

# The Pursuit of Peace through Literature

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## 1. Introduction: The nature of literature

Literature is the mirror to the society. The whole gamut of social problems, namely political, economic, socio-political, and socio-economic are depicted by literary works from time to time. Literature is inclusive in nature. Thus, Psychology, Philosophy, Mythology, History, Anthropology—nearly all human sciences find themselves reflected in Literature. Besides depicting various social problems, Literature also reveals the intricate fabric and inner conflicts of the human mind. It brings out the disposition of an individual so convincingly that readers can relate to it and select the right way of life. In *Doctor Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe brings out the tragedy of over-ambition. Shakespeare's plays such as *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear* are the manifestations of mental and emotional disturbances of the protagonists. These works of Shakespeare so convincingly bring out the complexities of the human emotions like anger, jealousy, love, suffering owing to moral blindness, 'vaulting ambition' and procrastination. Adetunji et al, have rightly pointed out that talking about external and internal world is one of Literature's major functions. This medium, indeed, acts as a tool of assessment of human nature and various issues associated with human beings and can also function as an effective instrument of conflict resolution and, hence, peace.

## 2. Literature and peace

While describing peace, J. Guttung holds that peace is a positive concept which implies that it is the practice of love and necessary conditions of harmonious human survival. Again Ian M. Harris is of the view that peace is a concept which motivates the imagination, connotes more than the cessation of war, implies human beings working together to resolve conflicts, respect standards of justice, satisfy basic needs and honour human rights. As Literature explores the whole gamut of human emotions including inner and outer conflicts and the way the characters attempt to resolve them, no doubt, it also touches upon the concepts of war, love, social justice, basic human needs, human rights and peace. This paper assumes an important role more so because of the war between Russia and Ukraine that began in 2022 and is still going on. With the world posing as the spectator to this huge war, it is once again necessary to remind humanity of the destruction that war brings to human lives, culture, and society, thereby reiterating futility.

In India, students are introduced to various literary masterpieces at different stages of the education system, namely, upper primary, secondary, higher secondary and even tertiary level so that, in the words of the Dalai Lama, they can be encouraged to an understanding that inner peace is born from love, compassion, tolerance and honesty which are essentially human values and that peace in the world depends on individuals finding inner peace. The message that peace is not negotiable at any cost and that war and violence are futile, is propagated through different genres of Literature at different times.

George Bernard Shaw's anti-romantic comedy *Arms and the Man*, Wilfred Owen's war poems 'Strange Meeting' and 'The Dead-Beat', Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, 'The Enemy' by Pearl S. Buck and the Indian author Keki N. Daruwalla's short story 'Love Across the Salt Desert' are some such works of Literature which speak out loud against war, unrest, violence and conflict and stand tall for peaceful co-existence and well-being of the people of the world, a message so very relevant in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Pursuing Peace through *Arms and the Man*, 'The Dead-beat', 'Strange Meeting', *Mother Courage and Her Children*, 'The Enemy', 'Love Across the Salt Desert':**

Through the anti-romantic comedy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century titled *Arms and the Man*, the Irish dramatist George Bernard Shaw has shown the futility of war and dealt comically with the deceitfulness of human nature. With dashes of humour and wit, Shaw shatters the romantic idealistic views pertaining to war, soldiering, victory and heroism. George Orwell has said that *Arms and the Man* is probably one of the wittiest plays Shaw ever wrote and that it wears well because its moral message - that war is not a wonderful, romantic adventure—still needs to be told today.

The play takes place during the 1885 Serbo-Bulgarian War. It is through the protagonist of the play, Bluntschli, that Shaw brings out the reality of war and shatters the utopic notion of heroism and bravery in battlefields that the history of all nations is filled with. Probably, Bluntschli is the persona of the playwright in communicating the message that war can bring nothing and no heroism should be associated with it. Very interestingly, Bluntschli, the Swiss professional soldier, is shown carrying chocolates in his pockets instead of pistol cartridges. This is a blow against the conventional idea attached to war and soldiering. He also says that soldiering is "a trade like any other trade" and that food, the basic human need, is more important for soldiers to survive than ammunition. This is another blow to the conventional idea attached to heroism and soldiering. In other words, Shaw points out that for survival and well-being of the human race what is important is the fulfilment of the basic human needs.

One of the earliest of Wilfred Owen's anti-war poems, 'The Dead-Beat' is the first he wrote after meeting with Siegfried Sassoon. Owen not only enlightens us on the horrors of the war but also the pity involved. The soldier is unable to serve despite threats. He thinks more of the people back at home - of the 'valiant' who are not 'dead', of the 'ministerially' smiling 'bold uncles' and of his unfaithful wife - than of his fellow soldiers at the battleground. The symbolism and the imagery are dark and brutal. Owen chose words that are blunt, simple and realistic. Owen satirises the people who are back at their cosy, warm homes enjoying peaceful lives at the cost of the 'dead-beat' soldiers broken down by the trauma of the war. Perhaps these 'dead-beats' were more broken down by the insensitivity of the non-combatants than the horrors of the war and therein, lies the irony. The soldier is in conflict with the people who belong to his own side and not the enemy. Owen brings out the insensitivity, uselessness and bitterness of the war.

Another anti-war poem, 'Strange Meeting' by the English poet Wilfred Owen, deals with the dark murky side of World War I. The poem was written in 1918 and was published in 1919 posthumously. The poem is narrated by a soldier who imagines to having "escaped/ Down some profound dull tunnel" to avoid the hellish battleground and there he meets the enemy soldier he killed the day before. It has been described as one of Owen's most haunting and complex war poems. The poem questions the purpose of war and expresses the futility of warfare and bloodshed. The memorable line: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend" echoes the very truth that at the end of the day precious human lives are lost in the battlefield and it really does not matter whether it is a friend or a foe who is killed. In other words, the message of peace and brotherhood is spread by Owen through this poem whose precious life was cut short when he got killed in the battlefield at the age of twenty-five.

A landmark drama of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Mother Courage and Her Children* is considered to be Bertolt Brecht's best work and a potent condemnation of war. Brecht wrote the play in 1938-'39 and set it against the backdrop

of Thirty Years' War (1624-1636). He intended the audience to be objective about the play but that remained unfulfilled since many of the European viewers had first-hand experience of the atrocities of war. Brecht draws an underlying irony in the play. In unstable and war-stricken Europe, Mother Courage engages in her trade to support herself and her family in those difficult times. But this very enterprise brings forth the death of three children- Eilif, Swiss Cheese and Katrin. She first loses Eilif to the Recruiting Officer who leads him off. Eilif returns two years later but is executed. The atrocities that he once committed as a cut-throat soldier during the war and was applauded for, becomes the reason for his execution since it is the time of peace now. And all the more, his mother never finds out.

She next loses Swiss Cheese. While bargaining for her son's life, she does it for too long which earns Swiss Cheese a shot to death. Her final loss is Katrin who out of her kindness, tries to wake up the common people in the wake of the Catholics' besieging the Protestant town of Halle and is shot to death. Though it could not have been stopped yet Mother Courage's absence signifies her non-interference on her child's behalf. It is ironic that Mother Courage's goal is to survive her family during the hard and bleak times of war but the means to the goal becomes the instrument to her children's untimely death.

Though *Mother Courage and Her Children* is removed from the time frame it is written, Brecht draws parallels between the war and the recent events unfolding in Europe while he was writing the play. Instability and uncertainty were the norm. Men of all ages had to take part in war. Similarly, just as Mother Courage looks at the Thirty Years' War as a business opportunity, so too was World War II a commercial enterprise. It is an unnatural perverse state in which common values are challenged at every turn. Brecht's primary theme in the play emphasizes that war is meaningless, pointless robbing humans of humanity.

A short story by Pearl S. Buck, 'The Enemy' is set against the backdrop of World War. The author very adeptly raises concerns regarding nationalism, patriotism and humanity. Dr. Sadao Hoki and his wife are faced with a critical situation when he saves an American prisoner of war washed ashore. He is in a dilemma- whether we should save the American from his dying state or be a loyal citizen of Japan and hand him over to the authority. Questions like, "Why is it we cannot see clearly what we ought to do?" haunt the text throughout. The doctor is in a dilemma because he is oscillating between what is right and what he should do as a patriot. At the end of the short story, basic human instincts win over the socially-structured patriotism and Dr. Sadao not only provides him with renewed life but helps him escape to safe ground as well. The American's remark at a later point in the text, "I guess if all the Japs were like you there wouldn't have been a war," somewhere tugs at the idea of the priority of being a compassionate, tolerant human being rather than being moulded by societal norms. It brings out the essence that all human beings are instinctively and basically good, peaceful and compassionate.

The short story 'Love Across the Salt Desert' written by Keki N. Daruwalla has been included as one of the short stories in the Higher Secondary or Class XII syllabus in many of the Indian schools. This twentieth century short story narrates how the village simpleton, Najab Hussain, defies his father, the international border between India and Pakistan and the hostile salt desert of the Rann of Kutch for Fatimah. The story is the triumph of love and hence peace over conflict, tension, unrest, hostility between two neighbouring countries---India and Pakistan. Najab, a timid and reticent young man, gathers up courage to cross the vast, arid, inhospitable, lonely salt desert, popularly known as the Great Rann of Kutch, for his love, Fatimah. As for Fatimah, crossing the vast salt desert from Pakistan to India along with Najab meant "just a shift in dialect, a smear of Kutchi added and a little Sindhi sandpapered away". This beautiful literary work tells us how easily people can give up hatred and violence if they wish and tread towards peaceful co-existence.

### 3. Classroom application and implication

Peace is harmony. It is a harmonious coexistence of human beings and social culture irrespective of race, colour, religion, nationality and other dividing factors. Peace is both of human right and duty. Every person has the right

to live a peaceful life and it is an individual's responsibility to take care of it at every moment of life. There are many factors that can affect peace like drugs, addiction, poverty and ignorance that somehow or the other lead to violence. However, educational and cultural exchange can bring about an end to violence. Education is not mere literacy; it is the building up of the concept of humanity. People and children who do drugs, live in poverty or are ignorant of a peaceful and harmonious possibility of coexistence, are rescued by education from a dark and bleak future. Thus, incorporation of peace education must be stressed on.

Maria Montessori said, "The life of the populations depends on peace and perhaps progress or extinction of the entire civilization." Peace can be promoted through literature. The texts discussed above can be key texts to educate the upcoming generations regarding the importance and necessity of peace. We must understand that education must be directed towards building of self-discipline. Education towards peace through literature will offer readers ways to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence. The education of peace through literature will inculcate moral goodness and social love to produce better citizens capable of building a peaceful society.

The texts that have been dealt with or discussed here can be easily taught in the classroom in the Indian context. India has been often ravaged by war and violence since time immemorial and hence, the Indians understand the language of violence. But being the largest democracy and multicultural land, people from all religion, culture, racial and ethnic diversity are able to coexist harmoniously. And to retain the peaceful and happy environment, education of young minds is necessary so as to instill and cultivate basic human goodness, compassion, tolerance and acceptance. This objective can be attained by teaching texts discussed here and the like to make students think critically and endeavour for peace.

'Strange Meeting', 'The Enemy' and 'Love Across the Salt Desert' are texts that are taught in schools at secondary and higher secondary levels. Since young minds are still at an impressionable stage, it is very important to instill in their minds the futility of violence and war. Children should be made aware of the history that is regrettable and consciously honed not to repeat past mistakes for they are the future to a better possibility. These young minds should be sensitised to the repercussions of violence and made aware that hatred can never resolve anything but brew further hatred. Since the first is a poem and the other two are short-stories, the teacher can make PowerPoint presentations highlighting the adversities of violence and the beauty of peace that holds the world together into a beautiful whole.

*Arms and the Man*, 'The Dead-Beat' and *Mother Courage and Her Children* are texts that are critical, complicated and fit for higher education. In this case, besides resorting to audio-visual aids like movies or documentaries, the teacher or the facilitator can also attempt to involve students in dramatic re-enactment of the texts. This not only makes the learning fun but also instills the finer pathos, irony in the minds of the performers and the spectators and make them question the pointlessness of violence and the fruitfulness of peace and harmony among fellow human beings. Moreover, it nurtures the cognitive, affective and conative development of students, thereby arming them with the power of questioning, judging and inferencing to come to individual judgements and their own ways to deal with the situation and fostering peace and humanity among fellow human beings striving for a better world.

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus, it is seen that Literature, indeed, promotes peace, love and well-being across humanity. Bluntschli in *Arms and the Man* educates the readers on how sham war is and on the false romanticism associated with war, battlefield and soldiering. He rightly points out that food is more important for the survival of man than weapons. The poet in 'The Dead-beat' and 'Strange Meeting' questions the purpose of war. The poet also exposes how it disturbs the peaceful coexistence of human beings and creates a chasm when it comes to brotherhood. Brecht in *Mother Courage and Her Children* points out the pointlessness of war and violence, and questions the human morality that becomes defunct, corrupt and non-existent to an extent. Najab Hussain and

Fatimah in 'Love Across the Salt Desert' show us that it is, indeed, possible to rise above hatred and antagonism through love, fellow feeling and hence peace. Adetunji et al., have very aptly pointed out that Literature plays a tremendous role by bringing to the fore the challenges faced by human beings. Through its universal appeal, this medium is expected to establish a lasting stability, peace, development and progress. No doubt, even in this age of science and technology, our education system makes it a point to give the students exposure to various literary works of different ages with the expectation that the young minds learn lessons from them. Adetunji et al. are right in pointing out that Literature must be put to use to meet the various challenges because it has the potential for furthering advancement of global peace in this generation and the next. Idea controls the world. Literature is the single most powerful force that can precipitate global peace and alleviate many of the world's most complex, challenges prone to brew wars, unrest and violence. Lessons may be learnt from the protagonists of the above-mentioned literary works. Peace (both inner and outer), indeed, can be pursued through literature and, hence, the pursuit of peace through literature is relevant even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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**How to cite this article: Dr. Aazra Nuh, Ms. Gennia Nuh, “The Pursuit of Peace through Literature”, Asian. Jour. Social. Scie. Mgmt. Tech.2023; 5(4): 180-185.**