# "The Humanities in the Forefront: Trauma or Relief in the Age of the Coronavirus"

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This is the age of the white army, this is the age of the doctors and the nurses, the age of the search for a vaccine to save humanity from an impending doom, this is the age of the ventilator, the age of tracking and testing, the age of the mask, the age of the hospital. This is not the age of the orchestra, the art gallery, the football stadium, the blockbuster. This is the age of the Coronavirus.

This is the age in which each night, millions of people locked downed in their homes stand in their balconies; clapping, cheering the army of doctors and nurses treating patients, and putting their lives at risk. This is the age in which football stars, Hollywood legends, musicians, artists, writers, performers, gradually recede in oblivion; and in their place science, medicine is our salvation, our guarantee that life will go on, that we will not perish. This is the age in which our very existence as a human species stands in the balance. This, without the rescue of science and medicine, is doomsday.

"So, distract yourself, you may say. Read a book. Watch a movie. Listen to a song, mesmerize in a ballet or an opera. But how could I, you reply? My life is at stake, and the lives of my loved ones. Contract the virus, and it's a fifty - fifty chance. This is not the time of the humanities, the time of leisure. This is the time of "my life", the time in which my doctor is my saviour, my knight in shining armour."

What you've just read my friends is a stream of consciousness, or rather an expression of a collective consciousness. When life hangs in the balance, panic creeps in, and our instincts drive us to search and cling to life. When a deadly virus hits us, medicine becomes our sanctuary. Everything else is irrelevant. Or so it seems.

As the Coronavirus Pandemic takes its grip around the world, we have seen how the humanities contract inwards, while medicine expands outwards. After all, what use is a humanist when a fever is raging in the house?

Crucially important, I would argue. The Humanities vanish from view at the very moment they are most required. Many facets of the coronavirus outbreak lie beyond the scope of biomedicine.

We have seen how people have left supermarkets empty; buying food, masks, and disinfectants compulsively. We have seen acts of racism and discrimination against certain groups, fearing that they may be infected with the virus. We have seen politicians fighting and blaming each other, trying to take advantage of the situation instead of fighting for the common good. We have seen how fear has exposed our selfish side.

But we have also seen how people have offered to buy food for the most vulnerable, and to take care of the children of those who work; we have seen how people daily support healthcare workers through their windows, singing and sharing words of encouragement; we have seen doctors and nurses giving up their holidays, and continue to work without rest; and we have seen young people helping those in need in their neighbourhoods.

So, what can the Humanities offer in these times of crisis? What can it do with a pandemic that seems to be understood only in terms of science and medicine?

It can, and has assisted in three major aspects:

Interpretation, control, and prediction:

1. It has helped, through various platforms, especially media (both social and mainstream) in interpreting the scientific complexity of the virus, its symptoms, how it spreads, means of self - protection, what to do if infected; thus forming a collective awareness of the seriousness of the crisis, and the need to act responsibly.

2. Humanities has assisted through the same platforms in controlling the resources and knowledge of the pandemic, especially the many fake news circulating around it; reducing dangers and negative practices on the part of the public.

3. The Humanities can predict the socio - economic, and political future of a world infected with the Coronavirus, both negatively and positively. Issues like world trade, globalization, borderless nations, ethnicity, conflict, leisure, intimate relationships, are all being revised and redefined.

It is not only science and medicine, therefore, that are taking centre stage in this arena of the pandemic. The Humanities has found its space; marginal though it may seem, but one which will grow as the days linger on.

It is noteworthy that Arts and the Humanities are at the forefront of pioneering research; research that is exploring the power of language, the need for creative toolkits, and its impact on religious principles, and online engagement.

Following are examples of these projects

1. There are projects that investigate the ways in which COVID-19 has been narrated across the world, studying key terms in several languages like "contagion, isolation, lockdown, social distancing, quarantine, ventilators, ICUs, protective gear, testing and tracking, spike, peak, flattening the curve, antibody testing," comparing meanings in other cultures, especially since such terms are becoming a part of the everyday conversation.

2. Other projects are giving free access for isolated audiences to cultural venues like online museum tours, online visits to archeological sites, access to live online opera shows, ballet and musical performances, digital libraries and databases, so as to promote empathy, and intimacy during lockdown.

3. There are multiple projects on how to provide psychological and social support for healthcare workers in the frontlines, and to terminal patients on the verge of death, and to their loved ones in the final hours. Several digital platforms have been established by psychologists and sociologists for these purposes.

4. Other projects are harnessing "Digital Humanities", i.e. how journalists and researchers are developing digital methods to investigate what the WHO has called an "infodemic" of misinformation associated with COVID-19. There are lots of fake news circulating worldwide.

5. Other projects investigate how the faithful in Muslim countries have turned to Islamic religious scholars for reassurance and information through "Fatwas" (legal opinions) given by significant religious scholars. These "Fatwas" act as a source of guidance during the global crisis.

6. Other projects are researching the emotional repercussions of the pandemic, and bringing attention to the practices of isolation, suggesting that "being alone with ourselves" is an opportunity for self - discovery.

7.  There are projects that deal with the psychological impact of quarantine, including emotional disturbance, depression, stress, difficulty of sleep, irritability, anger, monotony, boredom, and proximity to a small number of people. Solutions include the need to establish a consistent routine, to engage in creative hobbies away from social media and TVs, acknowledging progress and focusing on small achievements, and having honest and open conversations with family members.

8. Other projects deal with the adverse effect of the pandemic on gender equality. The pandemic, it is said, will be a disaster for feminism during which women will be driven back to their 1950s roles of cook, carer and cleaner, and how sharing tasks on the part of male partners and family members is the necessary solution.

9. There are also multiple projects that tackle strategies to overcome challenges of online education, offering multiple platforms for this purpose, plus projects that explore the social and psychological wellbeing of children under lockdown.

10. There are also projects that bring writers, artists, musicians, sport figures, performers of all sorts, to digital and mainstream platforms with the purpose of sending messages of reassurance to supporters and followers worldwide.

So, the humanities has carved a space for itself alongside medicine and the sciences during this unfortunate pandemic.

One final remark. This is not, of course, a race between the Humanities and the Sciences on who should win a competition. This is an attempt to prove that one is indispensable to the other; that medicine, while trying to save our lives needs to do so hand in hand with the Humanities.

So, an interdisciplinary approach is required to make sense of the disease's entanglement with social, economic, and political processes. Here, sociologists, psychologists, historians, anthropologists, artists, on the one hand; and epidemiologists, microbiologists, and physicists need to collaborate on research to better understand emerging infections and the role that social and cultural factors play in epidemic events.

The interdisciplinary work between the Humanities and medicine is often broadly categorized as the "medical humanities." Currently, traffic is one-way, with the humanities conceived as delivering added value to medicine. However, the Humanities has reclaimed the "social in medicine", reorienting it towards the socio - economic and cultural issues that impinge on health and well - being.

To conclude, no battle is meant to be won by the Humanities; rather an acknowledgement that it can also sustain life, and rise to the occasion when it is most needed.


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