



The Role of Literature and Art in Promoting Interfaith Understanding: An Academic Perspective

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None can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which god at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. A glimmer of that feeling has shone so often in your eyes when- like artists of every age captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colours and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God, the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you.

(Pope Saint John Paul II)²

Abstract

This study explores how literature and art function as cultural mediators in fostering interfaith dialogue and understanding in a pluralistic society like India. It examines these mediums' historical and contemporary contributions to transcending religious boundaries, promoting shared values, and addressing communal conflicts. By analysing select literary works, visual arts, and performing, the paper highlights the transformative potential of creative expressions in shaping a harmonious interfaith narrative.

Introduction

Literature and art function as cultural mediators in fostering interfaith dialogue and understanding in a pluralistic society like India. This paper examines these mediums' historical and contemporary contributions to transcending religious boundaries, promoting shared values, and addressing and clarifying

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² Letter to Artists, Pope Saint John Paul II, 1999

misunderstandings. Literature and art have often emerged as powerful tools in bridging interfaith divides by providing shared spaces for dialogue, reflection, and mutual understanding.

Origin and Significance of “Dialogue”

The word “dialogue” comes from the Greek word *dialogos*, which stands for conversation or discourse. It also means "a conversation between two or more persons." The mistaken belief that it can mean only "conversation between two persons" is from the confusion of *dia-*; as early as 1532, **trialogue** appears needlessly for "a conversation between three persons." Also, compare **Quadrilogue** "dialogue of four speakers" (late 15c.), in the title of the English translation of "Quadrilogue invectif," which consists of an allegorical dialogue between the Three Estates and a personified France.³

In ancient Greek philosophy, reason was considered the controlling principle of the universe. The Christian theologians have interpreted this as "the word of God". David Bohm often used words like "the whole", "the unknown", "the unlimited", or "the intelligence". I suspect that he meant roughly the same as the Greek "controlling principle of the universe" (or the Christian "word of God"). The "controlling principle of the universe" could be expressed through speech or writing (i.e. making a *logos* or theory).

Following this line of thinking, dialogue is how the whole expresses itself. That would make dialogue a play of cosmic intelligence. Generally speaking. However, our dialogues do not appear to be expressions of a very high order of intelligence: Chaos usually is a better description. How can chaotic dialogue be an act of intelligence? ⁴

Fostering dialogue among followers of various faiths has become imperative today. Achieving inter-community harmony is a critical requirement, and its absence poses a significant challenge. Such harmony must be built upon the shared principles and concerns of different faith traditions, aiming to create bridges of understanding and address misunderstandings that often lead to conflict. Equally important is emphasizing the role of interfaith dialogue in promoting peace. To achieve this, religions must focus on their shared values and reflect on how they navigate their internal diversity, cultivating a genuine culture of pluralism. This approach is vital for building a peaceful and inclusive society.

Mikhail Bakhtin and “Dialogism”

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian philosopher known as a literary critic and scholar. He also worked on literary theory, ethics and the philosophy of language. Bakhtin gave the theory of ‘dialogism’. According to Bakhtin, ‘understanding’ is a ‘dialogic’ process.⁵ This theory primarily focuses on ‘dialogue’ as a human condition, an ethical imperative, and even a prerequisite for thinking (Pace, 2005). His notion of dialogue is directed toward its social nature and the inherent struggle within the dialogical space (Pace, 2005).

³ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/dialogue>

⁴ http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/on_dialogue.html

⁵ <https://dudhnoicollege.ac.in/online/attendance/classnotes/files/1589380665.pdf>

According to Bakhtin, human thought becomes genuine only when it is in contact with another thought from a different person. This, however, requires an acceptance and a unity of the self for people to accept the other. Their modelling of interfaith dialogue favours the reciprocity, vulnerability, and subject-other relationship conceptualized by Bakhtin (Atkinson, 2019).

Bakhtin further reiterates, “Being heard as such is already a dialogic relation. The world wants to be heard, understood, responded to, and again to the response, and so forth ad infinitum. (Bakhtin, 1986)”. When seen, this theory seems simple. However, it has deep connotations and layers of meaning. The infinity of words leads to dialogue because words are born to be understood, received and responded to. This chain of communication leads to meaningful conversations, including interfaith ones. Without this dialogue, the scriptures lose their essence and purpose because their words are meant to create infinite communication waves between people of different religions.

Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative, constructive, and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions and spiritual or humanistic beliefs at the individual and institutional levels. It aims to promote mutual understanding and increase acceptance and tolerance (Interfaith Dialogue and Reconciliation, 2023). It involves people from different religious backgrounds coming together to have conductive and productive dialogue over issues of common interest or some particular community section.

Peter Abelard’s *Dialogus inter philosophum, Iudaeum et Christianum* (ca. 1136-39), Gilbert Crispin’s *Disputatio Christiani cum Gentili* (ca. 1092-1093), and Petrus Alfonsi’s *Dialogi* (ca. 1109-10), among several others can be counted one of the earliest works on the topic (Howard, 2023). Although Christian writers produced the majority of these, a few Jews and Muslims did so as well. Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari* (ca. 1140) provides a Jewish example, and Ibn Taymiyyah’s *The Correct Answer to Those Who Changed the Religion of Christ* (1317) is a Muslim one (Howard, 2023).

Art and literature play the role of connecting hearts and sparking lights of understanding amongst the masses. Dramas of Shakespeare, *Eliad* and *Odyssey* by Homer, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* in India, *Paradise Lost* by Milton, *Risalatul Ghufuran* by Marri, *Divine Comedy* by Dante or *Javid Nama* by Iqbal all world classics that deal with the issue of religion, tradition and humanity, thereby creating spaces for dialogues between different religions and belief systems.

Prem Chand (1880-1936), better known as Munshi Premchand, is an Indian writer known for his Hindi-Urdu social fiction. He was one of the first authors to write about caste hierarchies and the plights of women and labourers prevalent in the society of the late 1880s.⁶ He began writing *Karbala* in July 1923 and finished it

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Premchand>

in January 1924. Ganga Pustak Mala first published the play in Hindi in November 1924. Two years later, it was serialised in Zamana from July 1926 to April 1928, but with some alterations. The play was translated into Urdu partly by Prem Chand himself and partly by Prem Chand's associate, Munir Haider Quraishi.

It was later published in book form in Urdu by Lala Lajpat Rai and Sons, Lahore, six years after Prem Chand's death. In opting to publish first in Hindi, a play about a significant event of Islamic history that unfolded in seventh-century Arabia, and in recasting the story to convey the ideals of his nation and his national pride, Prem Chand transfers the imagined community of the country into a transnational zone, where neither language nor religious rituals act as the shared ideals of humanity achieve the guiding principles of unity, rather, unity here.

The play by Premchand was translated into English by Nishat Zaidi. Battle of Karbala was a brief military engagement in which a small party led by al-Hussayn ibn 'Alī, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and son of 'Alī, the fourth caliph, was defeated and massacred by an army sent by the Umayyad caliph Yazid. The battle helped secure the position of the Umayyad dynasty, but among Shi'i Muslims (followers of Hussayn), the 10th of Muharram became an annual holy day of public mourning.⁷

Karbala became a metaphor for suffering, sacrifice, and unwillingness to surrender to tyranny. World literature has dealt with the symbolic meaning of the battle of Karbala in myriad ways of expression. The famous Indian writer Premchand, better known for his Urdu novels depicting the horrors of poverty and the ugly face of humanity when it is at the peak of its cruelty, has also used his imagination to illustrate the essence of Karbala through the window of his imaginative world. Stressing this fact, Premchand records in the preface of his play Karbala: "In the history of every community, there are events that have sparked the literary imagination, and the scholarly community finds myriad ways to rediscover them. They are expressed in words, verses, poems, essays, folklore, and speeches. However, there remains a scope for new writers to explore them afresh. In the history of the Hindus, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are such stories. Among Muslims, Karbala is placed on the same pedestal" (Premchand, 2022).

Premchand was a Hindu by religion, but belief in humanity was his foremost creed. He wrote extensively on the social issues that do not concern a particular community or religion but stir the conscience of all humans alike. Stressing the fact that evil and vice know no religion, he explains in his preface, "It is a matter of utter shame and regret that, despite living together with the Muslims for centuries, we are largely ignorant about their history. One of the reasons for Hindu-Muslim discord is that we Hindus do not know about great Muslims and men of good character among them. Whenever Muslim kings are mentioned, it invariably brings Aurangzeb into the picture, but good and bad people have existed in every society and always will" (Premchand, 2022).

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Karbala>

Premchand has tried his best to reconcile and connect the Hindu-Muslim unity through his pen. His focus is on knowing each other and the history of every community. This way, we can understand the beauty of every religion and come together as a society.

Interfaith dialogue is as necessary for world peace as the peace itself. It can happen on something other than a platform named Interfaith Dialogue. Instead, it happens every time a community connects its threads through the threads of literature and art. Be it reciting “lab pe aati hai dua ban ke tamanna meri “in our school morning assemblies or dancing to “saare jahan se acha hindostan hamara”. The reciter does not investigate the writer's religion, nationality or caste; he enjoys the magic and gets absorbed. If art has so much power over the human mind and heart, why is it not used to connect with people of different religions?

As children, we all watched the Ramayana and Mahabharata serials on TV. We learnt lessons from these epic poems, but we never thought that the basic theme of these dramas was connected to the Hindu religion. Children were not divided by religious bias or prejudices against each other at that time. These epics were part of every household’s entertainment, irrespective of what religion that house followed.

Srimad Valmiki Ramayana is an epic poem of India that narrates Virtue's journey to eradicate vice. Sri Rama is the Hero of the epic. The Ramayana by the sage Valmiki is one of the great epics of the Sanskrit language and is dated to approximately 200 B.C.E. The exact date and time of Valmiki's birth are unknown, but he is believed to have lived around 500 BC. There are many other versions of the epic in the many regional languages in South Asia. Although the same core narrative is used (or referred to) in most of these versions, they have significant differences.

The Ramayana conveys the essential message of ‘unity in diversity’—people from all walks of life, including animals, were in Lord Rama’s army, which supported him as he headed toward Lanka. This unity helped him complete his mission. Another critical lesson that Ramayana taught us was to value relationships more than anything. Whether it was Rama discharging his responsibilities as a son, husband, and brother, King Bharat turning down the throne for his elder brother or Laxman living in exile to support his brother, the message was clear. The Ramayana has been among South Asia's most significant literary and oral texts for the past two thousand years.

This epic poem provides insights into many aspects of Indian culture and continues to influence modern India's politics, religion, and art. Filmmakers have tried to dispel the message of the Ramayana from unique angles. Numerous dramas and movies have been based on the epic, which is enjoyed and revered by people of all religions equally. This gives one a closer look into Hinduism and helps one understand the essence of the rituals and many festivals celebrated by our Hindu brothers and sisters worldwide.

Paradise Lost by John Milton (1608-1674) is also an epic poem written in blank verse. It retells the biblical story of Adam and Eve's fall from grace and explores themes of free will, sin, and the nature of good and evil. The poem also explores the moral consequences of disobedience, the tension between individual freedom and obedience to divine law, and the possibility of redemption.

Role of Exhibitions and Displays of Religious Art

Exhibitions and displays of religious art have been an integral part of religion since the manufacture of the first religious objects and the adornment of the first sacred places. Growing more complex and varied with time, such manifestations within religions provided models for art exhibitions associated with academies, galleries, museums, and other institutions with secular purposes by the mid-18th and 19th centuries. Typically organized around the works of an artist, a group of artists, art academies, or the holdings of private lenders, such exhibitions included works with sacred and secular subjects (Gahtan, 2022). Exhibitions and displays of the later 20th and 21st centuries embrace multiple approaches, partly dependent on the holdings, orientation, and history of the institution(s) involved and partly due to new interdisciplinary trends in scholarship and museology (Gahtan, 2022).

Paul Tillich ambitiously proposed that art can treat any subject. Consequently, all art can be useful for interreligious dialogue. It can make visible the invisible, as John Paul II claimed in his Letter to Artists. Ólafur Eliasson discussed how “art can motivate people to turn thinking into doing.” This would aid the work of transformation (Longhurst, 2021).

John Paul II further stresses the importance of artists and says, “To communicate the message entrusted to her by Christ, the Church needs art. Art must make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God. The Church also needs musicians. How many sacred works have been composed through the centuries by people deeply imbued with the sense of the mystery! The faith of countless believers has been nourished by melodies flowing from the hearts of other believers, either introduced into the liturgy or used as an aid to dignified worship. In song, faith is experienced as vibrant joy, love, and confident expectation of the saving intervention of God”.⁸

Religious Artworks

Religious art is typically rooted in a religious tradition, and it is usually figural in style, though it need not be. Typically, what identifies it as religious is its subject matter. This kind of art can educate about particular theological ideas of specific religions, thereby emphasising what is unique to a religion, such as the Buddhist belief in reincarnation and rebirth, Christianity's belief in the resurrection of Jesus, or Hinduism's belief that the divine presence exists in all of creation, or Islam's belief in the Prophet

⁸ Full letter available for download at:
http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_23041999_artists.html

Muhammad's night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (Isrā'). The respective paintings would convey the religious subject matter (Longhurst, 2021).

Museums, art galleries, exhibitions, and various formats of art display can enhance inter-religious understanding. When an artist paints the birth of Christ, or the image of Burraq, the horse that Prophet Muhammad rode on the night of Meraj, or a painting of lord Hanuman, he unavoidably poses questions to the followers of other religions, thus creating a curiosity to know the painting or image in a better way.

In the current scenario, interfaith dialogue becomes much more manageable when art becomes multifaceted and communication platforms more effortless and plentiful. Art of the 21st century emerges from various materials and means, including the latest electronic technologies, such as digital imaging and the Internet. A key feature of the art scene in the 21st century is the impact of globalization—the accelerating interconnectivity of human activity and information across time and space. This gives writers, poets, and artists an edge over the others as they connect the dots between different religions and cultures.

Religion manifests human consciousness about the Ultimate Reality (God). Human experience in dealing with him is diverse. The holy Quran has guided its followers to engage in dialogue with the followers of other religions. It also stresses that this engagement should be done sensibly, utilizing all the faculties of imagination and creativity. This kind of conversation should not be rigid and stubborn. It must be performed so that the other party feels at ease and included, not excluded.

In American neighbourhoods, some Christians find that interfaith dialogue has a new immediacy. For example, the children of a Southern Baptist family in Houston may come home from grade school with Muslim friends, posing new questions for their parents and Sunday School teachers. Can I play at Ali's house after school? Can Ali's family come to church with us? Can we go to Ali's mosque? The parents themselves may have new colleagues at work. In the next office or lab may be a Sikh or Hindu colleague who is not simply "non-Christian." However, a person of faith who prays sings devotional songs and participates in a religious community at the gurdwara or temple.⁹ This is not an American phenomenon; instead, it is a global scenario. People need to know each other and wish to understand their religious beliefs and the reason behind them. Literature and art can provide platforms to make this task more manageable and less complicated in such a situation. Hence, we need writers, poets, artists, and orators with more talents and skills than ever.

⁹ <https://shorturl.at/U37k1>

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