

***Explorations in Critical Humanities: A Collection of Essays* edited by Sreenath Muraleedharan K. & Devi K. (Viva Books, 2017)**

'Humanities,' as a discipline, has always been appreciated by the intellectual society, on the one hand, and has been castigated by the rulers and 'self-referential conceptualisers', on the other since the era of early harbingers of 'critical thinking' like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, among others. So, the humanities has not only been confined to the area of academic, but it also deals with common life in the public sphere. The ignorance of humanities as a subject/discipline, nowadays, questions the critical engagement of the same. Therefore, the academic 'crunch' of humanities as a discipline is now a matter of critical inquiry that needs to be addressed by scholars, especially those who are young. Victor Davis Hanson, in his article 'Death of Humanities,' observes that 'The humanities are in their latest periodic crisis. Though the causes of the ongoing decline may be debated'.<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, too, triggers the debate similarly,

[I]t is the humanities above all that are being pushed to the wall. The British state continues to distribute grants to its universities for science, medicine, engineering, and the like, but it has ceased to hand out any significant resources to the arts. It is not out of the question that if this does not change, whole humanities departments will be closed down in the coming years.<sup>2</sup>

Keeping in view of the criticality and quandary of humanities, two young scholars, Sreenath Muraleedharan K. and Devi K., the editors of the volume under review, who teach at the Amrita University, Kochi (Kerala, India), hosted a conference on 'Critical Humanities: Modern Perspectives', which endeavoured 'to carve out ... ethical, philosophical, political, and cultural experiences/demands of the twenty-first century' (Foreword). The outcome of the conference ultimately produced the volume entitled *Explorations in Critical Humanities*, which has entered the debate whether humanities as a discipline is really on the brink of extinction. If yes, this volume is going to ascertain a fresh inkling of a newer branch of knowledge in academic society.

The volume, collecting thirty-three chapters, brings an epistemological expectation in the area of liberal arts in a broader sense and sensibility as it opens new vistas of investigative deliberations in pan-Indian academia. The book also covers the intercultural, trans-historical, pedagogical, literary, anthropological questions on pluralism, power-conflict, exclusion of social inclusion, the disadvantage of disability, heterogeneity in discipline and social justice, texts and contexts and so on. Such endeavours mandate, write the editors in the 'Foreword', 'exploration into the problems and potentials for critiquing the domain of humanities.' The book is not only an attempt at reminding us of the significance of humanities but also an effort in reincarnating the discipline.

The volume is decked-up with fourteen exploratory essays on literary texts that contextualise diverse themes like religious propositions, cultural shock, culinary nostalgia, ecological concerns, classical dance forms, gender, sexuality, the quest for identity, familial associations,

<sup>1</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, 'Death of Humanities,' *Defining Ideas*. The Hoover Institution. 28 Jan. 2014. Web. 30 Jan. 2018. <<https://www.hoover.org/research/death-humanities>>.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'The Slow Death of the University,' *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 61.30 (2015).

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apartheid rule, public sphere and Dalit sacrifice, et cetera. The essays have been authored by A. R. Chitra, Sonia Chellirian, Geetha Pai, and Kavya Purushothaman, among others.

Apart from the essays on literature, the other essays cover a wide gamut of issues permeating in the contemporary academic scenario, which invites the attention of pan-global academicians. In the opening essay entitled 'Unburdening the School Bag', Vijayalakshmi unearths multiple methodologies, reports, guidelines, policies, procedures, advisories, et cetera, issued by the government agencies to reduce the burden of children's school bag from time to time. The parents, guardians and their wards tilting with the 'burden' of the bags are fraught with the commercialisation of school education. Similarly, Sreena K., in her essay 'Rethinking the Scope of Kitchen in the Post-feministic Era', traces the trajectory of the kitchen in different genres, such as the media and cinema, discerning that 'women play a critical and *crucial* role in attaining the essentials of food security, availability, access and utilization' (12, italics mine). The last essay of the volume, on 'football', by Ashish Krishna critically explores the prospects how the sport became 'instrumental' in shaping the socio-political and cultural history of Bengal and Goa in the twentieth century (222). The other essays, placed in-between, safeguard other significant *leitmotifs* like society, culture, history, anthropology, disabilities, health, ecology, aesthetics, humour, fashion, economic disparity, vocal versatility, food, music, et cetera and offer laconic but tangible critical appraisal on these areas of humanities.

The absence of an introduction to the volume, which could have been appended somewhere, reflects the lack of editorial endeavour. Nevertheless, the volume, finely printed *at par*, deserves bestowal from the 'presence' of Barthian readers who may delve deep by assuming the 'death' of authors of 'critical humanities'. R. Veerasekaran, in his article 'Deteriorating trends in humanities courses', astutely avers,

[T]he deteriorating trend of humanities courses in the campuses can be averted and proper structural changes implemented. The crisis management strategy may be dispensed with and, efforts must be made to attract the volatile strength. A long-term planning is essential to strengthen the do or die exposition of the humanities courses in future.<sup>3</sup>

*Explorations in Critical Humanities: A Collection of Essays* adds to the existing scholarship at a time when the field of humanities is in need of inseminating, disseminating and fostering a wide-ranging discussion. The inter-disciplinary conceptual framework presented by this volume, ranging from pedagogical practice to rational reflection, from food metaphor to film interpretation, provides a powerful toolkit for reading, framing, interpreting, construing, enabling or understanding the critique of the cultural impact of humanities. Not only is the volume, as a whole, made up of interdisciplinary critical perspectives, the chapters themselves draw on sources from various disciplines. It extends the scholarship on humanities, which itself is already an extremely ecumenical sphere of study but deserves to be cultivated exponentially. Thus, the volume is helpful not only for students but also for researchers and academicians.

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<sup>3</sup> R. Veerasekaran, 'Deteriorating trends in humanities courses,' *The Hindu*. 29 Oct. 2002. Web. 01 Feb. 2018. <<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/edu/2002/10/29/stories/2002102900020200.htm>>.