

Rethinking Humanities as Pluralist Pedagogy

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In this short yet engaging book, Daniel J Rycroft looks at the domain of education in the field of humanities with respect to the question of responsibilities at the global and social levels. Placing humanities education at the intersections of its theoretical-philosophical moorings and its lived-experienced practical underpinnings, the writer poignantly addresses several important questions that enable the reader to reflect better on the agenda of colonial pasts as an important agent of deepened social, cultural as well as academic-intellectual and theoretical inequalities. It is at this interesting point in the narrative on colonialism and the wide array of inequalities induced by it that the author brings in the idea of pluralist pedagogy.

In more ways than one, pluralist pedagogy appears to be simultaneously an answer to the homogenising and unilinear Orientalist world view as well as a pathbreaking solution to the question of Western hegemony in knowledge building. Pluralist pedagogy, as the author would argue, emerges as a refreshing alternative that takes into its intellectual-ideational ambit all kinds of indigenous (tribal) as well as non-indigenous (non-tribal) ways of interpreting the world, including ways of teaching and learning, modes and models of communication, and a wide plethora of methods of social and cultural interpretation.

Unlike orthodox, hegemonic pedagogies, it opens up a reciprocal, dialogic and cross-cultural intersubjective engagement that is more accommodative of differences than its conventional counterparts. Perhaps the arguments made throughout the course of the book resonate with the broader agenda of comparative literature as a domain of knowledge that continuously laid great emphasis on the fact that in a country like India, which is not only multilingual and multicultural but also diverse in its knowledge traditions

The Humanities in India as Pluralist Pedagogy

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and literary histories, we ought to prioritise an approach that is comparative, respectful, and sensitive to the diversities and differences.

How does one conceive of such an approach? Perhaps the answer lies in envisioning a methodological outlook that is intercultural as well as interdisciplinary. A pivotal part in this outlook would certainly entail sincere efforts to engage in the translation of social-cultural and literary texts, interpretation of oral traditions and indigenous art forms among a range of other interventions.

Potential for Social Metamorphosis

What sets this short yet informative book apart is its emphasis on the positive role that can be played by teachers, researchers and scholars in the field of humanities to transform and even metamorphose the way in which academic social responsibility has been so far engaged with. It also advocates the emergence and development of “humanistic methodologies,” which is a result of a combination of interventions such as the development of curricula, engaged participant observation as well as sustained academic emphasis on understanding cultures beyond just imperial or post-imperial.

Rycroft highlights the need for rethinking and then envisioning the idea of responsibility and disciplinary accountability. It is in this pursuit that the author talks about the hidden and intangible processes involving value creation. He simultaneously also encourages those working in humanities and beyond to acknowledge and accommodate the importance of the idea of inclusiveness in all that they engage with whether it is academic practice, formation and interpretation of public

policy or any other form of involvement in the field of social ethics.

The Ethical Domain

The book is divided into eight parts, tapping the voices of: inclusion and pluralism, responsibility and provocation, subject and value congruence, experience and transversality, memory and commemoration, complexity and community, human dignity and recognition, and rights and anti-colonial nation. What makes this book provocative is the manner in which it attempts to experiment with a wide variety of approaches to the academic, intellectual, and intercultural notions of social responsibility.

The author strongly believes that only when we acknowledge the gravity of social responsibility in the practice of humanities can we address the challenges such as social inclusion, marginalisation, social justice, layered or multidimensional injustices and sustainability. Towards the end of the book, the author talks about the urgent need to find a sustainable and viable balance between the subject-specific interests and domains of research for each of the disciplines clubbed under the umbrella term “humanities,” and its ability to translate into lived experiences in the pragmatic and a complex world.

For a Liberating Pedagogy

How does one then envisage and implement such a grand and deeply philosophical dream? The author refrains from providing any ready-made solutions and rightly so; instead he suggests the need for transversal and dialogic practices that can lay the foundation for the process of intra-institutional and inter-institutional dialogue. He suggests that it is only through the process of enhanced dialogue can we aim to arrive at a better alignment between the individual and the collective in terms of social responsibility on the one hand and the encouragement of such mutually benefiting dialogues on the other. It can also provide better clarity to those working as university administrators and functionaries in terms of value congruence.

The task is tremendously challenging but what cannot and must not be overlooked is the fact that this alone shall

become a gateway to making humanities (envisioned not as a singular but a plethora of disciplines) a truly dialogic, interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and ethically nuanced field that is not only aware of but also responding to the question of social responsibility.

The author leaves no stone unturned to remind us of the need for the humanities and its wide variety of practitioners, whether they are teachers, researchers, scholars or young learners, to lay greater emphasis on becoming better equipped at the art of dialogue, exchange and mutual reciprocity. The book also encourages contributing to the field of translation studies such that texts across cultural milieus gain greater accessibility and can break free from monopolies of all kinds. The author does not shy away from articulating the possibilities with these kinds of efforts alone and that we would be able to envisage and even reconstruct what he calls a “pluralist architectonics of diversity and inclusion.”

Interdependence and the ‘Voices of Pluralism’

An interesting observation made in the book is about how when we engage with the idea of the “voices of pluralism”

we are invited to reflect on the idea of “interdependence” almost by default. After all, pluralism is premised on the idea of diversities and differences that are well accommodated into the ideational whole while retaining their distinguishing characters. For this, dialogue is almost like an indispensable tool without which neither the voices can become an effective reality nor can there be any congruence of values, ethics or social responsibilities.

The other important dimension over here is interdependence as a phenomenon that exists and thrives at the cusp of the various facets of learning, construction of knowledge and the agenda of social transformation. It is only through interdependence and dialogue that co-creation and co-development can be possible.

It is perhaps due to the sustained insistence on the need for cultivating and nourishing interdependence and thereby paving way for the “voices of pluralism” that Rycroft (p 85) concludes his book by arguing:

All Humanities teachers and learners, many benefit from cultivating an enhanced responsiveness to the principles, politics and philosophies-whether short-term or long-term, direct or indirect, indigenous or non-indigenous -that animate our academic practices. It is in this multidimensional space of

thought, action, knowledge, understanding, experience, responsibility, humanity, and co-presence, that the idea value of the “humanities” is brought into existence. It is here that we can reflect on our “discursive being” and then make these reflections significant to each other.

The crisp yet impactful manner in which complex issues surrounding social responsibility, interdisciplinarity, and dialogue have been addressed and systematically taken up in this book make for an engaging read not only for those interested in comparative literature or humanities per se, but for all those who think deeply about dialogic pedagogies or advocate for the social sciences to become even more nuanced, socioculturally and ethically enriched in approach.

This book is for all those who envisage and strongly feel the need for developing learning methodologies that emphasise dialogue and agency, accommodate diverse value systems and a complexity of voices, while addressing the responsibilities towards the world around us.

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