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ART AND CULTURE- A CREATIVE APPROACH TO CONFLICT-RESOLUTION AND PEACE-BUILDING IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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ABSTRACT:

This paper delves into the idea of studying the significance of Art and Culture as a creative approach to Conflict-Resolution and Peace-Building, in the contemporary situation, as these elements have always played a vital role in shaping human societies, and promoting social development.

Key Words: Art, Culture, Peace-Building, Conflict-Resolution

Introduction

Art and Culture have always played a significant role in shaping human societies throughout history, preserving the stories of the heritage and lifestyle of the respective communities, and strengthening their sense of place and personal identity, through their creativity. They are the means of creative expression and mutual communication between individuals and communities. ⁽¹⁾

Art and culture are inter-related concepts whose uses are often overlapped. Art is considered as the creation of objects, images and performances that express human emotions, ideas and experiences and its various forms include, painting, sculpture, literature, music, theatre, dance etc. Whereas, culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, customs, traditions, and practices of the respective groups of people. It includes, language, religion, cuisine, clothing, norms etc., ⁽²⁾

Art and culture profoundly impact society, in the way, it influences the people's thoughts, feelings, emotions and behaviour and contributes to the promotion of social cohesion by facilitating communication and understanding amidst people from different walks of life. ⁽³⁾

Since the end of Cold War, inter-state and intra-state conflicts have been more focused on the issues of culture, ethnicity, politics and religion, rather than on Nationalism. Thus, cultural beliefs, norms, traditions, ethnicity and religion have contributed towards many major disruptions that have resulted in the loss of innocent lives and valuable property. These conflicts are not compliant to transformation through rational processes alone; they require modes of expression that embraces enigma and gives voice to thoughts and feelings that defy words. Culture and the arts offer resources for eventuality of violence and building the dimensions required for peace ⁽⁴⁾.

This conceptual paper will help the readers to understand the significant role of art and culture in Peace-Building, and will delve into the ideas of promoting these creative approaches to resolve intra-state and inter-state conflicts, in light of the Rwandan Genocide, Manipur Conflict, Russia-Ukraine War, and Israel-Gaza Conflict.

Background

In regions of conflict, throughout the world, artists and cultural workers are creating projects and facilitating processes that foster the capacities required for peace- such as receptivity, creativity, imagination, compassion and the ability to accept paradox. In times of conflicts and wars, artists bear witness to suffering and draw the world's attention to those whose rights have been violated. ⁽⁵⁾

Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed, stated that peace, which is the main purpose being served by United Nations, is "now under grave threat". She observed that people's sense of safety and security, are at an all-time low, in almost every country ⁽⁶⁾. The world is facing the highest number of violent conflicts ever since the Second World War, and 2 billion people- almost a quarter of humanity, reside in places affected by such conflicts ⁽⁷⁾.

Through this paper, the author attempts to highlight the various ways Art and culture has assisted in resolving conflicts and building peace in the

past conflicts and how their application can be developed and promoted as a significant approach in the present conflicts, whether inter-state or intra-state.

Role of Arts and culture in Conflict-resolution in the past

Over the last few decades, art has taken the stage as a critical tool for reconciliation and peace-building. Dr. Edel Hughes from the University of Galway, conducted a study, which provides a rich background, establishing art as a “modernizer” of conflict. He identified a number of themes (from the increasing number of literatures in this field), such as Art as a Diplomacy tool, Art as a medium to draw attention to the realities of conflict, and Art as a bridge-builder bringing together all sides of the conflicts. Dr. Hughes supports this, with case-studies on Colombia and the troubles in Northern Ireland. In relation to the latter, he draws attention to the murals, observing the Troubles in Derry and Belfast, wherein these murals exemplify, how art can be used in truth-telling and healing. Dr. Hughes has also talked about the role that art played in leading up to the Peace Accord of 2016, in Colombia, wherein formal programmes and grassroots initiatives, that used music to address the effects of violence and to promote reconciliation among Colombians, were implemented. ⁽⁸⁾

East Africa, persists as one of the most unstable regions in the world. This region is made up of diverse cultures and various conflict environments across countries like, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). While some parts of the area, are relatively peaceful today, other significant sections of East Africa remain unable to escape the brutal and prolonged histories of armed conflicts, violent crime, extremism, communal violence, political instability, displacement, and human rights violations. These dire conflicts, which often leads to war and genocide, look forward to the pursuit of peaceful and non-violent strategies to resolve the, for the betterment of human co-existence and progress. As the region’s peace-building efforts continue on a powerful upheaval, gaining visibility and acceptance internationally, peace-builders in East-Africa have increasingly executed innovative methods of community arts and culture. This approach helps in demonstrating and strengthening conflict-prevention mechanisms, but they have also been successful in post-conflict pacification efforts. Defying all sorts of boundaries, art is considered a universal language that provides a direction for ordinary citizens at all levels of society to engage in broader national civic participation. ⁽⁹⁾

Role of Art and Culture in the context of Rwandan Genocide

The arts and culture, are widely accepted for their use as propaganda in inter-state conflicts, most notably in the Cold War between the USA and the USSR. However, their significance as a mode to advance peace and security has typically been considered as limited, in both academic and policy circles ⁽¹⁰⁾. Practitioners of Cultural relations believe that the arts and cultural programmes do not have the sole power to resolve conflicts or to prevent them. Yet, their experience, working in the areas of conflict, has revealed significant evidence of the power of arts and culture to increase the resilience of communities and provide a platform for debate and discussion, at times of crises. ⁽¹¹⁾

This particular study also highlights the contributions made by arts and culture to post-conflict communities, through therapy, reconciliation and civil-society strengthening. Rwanda is a notable example, where cultural programmes based on shared cultural heritage have been principal to the Government’s efforts to create a unified Rwandan identity, and heal ethnic divisions, following the genocide in 1994.

“Itorero” is a government-led citizenship and cultural education programme launched in 2007, focused on National and community service programmes for those aged between 18 and 35. Drawing from Rwanda’s cultural history, the initiative was based on the 17th century institution of Itorero, which was cultural and civic-school for Rwandans. This tradition was a part of a shred cultural heritage, between both the Tutsis and Hutus, and was recognised by Scholars. ⁽²⁰⁾

“Never Again Rwanda” works with those affected by the genocide and seeks to encourage creative, active and critical thinking in citizens, through films, theatre, discussions and groupwork. These sessions are facilitated by a trusted member of the community, who understands the fragility of the local context. ⁽²¹⁾

The arts play a central role in Kwibuka, the annual remembrance of the 1994 genocide wherein, the key element is the Flame of Remembrance, which tours around the country each year, similar to the Olympic Flame, with communities marking its arrival, in their own ways, including community performances of theatre, music and poetry. ⁽²²⁾

Role of Art and culture in Conflict-Resolution, in the context of Manipuri Conflict

The Manipur conflict commenced on the 3rd of May, 2023, between the State’s majority- Hindu Meitei community, against its hill tribes, mainly, the Christian Kukis. This regrettable violence has greatly impacted both, the existing art education & training, and its practices in present Manipur. Yet, amidst all the struggles, the artist community carries a heavy responsibility to realign itself with the ground realities, and to recover what has been damaged or lost.

Amidst all the confusion and uncertainty, Manipur artists are standing at the crossroads, facing decisions that will design the future of artistic and cultural practices in Manipur. For the past 7 months, there have been no major Art exhibitions, shows, festivals, or workshops. However, despite these hardships, the role and responsibilities that artists are supposed to undertake, during such situations particularly, are massive, wherein the primary responsibility is rethinking and reimagining an artist's role in the present and in the future.

Some artists and cultural organizations in Manipur, are beginning to reflect on the disastrous consequences of violence on art-making, production and reception of art. Some of these artists and groups, are engaging themselves in activities, within relief camps, by conducting art workshops for displaced children. Although these activities are not directly linked to art-making, but they hold a meaningful place in the contemporary art and cultural scenario, of Manipur. For example, art and cultural institutions such as, SIYOM, Happy in KHOL, and Matai Society, have been conducting art activities and workshops for conflict-affected children in various relief camps. ^(23 & 24)

Art and Culture in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

“In this war, culture is a primary target, and the destruction of hundreds of places, where the Ukrainians experience culture and history is key to Putin's goal of completely destroying Ukrainian identity” said Liesl Gertholtz, Director, PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Centre.

“Ukrainian artists, through every brush stroke, photograph and creative concept, serve as guardians of the country's rich history and culture, guaranteeing the on-going vibrancy and evolution of Ukrainian art far into the future. Enabling them to continue to create is an act of solidarity and a powerful form of resistance against Putin's targeted program of cultural erasure,” said Julie Trébault, Director, Artists at Risk Connection. ⁽²⁵⁾

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February, 2022, UNESCO has been advocating for respect for international humanitarian law and implementing emergency and medium-term measures in Ukraine, as a part of its directive for education, science, culture, information, and communication.

As previous crises have indicated, culture, education and information are major elements in meeting the needs of the population, in times of war, building resilience and preparing for the future.

The protection of cultural heritage in Ukraine is crucial, because it is not only a testimony of the past, but is also a key factor to future peace and cohesion. Heritage is the foundation of identity in Ukraine, providing the population with a sense of belonging.

By the beginning of February, 2024, UNESCO, had confirmed damage to more than 340 cultural sites in Ukraine, including, museums, monuments, libraries, religious sites, archives, building of historical or artistic interest. UNESCO's response focuses on all key areas of heritage: advising professionals on how to protect buildings and safeguard living heritage, delivering protective equipment, digitising artworks and archives, advising national authorities to update policies and strategies, supporting artists and cultural professionals, integrating living heritage in education, and facilitating the fight against the illegal trafficking of cultural property, as well as observing and evaluating damage. Around 100 Ukrainian artists, who were displaced, and their dependents (mostly, women) were provided temporary artistic residencies in European countries, as well as in other safer areas of Ukraine. Organized in more than 40 institutions, UNESCO gave these artists training and networking opportunities, allowing them to restart their creative works, generate income and preserve their livelihoods. ⁽¹⁸⁾

An initiative named as, “Flowers for Hope” is taking place in the war-torn city of Irpin, Ukraine. Volunteers, that is the local artists, take burnt and destroyed vehicles to turn them into touching works of art. As a part of this project, these volunteers go around the streets painting Sunflowers (which is the national flower of Ukraine), in order to raise funds, to help build the city. The Sunflower has become a symbol of resistance against the invasion of the country, by the Russian forces. ^(26 & 27)

Role of Art and Culture in the Israel-Gaza Conflict

Hamas, the Palestinian Militant Group, had launched an unrivalled assault on Israel, on the 7th of October, 2023, with hundreds of armed men, invading the communities near the Gaza strip. About 1,200 people were killed and more than 250 people, were taken to Gaza as hostages, according to the Israeli scores. More than 33,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed in the air and artillery strikes, carried out by the Israeli Military in response to the attack, says, Gaza's Hamas-run Health Ministry. ⁽²⁸⁾

With Israel's attack on Gaza, many artists are using their creations to demand justice, freedom, and an end to all bloodshed. Throughout history, art has been a crucial element of Palestinian resistance. From graffiti to skateboarding, Palestinian artists have found their own way to connect and share experiences, and to ensure that their culture and ethnicity is preserved. ⁽²⁹⁾

These artists are managing the crisis in countless different ways: through paintings of the horrors of the war, through anguished songs or dances or dramas etc. Tel Aviv, Israel's cultural capital, has a vibrant artistic community, leaves its mark, with colourful murals, and other kinds of artworks, painted throughout the ancient Jaffa neighbourhood's narrow streets. These works alongside other forms of art, such as songs, dance and plays, are

displayed in places like the Tel Aviv's Hostages Square, where protesters gather regularly, to demand the release of Israeli captives being held by Hamas, and on social media, where the Palestinian diaspora find it relatively safer to upload their works, in comparison to the ones still living under the Israeli Government.^(30 & 31)

The artists describe the various emotions and feelings that are portrayed through their artworks in terms of the colours and the strokes they use.

Conclusion

This review article points out the vital role played by Art and Culture in Peace-Building and Conflict-Resolution keeping in mind, the Rwandan Genocide, as well as the contemporary examples of the Manipur Conflict, Israel-Gaza Conflict and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict. With the help of this article review, we could come up with 5 areas, where Art and Culture turns out to be really helpful for Conflict-resolution and Peace-Building:

1). Channel for Truth-

Art and Culture helps the people, victims and viewers, alike, when it provides them the platform to promote truth via their artworks, creations, directions, choreographies, compositions etc.⁽¹⁹⁾

2). Social Space to promote Dialogue-

Art and Culture also promotes individuals from different people groups, different communities, different ethnicities, different countries etc, to talk about peace and resolving conflicts, in relation with their respective cultural practices and traditions, in turn making other people aware of the myriad of cultures existing in this world.⁽¹⁷⁾

3). Means to promote Healthy Conflicts

Having conflicts is not bad, it comes as a product of the complex human nature and the uniqueness that surrounds every individual. But what matters is how these conflicts are channeled, and dealt with. Art has often been proved as a channel to bring inner healing to people, hence, Art and Culture can be one of the significant methods through which healthy conflicts can be promoted, through methods such as painting, singing, dancing, acting etc.⁽¹⁶⁾

4). Art therapy for Conflict-affected people

Like mentioned in the earlier point, art has a healing effect to its viewers and creators, alike. Hence, it is also popularly used to provide therapies to the people in the affected area, such as art therapy, dance therapy, music therapy etc. It helps every individual to portray their emotions in the rawest of ways possible, and in their own unique manner.⁽²³⁾

5). Protection of Culture and art forms to protect peace

Culture is one of the foundational institutions of the society, and man holds it very dearly to his heart. Similarly, it is one of the most important components of every ethnic group, every community and every country, hence attacking the art and culture of any group, is equivalent to robbing them of their identity, their history and their heritage. Therefore, it is very important to ensure that the culture of every ethnic group or community or country, is protected and promoted, in order to maintain peace and stabilize relationships between individuals, groups, communities and countries.⁽¹⁸⁾

Conclusion

Art and Culture does play a significant role in the process of Peace-building and Conflict-resolution. The use of arts and culture to address issues of conflict, is extensive. Programmes can be implemented at all stages of the conflict-cycle, from Prevention to Post-conflict recovery⁽¹¹⁾. Arts have a particular ability to engage people in a way, that resonates with their local society. Art and culture provide a platform for groups, to have debates, discussions and dialogues, through much peaceful and calmer modes, in comparison to the violence and havoc caused by using weaponry⁽¹²⁾. Art and culture also provide a way to preserve the history of a community, through various forms of literatures, paintings, sculptures, films, photographs etc., It helps in providing a sense of identity to an ethnic group, community, or even a country.^(13 & 14)

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