which has awakened the minds of the public. The student communities and people living near lower Subansiri hydel power project have begun to raise their voice against the increase in the dam projects across the rivers in Assam. It was set up in 2003 by NHPC. (National Hydro Electric Power Corporation) At present it is facing severe criticism from many environmentalists and pressure groups which are demanding the scraping of the construction works, citing adverse environmental problems. The voices of activist writers like Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy get merged in all these myriad voices calling for positive changes of the people and for the people. This aspect does not get confined to industrial projects alone. There are protest voices against atrocities from the army and state police too. Today politicians too have taken clues from these writers.

Development does not mean stifling the voice of the poor, downtrodden, tribals and dalits.

Many resistance movements in India were born out of this deep gap between the rich and the poor. For instance, the agrarian movement in Naxalbari (Naxalite upsurge) rose against the feudal oppression which extended to Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and in parts of Kerala. The Chipko Movement in Uttarakhand Himalayas, village women resisted commercial forest felling. Then there was the rise of Adivasi movement which formed the Shramik Sangha, in Dhulia district of Maharashtra. Initially it was a struggle to fight for restoration of tribal land occupied by settlers from outside. But later on it was a fight for honour and dignity as tribal women were subjected to harassment and sexual abuses. Similarly, down in the southern state of Kerala Fisher workers movement broke out because of the crisis in the traditional fishery sector in the wake of mechanized fishing.(Competition from the modern way of fishing) The trends in this struggle saw the deprived and the suppressed section in the Indian society fighting against the unequal structural arrangement of the existing government at that time, though different in their levels of mobilization.

Arundhati Roy's writing finds its root in the history of resistant literature of these movements. She says that the Maoists rebellion has reemerged many a time because of their desperate condition of poverty and injustice and inequality from every side. Activist writer Mahasweta Devi too has raised these facts and issues in several of her fiction and activist writings. The Ho, the Oraon, the Kols, the Santals, the Mundas and the Gonds have the records of fighting against the British, the Zamindars and the money lenders. The rebellion was always crushed but it failed to conquer the rebellious spirit of the people. Even after independence these tribals continue to suffer from negligence and isolation by the Indian government. The gravity of the situation is described in her language as typical of Arundhati as she says in her essay "Walking with the Comrade" – "It is the epicenter of war. It is an upside down, inside out town... in Dantewada, the police wear plain clothes and the rebels wear uniforms. The jailed superintendent is in jail. The prisoners are free. The rapist gives speeches in the bazaar".<sup>12</sup>

Roy also questions the achievement of India after independence. She puts up a hefty figure of 830 million people of India live on less than twenty rupees a day and starve while millions of tons of food grains remain rotting in the government godowns to be eaten by rats.

Due to chronic hunger and malnourishment of children die every year before they reach the age of five. Such acute problems, children turn into thieves and robbers to kill and loot when they grow up. Thus she questions- “Is this is known as enjoying the fruit of modern development?”(Statesman, September 11, 2010) In the same way Roy writes about the Kashmir issue and tries to connect the aspirations of the people of Kashmir. They have gone through years of atrocities in the valley and that it has now desire for independence from the Indian government. The simmering tension in the valley and the growing separatists’ agitation seems to throw life out of gear. Roy tries to get into the psyche of people for whom ‘Azadi’ is only means of integrating their aspiration. We get a better picture of the situation in the article by Ben Aronoldy in the “The Christian Monitor”. He writes, “Amid a summer of heat, regional flooding and separatist protest across Indian controlled Kashmir, one of the unlikely grievances mentioned by rock-throwing youth is water. India is building a series of hydro-electric dams in Jammu And Kashmir State but much of the power they generate will be distributed to the wider Indian grid. For a separatist mind in Kashmir these represent the theft of a birth right and yet another reason to idealize independence.”<sup>13</sup> The disgruntled youth he says, accuse India of hydro-

power project in the state to generate electricity for rest of the country even as Kashmir deals with power shortage. These are intricate problems that India has to tackle dealing with Kashmir. The valley still lives in the darkness of bandh, strikes and curfew. Dissatisfied with the ruling government and paramilitary atrocities; the youth in the valley have resorted to stone pelting and destroying government building. Roy feels that the people of Kashmir feel alienated from the center and they are in direct war with the government. It has gone to such an extreme situation that the people in the valley are looking for azadi rather than staying with India.

Even in the Northeastern states like Nagaland, Assam and Manipur have similar problems. In short there is chaos everywhere and the neighbouring states are at logger heads with each other. There are not only writers but also civil societies who are weary of misgovernment and atrocities committed by the army. Arundhati Roy's writing is part of her intervention and participation to place her protest against the policies of the government which will benefit the elite few. Using writing as a medium of art she basically pleads for the people whose voices have been muted for generations. In an interview to CNN-IBN, Roy says that India's red corridor is turning redder, pocker marked by ambushes, encounters,

fake encounters, rape and torture. Arundhati Roy in her essay titled “The Trickle-down Revolution”, voice her protest against a particular killing<sup>14</sup>Roy also criticizes the Indian government’s plan for the grand preparation for the Commonwealth Games where as in many parts of the country, common people bleed due to poverty. She cites the example of many protest marches which takes place in Jantar Mantar in Delhi where she also participated in some of these protests. The representatives of the more than 60 million people who have been displaced by rural destitution, by slow starvation, by floods and drought, by mines, steel factories and aluminum smelters, by highway and express ways, by the 3, 3000 big dams built since independence and now by special Economic- Zones. She adds that justice which is a grand beautiful idea is being reduced to mean human rights. Mahasweta Devi too concurs with Roy’s idea of the hang over imperial mentality among the Indian elite. Roy says – “The old empire may be dead, not the tradition of servility.”<sup>15</sup>

Mahasweta Devi echoes similar sentiments in her work “Imaginary Maps” about the tribals and the need for understanding their way of life. She says, “To build it you must love beyond reason for a long time. For a few thousand years we haven’t loved them, respected them. Where is the time now, at the last gaps of the century? Parallel ways, their

world and our world are different, we have never had a real exchange with them, and it could have enriched us.”<sup>16</sup>

Gayatri Spivak too speaks of world's constantly changing maps which is measured by economical developments than national boundaries. So in this process of great changes, it is only the aboriginals who are pushed to the margins for the contemporary history and geography of the world's civilization to be established.

Arundhati Roy's life and work are integrated with the life and aspiration of the common mass. Her writings are reflective of the experiences and understanding of the world around her. Her medium of writing is her forte and expressions of these writings become her activism. Roy's conception and understanding of human problems springs from her inner desire to get into the minds of the basic needs of man. She integrates all of her life's understanding through the understanding of the ordinary life for whom she does not fear taking sides. All these views and aspirations are channeled through her writing, thus activism is manifested in the process. Her contribution for the welfare of the people and her participation in their programmes is a part of her active activism. Thus Arundhati Roy is a role model for writers who seek to use their art of writing as an influencing factor in the life of the people around us.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Arundhati Roy, *The Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi:Penguin Books, 2008) p 33. Print.

<sup>2</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Colonisation of Knowledge” *The Shape of the Beast* (New Delhi:Penguin Books, 2008) p.47.Print.

<sup>3</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Power Politics” *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2002) p153.Print.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.p.153

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.p.256

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.p.190

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.p.192

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.p.192

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.p.191

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.p.188

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.p.37

<sup>12</sup>Arundhati Roy, “Walking with the Comrades” *Outlook*, March 29, 2010.p.26

<sup>13</sup>“The Other Kashmir Problem:India and Pakistan tussle over water”

[www.csmonitor.com](http://www.csmonitor.com) Web 20 August 2010

<sup>14</sup>Arundhati Roy, “The Trickle-down Revolution” *Outlook*, 20th September

2010.p.26

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.p.36

<sup>16</sup>Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (Calcutta:Thema, 1995)p.197.Print

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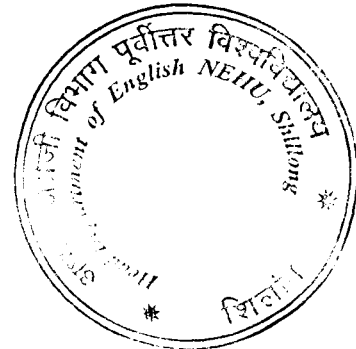
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