

# **Inculcating Peace through Literature: Towards an Evolved Pedagogy**

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**Abstract:** The constitution of UNESCO expressly states that ‘since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.’ As educators, we are only too cognizant of the role that holistic education plays in the formation of a mindset of peace; peace being not just the absence of war but the presence and active functioning of a culture of tolerance and inclusivity.

In a world fraught with tensions and conflict, the study of literature through a more involved and evolved pedagogy can work as an invaluable method of comprehending, inculcating, and applying the concept of peace at both school and higher education levels. In this context, the definition of peace must be construed not just as the absence of war (political peace) but on a larger and deeper scale, as social and individual peace. (Harris, 2002) For this purpose, the literature teacher will be required to reorient her pedagogy, progressing from a mere paraphrased critical investigation of a literary work towards a more thought-provoking inquiry into the ways in which a particular literary text can build/enhance the soft skills of students. (Polat et al, 2016)

This paper attempts to envisage a blueprint for teaching strategies aimed at inculcating and fostering peace using literature as a means, among students as a collective body, and in the individual student as a human being as well as citizen of a globalised world.

**Keywords:** Peace, literature for peace, pedagogy, teaching strategies, SDGs, UNESCO SDG 16, personal peace, social peace, inclusivity

## **Conceptualizing Peace**

The Yamoussoukro Declaration (UNESCO, 1989) was formulated with the firm belief that ‘Peace is more than the absence of armed conflict’, and ‘Peace is a behaviour’. More than four decades after this significant pronouncement, promoting a culture of peace, as enunciated in UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, has become the cornerstone of the other SDGs developed by UNESCO. (Kempe, 2020; Kumar & Roy, 2018) Inculcating a culture of peace must be initiated by the two institutions with which the individual is inextricably connected: the family and

the educational institution. Both these social units share a cyclical relationship in the development of the individual: whatever a person learns from one is applied on the other. However, it is at the level of the educational institution, where the growing child spends the maximum time that peace as a living, working force must be integrated into activities, and the concept of peace must be incorporated into teaching strategies.

Two vital components of a peace building exercise are ‘inclusivity’, providing equal access to people with orientations and points of view other than one’s own, and ‘non-judge mentality’, not forming opinions based on one’s own moral or personal standards. The opening lines of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* are powerful reminders of both of the above: In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my head ever since.

‘Whenever you feel like criticising anyone’, he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you have had.’ (Fitzgerald, 1925, p1)

However, being inclusive and non-judge mental are not qualities that can be developed through examinations and assessing grades, but by inculcating and promoting soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, inter-cultural understanding etc., in the students. Economist philosopher Amartya Sen is of the view that young people are often looked upon as perpetrators of violence. They become disillusioned with existing dispensations when they are excluded from decision making and social re/construction processes as being too inexperienced. In such a situation, they fall easy victims to aggressive ideologies that promise them better opportunities in new power structures. One way to reorient them towards non-violence and positive, creative channelisation of their natural energy is to make them responsible for community building efforts by actively engaging them in such projects. (Sen, 2007) Therefore, it is imperative that educational institutions orientate themselves towards strengthening the soft skills of their students while they are still in their most formative years, in order to make them not only practitioners, but also ambassadors of peace.

### **Literature as a tool of peace building**

The literature classroom, more than any other space, is one that can be fruitfully utilised for nurturing and promoting a culture of peace. To say that literature is a mirror of society would merely be to repeat a cliché. Literature is not just a *reflection* of society’s past, present, or future. It is also an imaginative record of what society and its human constituents can become; of the heights of nobility, generosity, kindness, and empathy that human beings are capable of achieving in the face of all odds. Its flights of fancy can create idyllic utopias as well as terrifying dystopias. However, it takes the right kind of teacher and a certain pedagogy to embed its transformative power in developing minds and make students comprehend the affirmative influence of literature. Such pedagogy can successfully impart the skills of peaceful coexistence, and foster individual peace by enabling

students to accept and welcome difference and otherness, both of which are major sources of strife, whether political, social, or inter-personal.

We notice, too often, that the literature classroom becomes a hotbed of ideological controversy and indoctrination. Since most literary texts are critiqued from a theoretical perspective, the ideologies associated with them form an inevitable part of the discussion. Thus, for instance, we find Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or *The Merchant of Venice* or *Othello* often being talked of as racist, imperialist, Eurocentric, anti-Semitic etc. It is true that every generation that reads Shakespeare gleans something new and different from his works. This new reading is coloured by the ideas and ideologies in currency at that moment in time. Yet there is more to Shakespeare than just the political/ ideological bent of his works as comprehended by each new generation of readers. That incalculable something is what makes Shakespeare a classic, a universal text that continues to be read centuries after it was written, even in definitive post-colonial settings. Let us then imagine a literature classroom wherein the *first* approach to Shakespeare is not an ideological or a theoretical one, but a personal one. Let us allow each student to read the text and make whatever they can of it. Before the teacher can begin to give her understanding or theoretical standpoint of the text in question, let the students come out voluntarily with what they think of the text. What was it that intrigued them the most? What was their impression of the text? Could they understand the language? Could they identify with it? Did they find any resonances with their own culture/s, or situations/ circumstances in the text? Let the literature teacher then give the students a historical and cultural background of the text, explicating the times in which it was written. A text cannot be holistically comprehended unless all its variables are taken into account, whether historical, political, religious, thematic, linguistic, or stylistic. An understanding needs to be developed that what is considered unacceptable in the contemporary milieu might have been and indeed *was* regarded as acceptable in another age. A 360-degree understanding of a text involves an acknowledgement of its difference from the present times but at the same time should stress upon its universal qualities. Theory and ideology undoubtedly provide a vital framework for reading a text, but it is not the only framework. A purely ideological reading of a text, Shakespeare or any other, will only lead to a lopsided understanding, one which precludes critical thought, expression of curiosity, and the questioning of established or powerful norms.

The ability to think critically and imaginatively and to articulate fearlessly are qualities that can be instilled in a literature classroom more than in any other discipline. The pure sciences are founded on fixed, immutable laws, and the social sciences are based on observable phenomena that are protean, changing over time. Literature is the only stream of knowledge that is both fixed and protean, in that the text is fixed, but its meanings, which evolve and change over time, are protean, and frequently differ from person to person, class to class, community to community, and nation to nation even in a synchronous time-frame. (Sabu, 2020) An acknowledgement of this very plurality of meaning by having students come out with their understanding of a text, or by asking unconventional 'non-exam' questions, goes a long way in making them conscious of the fact that there are multiple

opinions and points of view on the same subject and that all are equally important. An acceptance of plurality leads to inclusivity and non-judge mentality, two qualities that are crucial for the inculcation of peace as mentioned above. Our higher education examination system tests students on their knowledge of the text, as well as their application-based answers supported by the opinions of literary critics. However, until a change is brought about in this system, class discussions and assignments can be utilized to encourage freedom of thought and draw out multiple opinions about a text.

The role of the literature teacher, her personality, her own ideological standpoint and the fervour with which she believes in it or advocates it can become crucial markers of the learning that students will imbibe in a literature class. Too often, we see literature students becoming ideological clones of their teachers; so intense is their influence upon susceptible minds. Literature lends itself to different interpretations in every age because of the multiplicity of meanings that can be read into a text at any given time by any number of readers. (Steiner, 1963) However, the problem arises when a text is attributed one and only one interpretation to the exclusion of all other possible meanings. Voices of power gain precedence in such a construal, and numerous other not-so powerful voices are ignored, neglected, marginalised or even silenced. Such a classroom cannot foster inclusivity simply because it validates only one kind of thought process, only one reading. Literature teachers therefore need to be sensitised towards inclusive teaching and interpretation through programmes designed to train them into eliciting, acknowledging, and validating the varied responses of their students. (Polat et al, 2016).

### **Peace Building Challenges at the School Level**

The process of critical thinking and of questioning accepted/powerful versions should ideally begin at the school level. Unfortunately, our education system, particularly at the school level, is still heavily orientated towards syllabus completion, rote learning, keywords, and examination grades to allow for such eclectic methodologies. An examination system that awards marks based purely on memorisation, text-based answers and /or keywords cannot hone the soft skills of students. However, awarding marks based on any other non-quantifiable criteria in a country that has the largest number of young people in the world is an uphill if not impossible task. A brief ambitious phase of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation(CCE), launched by the Central Board of Secondary Education from 2009-2017,focussed on developing and evaluating soft skills in students from Class 6 to Class 10, awarding them grades instead of marks for these non-quantifiable criteria. The system was abandoned a few years later when complaints from parents and objections from teachers began pouring in. Teachers were wary of going ahead with an evaluation system for which they had not been adequately trained; and many of them strongly felt that the extra parameters for evaluation compounded their already demanding workload. Parents felt that evaluating their wards on the basis of a term-long continuous system was unfair because most children studied only for the all-important Board exams. There were also general objections that this system lacked the academic focus

necessary to prepare students for university entrance examinations or professional and competitive examinations. (Pal, 2021) Any attempt at making education holistic merely through external evaluative methods cannot be wholly successful unless there is a commensurate change in pedagogy. It is here that the NEP (2020) seeks to bring a change. The 30-30-40 formula currently followed by the CBSE for evaluating its Class 12 students in place of the customary Board examination has already been receiving positive signals. With the NEP, academic orientations will have to be modified, and schools will be able to employ multiple tools and approaches through assignments, fieldwork, community building projects, self exploration etc. throughout the academic session, to assess students. This strategy can give teachers a better idea of the capabilities and potential of students. It will also provide students with more flexibility to recognise and hone their creative aspects instead of forcing them to resort to rote learning and examination-based study. (Pal, 2021)

Irrespective of academic orientations and efforts, a culture of peace is most effectively strengthened by orientating students towards the acceptance of co-existence, the affirmation of self-worth, and the development of mutual respect among fellow students through the most indispensable educational activity, that is, classroom teaching. Again, the literature classroom can serve as an amenable space for the same. However, school teachers are so often caught in a relentless race against time to complete the desired tasks in the syllabus that they do not find the time to engage students in meaningful classroom activities or discussions that will broaden their horizons and foster a comprehensive understanding of the people, cultures and thought processes that they read about in their literary texts. Nonetheless, there could be other ways to inculcate the same. Innovative group assignments and projects related to the literary text that involve students from varied socio- linguistic backgrounds and maybe one specially-abled student could be a helpful method to make them aware of diversity, and to get used to it as something natural and acceptable. For instance, a textbook lesson titled 'The Old Clock Shop' (CBSE NCERT English Reader- Class VI), a story of human kindness, can be given to the students to work upon as a group. A possible assignment on this could ask them to find out other stories of kindness from their neighborhoods or friends. Moreover, the specially-abled student in the group could be assigned a 'project buddy' who will look out for them during the project, thereby putting into action the very trait that is being discussed in the lesson. Such projects can be undertaken in every discipline, it is true, but the literature classroom is especially suited to such exercises because of the nature of its content, as mentioned earlier. These soft skills can also be fostered at co-curricular and extra-curricular levels, by promoting and awarding theme-based creative writing, forming book clubs that are open to students of all disciplines, encouraging debate and group discussions, and most importantly, by incentivizing students to volunteer for situations and tasks where such skills are required to be put into action.

### **Translation as a Peace Building Exercise**

An important component of the study of literature today is literature in translation. Translation has brought the distant closer, enabling readers to learn how other people, cultures, and

communities think. While translation itself has traditionally been a political exercise performed by colonist rulers to know about their subjects so that they could govern them more effectively (Nair, 2012), it has acquired another purpose in today's globalised world. It brings together discrete peoples, opens barriers to communication, and offers an understanding of differences in situations of conflict. As a vital component of literature curricula today, translation offers a perspective on diversity and inclusion.

UNESCO's 'Writing Peace' project(2018- )aims at training young people 'to become aware of the interdependence of cultures through familiarisation with contemporary writing systems, their history, and their mutual borrowings'. (Writing Peace: Training Tools & Resources, 2018 )The project involves writing the word 'peace' in about 30 scripts from different regions of the world, along with a symbol from each that conveys pictorially the same idea. In a predominantly multilingual country like India, where even the most ordinary classroom would necessarily include students from varied socio cultural and linguistic backgrounds, such a project, tweaked to translate not just the word 'peace' but also small paragraphs from literary works, or even about local culture or art from the vernaculars, would prove exceptionally effective in enabling students to become aware of not just the diversity and plurality of their own country but of the underlying similarity of experiences, irrespective of backgrounds. A significant outcome of such an exercise would be the acknowledgement that although languages or cultures may be different, people of similar age, of any gender may share common experiences, behavioural traits or personalities. With such co-curricular activities, the conflict between self and the other, which is one of the key factors that preclude a culture and mindset of peace, can be mitigated at the level of the classroom itself. A student who has been sensitised towards difference in a positive manner will then go on to display more inclusive behaviour in public and personal spaces.

### **Advocating Environment Consciousness through Literature**

*'Peace is also a harmonious partnership of humankind with the environment.'* (Preamble, Yamassoukro Declaration, 1989)

How can the study of literature contribute to nurturing a peaceful relationship with nature? While environmental science as a discipline is directly concerned with the conservation of natural resources and adopts a scientific approach to the study of the environment, literature allows its students to connect with nature at a more personal and emotional level through various literary works that articulate explicitly or implicitly, the beauty and magnificence of the natural world, as also the tenuous bond between humans and nature. The works of the British Romantic Poets come instantly to mind. Generation after generation of students recall poems such as

Wordsworth's 'The Daffodils' or Keats's 'Ode to Autumn' long after they have graduated from school or college. Yet, merely remembering a literary work for the beauty of its verse or its theme is not sufficient to build a proactive approach to living in peace with the environment. Once again, it involves a pedagogy infused with personal enthusiasm on the part of the teacher to inculcate love for the environment in her students using the literary text as a tool.

A reading of Kalidasa's play *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* can be a fruitful exercise in understanding the human-nature relationship, particularly in the Indian context. Shakuntala is a child of nature, more or less like a forest deity, who is portrayed in a symbiotic relationship with her surroundings, and positively out of place in the royal court of Hastinapur. Dushyant, on the other hand, is the ravaging king, the destroyer, from whom the animals of the forest flee in panic and seek refuge in the ashram of Rishi Kanva. Every incident in the play points towards the positive influence and benevolence of nature when humans treat it with love, respect, and kindness. Similar learning can be gleaned from other literary texts prescribed in university syllabi, such as the *Mahabharata*, especially the episode in it about the burning of the Khandav forest and its eventual consequences; Kalidasa's *Ritu Samhaar*, an insightful, comprehensive and utterly beautiful descriptive poem about Indian seasons; and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), detailing the very real danger of climate change. The beauty of literature is that its portrayals and descriptions are couched in allegory and metaphor. Decoding them and emphasising their significance in daily life can only be done by the evolved teacher, who is conscious of their connotations and committed enough to enlighten her students about their application and effect. This learning can be further enhanced by classroom activities like discussions, minor research assignments on environmental issues, group environment conservation projects that also involve creative writing etc.

### **Literature and Individual Peace**

Since every reader experiences a text in their own unique way, literature, more than any other discipline, is a potent instrument for inculcating peace within oneself. As stated by Horace, the purpose of literature is both to delight and to instruct. The cathartic impact of literature, as described by Aristotle, has been noted and widely accepted. Its ability to produce and enhance enjoyment forms the foundation of the *Rasa* theory in classical Indian dramaturgy and other forms of art. Even if we bypass all these affirmative effects of literature as noted by ancient critics, and concentrate on the individual reader who approaches a literary work with no prior introduction to critical analyses, we can notice its impact on the emotional and psychological being of the reader. The thematic emphases, linguistic dexterity and stylistic beauty of literature mesmerise even the most hard-hearted. The empathy that a literary work generates is unparalleled. Literature presents creative answers to our dilemmas, and inspiring ways to deal with the conflicts that beset us. It accords dignity to our strife-torn lives by enabling us to come to terms with our circumstances. It also gives us the inspiration and moral courage to rise against the forces that control us against our will. It enhances our understanding of the diversity of

human experience and the complexity of human existence. It opens our minds to possibilities of change and betterment through its flights of imagination. It infuses cheer, laughter, and humour into the drudgery of life. It enables us to identify, philosophise upon, and contextualise our individual anxieties. Some of the most enduring life lessons can be learnt from literature, since it is a creative record of every possible human experience, penned in beauty and profundity. That literature is a mirror of society is definitely a cliché. But in literature, every individual can find oneself. In looking at this reflection, they can come to an enhanced understanding of who they are and what is their purpose in life. If self-knowledge is a crucial criterion for personal peace, then literature is the looking glass through which such awareness can be initiated.

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