

## LITERATURE AS THE MEDIUM TO NURTURE WORLD CITIZENSHIP FOR PROMOTING PEACE AND MITIGATING WAR

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### Abstract

*The similarity of religious sources and the richness of their internal diversity triggered the curiosity of man in the postmodern world. As a result, man attempted to embrace differences, but scepticism in the air often led to the demise of tolerance, and havoc resulted from the failure to foster understanding. The root cause for this is internal war, war with one's own self, worse than physical atrocities. Buddha, Jesus, Swami Vivekananda and Muhammed won their sense and sensibilities, realized their inner selves and transformed into universal beings or world citizens with no differences, no conflicts, no war and only peace. Today, when the world is torn by war between nations, races, gender and religion, the attitude of world citizenship can mitigate it and primarily for this, internal war has to be mitigated through reading, thinking and understanding. There lies the significance of education in Literature. Moreover, World Literature as a genre comprises all didactic writings that have overcome the threat of time. These works that have become a choice of very few in this era should be the solution in schools and universities to nurture world citizens to ensure individual peace, social peace and collective peace.*

**Key words:** *Peace, War, Conflict, Nation, Race, Gender, Religion, World Literature, Spiritual Literature, World Citizenship.*

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- Rajeev Nair

“**M**ay HE who is the Brahman of the Hindus, the Ahura-mazda of the Zoroastrians, the Buddha of the Buddhists, the Jehovah of the Jews, the father in heaven of the Christians give strength to you to carry out your noble idea.” - Swami Vivekananda

Prof. Betty Reardon once commented, “Peace does not come with our DNA. To reach peace we need to teach peace”<sup>1</sup>. War, the most common word found everywhere in this contemporary era, is as similar to the status of man’s most poisonous enemy AIDS. Man may identify many reasons for these wars, some of them being religious, a matter of faith. However, a closer look at the incidents of war can help one understand the hidden socio-political agendas also. Such materialistic competitions have made mankind become increasingly unkind towards his fellow beings in terms of differences with regard to gender, religion, race, ethnicity, colour, class and what not. Scholars and philosophers may preach commonality of human life amidst the diversity of ideas in order to bring a world of peace. But they must understand that mere absence of war, in this context, will not bring peace. As sexually transmitted diseases are results of man’s quest for never satisfying emotional outrages, wars, as said in the opening lines of UNESCO’s Constitution, “begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, seeds must be sown to win the distractions of mind and see the bigger horizon of life and universe. Though there are different dimensions like ideational approaches, cultural approaches, realistic views and pacifists views exist to justify the acts of war, when one thinks about the ideology of the world as single global village, the question posed by the late Stuart Bremer, “Who Fights Whom, Where, When, and Why?”<sup>3</sup>, seems to be of great importance.

Since the contemporary era has created a lot of chaos in the name of various belief systems, it is imperative for us to look at what different religions say. Hinduism stands for tolerance and peace. Usually all Hindu prayers end with the word 'shanti' meaning 'let there be peace within us, in our family and in the world'. Judaism warns a man against indulging in violence and Buddha preaches 'not to kill' any one in our acts. Islam teaches one not to hurt humanity and Christianity preaches that one who uses the sword will become prey to the same. The founder of Taoism teaches that a good ruler need not have weapons which are signs of evil. Even after following all these scriptures and preaching, people today are characterised by racism, sexism, heterosexism, lookism, linguicism, ageism and classism. Man appreciates all ideologies and even praises the diversity of systems. However, since the essence of oneness is not perceived by the mind, differences arise and peace is found neither in the thoughts nor in the actions of people. With such differences it is impossible to have progress of any civilization and though, of late, mankind has started realizing the deadly deeds he has experienced, the new world order of peace can be brought in only by a conscious and selfless spirit of sharing and understanding, realising the oneness in everyone, which in other way may be termed as 'Peace'.

The UN Declaration in 1998 states that

"a culture of peace is a set of values, attitudes, traditions, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reflect and inspire: respect for life and for all human rights; rejection of violence in all its forms and commitment to the prevention of violent conflict by tackling their root causes through dialogue and negotiation; commitment to full participation in the process of equitably meeting the needs of present and future generations; promotion of the equal rights and opportunities of women and men; recognition of the right of everyone to freedom of expression, opinion and information; devotion to principles of freedom, justice, democracy, tolerance, solidarity, cooperation, pluralism, cultural diversity, dialogue and understanding between nations, between ethnic, religious, cultural and other groups, and between individuals."<sup>4</sup>

This holistic definition of 'Peace' demands a lot of initiative and openness from humans. It just does not come from one's spirit as in this war-torn world one encounters conflict almost all the time. Where should the change be initiated? One can find an apt platform only in schools and universities. Schools and Universities are the

forests of budding thoughts and actions. If those thoughts and actions can be guided, strengthened and spiritually purified, a propitious civilisation could be nurtured. Therefore the youth is to be targeted and cleansed.

Kang Song wrote after reading UNESCO's report on Culture of Peace: A Move Towards Peace And Peace-Building, "Mahatma Gandhi also stressed the importance of educating youth about peace at an early age – if we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children."<sup>5</sup> The solution lies in the perspective that schools and other educational institutions should integrate in their curriculum varied themes like tolerance, diversity, empathy, mutual understanding and acceptance, unity etc. Apart from all this children from early childhood should be exposed to cultural learning and develop the skill to appreciate and understand the diversity of culture. In fact, one can understand that a lack of basic understanding of 'Peace Culture' is one which resulted the conflicts between 'the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, the Israelis and Palestinians in Israel; the Bosnian Serbs and the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo; the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda; and some Christians and Moros in Mindanao'<sup>6</sup>. A devoted reading about world religions and cultures and the understanding of the similarity in the outcomes of religious practices can pave the way for a new world order of harmony and peace. In plain language, it can be claimed that studies in various streams related to Humanities and Arts to be encouraged at school and university levels.

The English poet and critic Herbert Read, considered to be a pioneer in the field of peace education, argues that the best tool to develop moral values is Arts. He criticizes the increasing trend towards Science and argues that, "aesthetic education properly conceived is also moral education; the ethical and aesthetical are intimately linked in this theory."<sup>7</sup> If we consider literature as the best medium to advocate peace and end war, there are many questions to be taken up for discussion: In what ways are the social issues addressed in literary writings? By only reading about cultural bias and racism, according to individual choices, can one develop the culture of peace? To what extent can an ordinary writer develop empathy and understanding in readers? Therefore what we need to focus is not just whether literature can be a source to understand social

issues but whether literature can help create a platform for critical reflection and become a vehicle for change in the world by making the reader understand the reality.

Literature, a form of Arts, is emotive and subjective, and therefore it can help the audience empathise with the characters and feel for them. This can even create cathartic effect and bring out the intended outcome in the audience. Since these works of art and artists get motivation from social and historical contexts, the imaginative power and catchy imagery with which they get depicted can in fact shape the thoughts of perceivers. However, perception is again subjective. This can be related to the Dada Movement of 1916 that was developed to portray the problems of the time. It was more like an 'anti-war art' and could not achieve the intended goal of bringing about peace. In the article entitled 'Promoting Peace through the Arts: The Role of Anti-War and Peace Art in Building Cultures of Peace' written by Dr. Carol Rank, the author says, "In Peace Studies we talk about 'negative peace' as that which is defined by the absence of war, and 'positive peace' as all the conditions that contribute to a sustainable peace. In parallel to that we have 'anti-war art' (negative imagery) and 'peace art' (positive imagery)."

To understand what 'peace art' in 'peace literature' is, the objective of such literature has to be studied. Since there is no such specific genre as 'Peace Literature', writings on peace are not directly focused on peace. It is only through interpretation and reinterpretation will one be able to understand the quality of the writing and the message it has for the audience:

In Bakhtinian terms, the genre of peace literature paradoxically belongs to what has elsewhere been called epic novels, which explore representational tensions between epics and novels to create syntheses and synergies that would not be achievable otherwise.....Philosophically, Miller calls genres "a form of social knowledge—a mutual construing of objects, events, interests and purposes that not only links them but makes them what they are: an objectified social need." it is as old as literature itself, because peace literature as a genre is determined not by a formal structure but by the ways in which readers do and do not interact with it.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, one can understand that the culture and practice of peace exists in all civilizations. The key to unlock this treasure of peace is to study literature with

reference to History and Philosophy. In simpler terms, literature in the epics and scriptures of different cultures can be deemed as the best source to understand and propagate peace. However, critics may question whether these writings which are classified as classics could be of any help to the modern world and future generations. At this juncture, one must understand that the longest poem in the world, *The Mahabharata*, is a living literature than a classical one like *The Ramayana*, *The Iliad* or *Aeneid*. The well-carved plot structure comprises not just stories of kings and kingdoms; it is more of human actions and effects. These writings can be taken up as the perfect guide to teach man what his basic duty is.

Classics may be old and outdated but lessons from those writings are always applicable to any society we live in. There are works on this field which stood the test of time. For example, the works of Tagore, Owen, Tolstoy, Shakespeare etc. In fact all these find their apt places in World Literature.

Literature allows us to transmit the profound meanings of a determinate culture, its stereotypes, archetypes and collective in conscience, creating the possibility of social change through a critic that is able to act into subliminal world of emotions.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the writings that can change man's perception of the world are *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse, *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Four-Gated City* by Doris Lessing, *Franny and Zooey* by J. D. Salinger, *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac, *Island* by Aldous Huxley, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'Connor, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, *The Bible*, *The Quran* etc.

Whatever and however the situations may be, the products of age old civilizations which are the religious and epic texts could be widely considered as the basis to promote peace and form Peace Literature. The spiritual lessons in these texts are quite powerful in bringing about a change. It is very disappointing to note that even after many international conferences and policy decisions on peace, spirituality has not yet been recognised. Today, when the world is in a kind of meltdown, peace can be initiated only by teaching the growing generation various themes related to peace. This can be also achieved only through advocating peace through writing especially those that are taken from religious scriptures. Swami Vivekananda rightly says in his essay 'The Secret of Work',

Helping others physically by removing their physical needs, is indeed great, but the help is great according as the need is greater and according as the help is far-reaching. If a man's wants can be removed for an hour, it is helping him indeed; if his wants can be removed for a year, it will be more help to him; but if his wants can be removed for ever, it is surely the greatest help that can be given him. Spiritual knowledge is the only thing that can destroy our miseries for ever; any other knowledge satisfies wants only for a time.<sup>10</sup>

Imparting spiritual knowledge has become the most demanded service in our contemporary world. Certain movements are already in place and are successful to a certain extent. However, the basic obstacle is the difficulty in finding spiritually-enlightened people or so called 'sages' or 'prophets' or 'messengers' to teach spirituality. Therefore the only possible option for us is the literature gifted by them. Spiritual Literature is not the literature of one country, it is of the world. That is why the epics of India, Hindu scriptures, holy books of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism are considered to be part of World Literature or Global Literature. Buck and Louie have written in their paper, "Critical reading of global literature provides an opportunity for youth to read the world and connect their own identity and experiences to others hailing from differing backgrounds"<sup>11</sup>

"The kind of culture, literature, values and norms that people exposed to and absorb and what they read and watch determines the basic ideas, ethics and norms which affect and motivate them throughout their lives. Religions which are an integral part of our culture are often based on stories and parables. It is of crucial importance, therefore, that those stories which are told and which we listen to and internalise and watch on television and in films should be stories of peace and harmony that create and build and they do no destroy. When people come to know and respect the culture of "the other", mistrust and fears are abated and this provides a chance of tolerance, confidence and acceptance. The awareness of oneness of humanity and the consciousness of common values and norms in all cultures, promote the necessary new identity of the 'global citizen' in addition to the identity of a particular culture.

Advancing towards global unity with diversity. In a true spirit, it can be said that Literature can be used as a missile or patriotic missile too.”<sup>12</sup>

Literatures throughout the ages, basically those which are with spiritual undertones, have secrets to achieve peace and can transform our lives and actions. These writings help in erasing the ‘them and us’ culture and unite the differences to nurture the quality of World Citizenship. Patricia Mische explains that “the transformation that we should seek should not only be the transformation of our society, but also the transformation of our spirit because the inner transformation inspires the outer work. She concludes that the inner and outer transformations are inseparable parts of one whole”<sup>13</sup>. Once the attitude of world citizenship is achieved like that adopted by Swami Vivekananda, there will be no question of war in this world.

O Lord, Lead me from the unreal to the real. Lead me from the darkness to light. Lead me from death to immortality. May there be peace, peace, and perfect peace.

–BrihadaranyakaUpanishads

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