

# Drama as an Educational Tool: Its Role in Nurturing Spirituality and Religious Beliefs in Human Beings

Shakuntala Mukherjee

*Department of English Literature, AMITY University Kolkata, Uttarpara Kotrung, West Bengal, India*

**Abstract-** Art in any form has always been influenced by religious beliefs and spirituality. Similarly, human mind has always been influenced by various forms of Art be it drama, music, dance, or literature. In old days, the primary source of acquiring religious knowledge and education was passed on verbally over generations through memorisation. However self-reflective knowledge or critical education required human freedom in order to incorporate their own understandings in both religious education and drama.

In the latter half of the 20th Century, Dorothy Heathcote advocated freedom of learning through personal experiences and aesthetic reflections that privileged in the development of aesthetics in drama as reflected in the works of O'Neill (1995) and Mc Lean (1996). Religious Education demanded emotional involvement and aesthetic imagination. This was in sharp contrast to the age-old doctrinal practices and brought about a huge shift in education that in turn had great impact on drama as well as religious education. Aesthetic education therefore aimed at nurturing and discovering spirituality in human beings.

The aim of this paper is to access how far Drama as a form of Art; is an appropriate means of religious education.

**Index Terms -** Religious, Spirituality, Drama, Art, Education.

## INFLUENCE OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

In history we have witnessed the huge influence of the Roman Catholic Church on drama that in turn influenced the religious beliefs of the then society. Jesus too has taken the help of parables and storytelling while preaching and teaching his followers. We have witnessed that people have been expressing their faith and belief through sculptures, engravings and paintings for ages.

The word 'Church' means 'a gathering of people who belong to God'. These people were not only bonded to

Christ but also to one another. Religious Education comprised of memorising prayers, texts, stories and parables and taking part in rituals. With passage of time, Christianity spread and the followers began to express their beliefs and faith through different forms of art like sculptures, paintings and engravings on the walls of churches and burial sites. After Emperor Constantine converted into Christianity in 313 CE, it became the official religion of Rome. Christian doctrines began to be taught through sermons and lectures under the guidance of Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. Henceforth, baptism became a common practice.

## MIDDLE AGES

Since most of the people in the Middle Ages were unable to read and write, religious education would be taught through poetry, sermons, drama and music. The most significant means of religious education was through 'The Mystery and Miracle' plays that were mostly watched for entertainment during Easter and Christmas. Pope Gregory the Great (590- 604) believed that Christian learnings could be nurtured more effectively through liturgy and music as the common people back then hardly attended schools. The great religious art of Michelangelo, Palestrina and Raphael worshipped and celebrated the aesthetic qualities of the religion through their unique creations.

## REFORMATION

Martin Luther (1483- 1546) and subsequently the Council of Trent (1545- 1563) believed in the development of personal faith in each Christian through education. "Education for Luther then was closely connected to religion and to the reformation of the church". (Elias, 1995, p. 108). Luther brought out reforms in education and established many schools that provided secular and religious lessons to the

students that continued till the twentieth century in as far as Asia, Africa, Australia and Americas.

#### TWENTIETH CENTURY

The twentieth century witnessed more progressive theories of education that questioned the existing ways of learning. Dewey (1934) believed that personal experiences of daily life influenced learning more than the doctrines of the churches. Whereas Ninian Smart believed that religious education should consist of beliefs, rituals, stories and comparing their principles across religions.

#### ART BASED APPROACH

Peta Goldberg in 'Religious Education and the Creative Arts: a Critical Exploration' notes that so far adequate attention has not been paid to 'Arts' in the process of religious education that needs to be bridged. Hyde (2005) suggests that the best way of nurturing spirituality in children is by engaging their body, mind and senses. Jan Grajczonek suggests usage of drama and literature and other imaginative methods in the process of religious education. Lovat (2001) refers to Dewey (1902), Piaget (1959), Kohlberg (1963) and Fowler (1981) and suggests that religious education must employ methods that allows 'freedom of choice' and drama is one such educational tool that allows the learner to choose, experience and reflect.

#### EDUCATIONAL DRAMA

20th Century Drama proved to be the most influential means of teaching. Dorothy Heathcote developed a meaning that influenced the understanding of the audience through his drama and therefore used it as a tool for learning. "The Art form of Drama was to be a crucible for knowledge" (Bolton, 1998, p 177).

Heathcote performed the role of a teacher and aimed to educate the children through different role plays by allowing them to participate in drama and thereby providing a scope for reflecting on new ideas. She even took children on field trips where they would get scopes to gather new information and experiences that helped in enriching their aesthetic knowledge.

Bolton once mentioned that "aesthetic intention, aesthetic attention and an overall aesthetic conception by the teachers" enhanced aesthetic experiences. (in

Havell, 1987, p177). Aesthetic learning involved participation, searching for meanings and symbols and thereby developing awareness and the artistic conscious mind. Judith McLean in 1996 acknowledges a "methodology that privileges the aesthetic experience as the central feature of learning drama". (Hoepper & Taylor in McLean, 1996, p3). Mc Lean urged the teachers to use their aesthetic consciousness through their understanding of literature and percolate it in their students that may open new opportunities for them so as to direct and streamline their aesthetic learning and experiences.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROCESS DRAMA

In Process Drama there would be no script. Such a drama would develop as a product at the end of rehearsal and would gradually take shape as performance progressed. There would be no audiences, rather the actors play the part of the audience as well. Thus, in a 'Process Drama', there would be scope for discussion, elaboration and reflection and thereby enhancing the authentic experiences of the participants. Such drama even played an important role in religious education and cognitive learning.

#### INTEGRATION OF THE ARTS AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Art has always played an important role in spreading Religious Education, rather Art is "a kind of bridge to religious experience" (John Paul II, 1999, p13). Even the Pope had a keen interest in drama in his young days. Religion and aesthetics began to be treated as complementary studies that helped people to reflect and think on what they have witnessed. Thus, the outer world of Art in form of Drama continued to influence the inner world of the common people and urged them to think and form new religious beliefs and faith.

#### REFERENCE

- [1] Abbs, P (Ed.) (1989). *Essays on Creative and Aesthetic Education*. New York: The Falmer Press.
- [2] Barry, G., & Brennan, D (1997). *A Syllabus for Religious Education for Catholic Schools*. Brisbane: Brisbane Catholic Education.

- [3] Bolton, G (1998). *Acting in Classroom Drama: A Critical Analysis*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham.
- [4] Comby, J (1985). *How to Read Church History: Vol 1. From the Beginnings to the Fifteenth Century*. London: SCM Press Ltd.
- [5] Dewey, J (1934). *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books.
- [6] Eisner, E (2002). *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [7] Greeley, A (2000). *The Catholic Imagination*. Berkley: University of California Press.