

**Yuval Noah, Harari (2018), 21 Lessons for the 21st Century,
Penguin Random House UK, pp. 352**

**Dr.Kalyani Rangarajan*

ABSTRACT

Yuval Noah Harari looks at today's most urgent issues and emphasizes the challenge of maintaining our collective and individual focus in the face of constant and disorienting change.

Keywords: Global perspective, terrorism, liberal democracy, technological revolution, meditation

1. Introduction

Yuval Noah Harari, with a Ph.D. in History from the University of Oxford, currently lectures at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, specialising in world history. His two earlier books, 'Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind' and 'Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow' became international bestsellers. Like these earlier works of Harari, this book also features in the Bill Gates' list of preferred books for 2018.

Harari's first book, Sapiens looked at the human past, tracing the evolution of an insignificant ape into becoming the ruler of the planet Earth.

Homo Deus, the second book explored the long-term future and the ultimate destiny of human intelligence and consciousness.

This modern philosopher with his profound insights, now takes a look at the here and now and directs his focus on the immediate future of human societies. He takes on what dictates our future, with an in-depth exploration of nationalism, religion, immigration, artificial intelligence and many other important topics. In taking up a crucial global conversation about how to take on the problems of the twenty-first century, Harari suggests, "The trick for putting an end to our anxieties is not to stop worrying. It's to know which things to worry about, and how much to worry about them...!".

2. The Review

With a global agenda, this insightful author, Yuval Noah Harari, looks at the major forces shaping societies all over the world, that are likely to influence the future of our planet in its entirety. Some of the questions he endeavours to answer are: "What is happening right now? What are today's greatest challenges and choices? What should we pay attention to? What should we teach our kids?"

Though the book takes on a global perspective, the author manages to tackle many issues an individual faces at the personal level, emphasizing the connections between the

great revolutions of our era and the internal levels of individuals.

The book starts with an examination of the current political and technological situation. At the close of the twentieth century liberalism held its sway over fascism and communism. The way forward seemed to be pointing to democratic politics, human rights and free market capitalism. But with the global financial meltdown of 2008, liberalism also is in a fix and losing credibility, at a time when the merger of infotech and biotech advances might push billions out of their jobs, compromising both their liberty and equality. Big Data algorithms leading to digital dictatorships may concentrate all power in the hands of an elite few, with the majority of the working age population being pushed into irrelevance.

With the corporations and entrepreneurs driving the tech revolution having sights glued only on the benefits of their creations, without looking at the consequences for the human populations inhabiting the earth, the onus is on sociologists, philosophers and historians like Harari to sound the alarm and predict the ways in which things can take a turn for the worst.

The second part of the book emphasizes the need for global cooperation for evolving solutions to the technological challenge. But achieving this would be very difficult with the humankind being divided by their hostilities involving nationalism, religion and culture. Humankind has evolved into a single civilization and problems such as nuclear apocalypse, ecological degradation and technological disruption have to be tackled at the global level. The collision between global problems and local identities leads to several crisis situations, as has happened with the Brexit issue and European Union or to give a more local example, the recent Pulwama massacre and its aftermath. A very insightful comment by the author is, "One thing that might help the world as a whole to integrate betteris to downplay the hysteria regarding terrorism, the weapon of a marginal and weak segment of humanity. How did it come to dominate global politics?"

**Dean, School of Management, IMS Unison University, Dehradun*

A ray of hope shines through Harari's examination of the unprecedented challenges and intense disagreements among humans. He puts forth his encouraging view point that humankind can rise to the occasion by keeping its fears under control and being humble about its views.

Talking about religions, Harari does acknowledge the enormous contribution of religious belief to peace and harmony in the world. "If visiting a temple makes people experience peace and harmony - that's wonderful. But if a particular temple causes violence and conflicts, what do we need it for?" "This extreme position may find favour only with a few rationalists. The author concludes that secularism can provide us with all the values we need.

The fourth segment of the book takes a look at the notion of part - truth and asks how can any single person comprehend the complicated global processes and avoid falling a victim to propoganda and misinformation. How does one find the thin dividing line between reality and fiction?

In the fifth and final part, Harari takes a general look at life in this age of bewilderment and confusion, with the old order on the verge of collapse and no new engaging story replacing the earlier ones. He ends with the philosophical question, "Given everything we know and don't know about science, about God, about politics and about religion - what can we say about the meaning of life today?" He is quick to point out that we cannot continue this debate indefinitely. If we are indecisive, the invisible hand of the Market is sure to force upon us its own blind reply.

After criticising so many stories, religions and ideologies, the author puts himself on the firing line and puts forth how he handles his frustrations through the age old technique of Vipassana meditation for handling suffering caused by patterns of his own mind.

Harari concludes with distinguishing between the mind and the brain. The brain is a material network of neurons, synapses and bio-chemicals. The mind is a flow of subjective experiences such as pain, pleasure, anger and love. We so far have no explanation for how the mind emerges from the brain.

Several ancient cultures gave considerable attention to the study of the mind and evolved methods for training people to observe their own minds systematically. The methods thus developed have been collectively bunched under the generic term 'meditation'. While there are hundreds of meditation techniques developed by humans, Harari has had personal experience only with Vipassana meditation, discovered in ancient India by Buddha.

The author points out the tremendous efforts we are willing to make for understanding foreign cultures, unknown species and distant planets. He asks whether it might not be worth our while to work just as hard in order to understand our own minds and concludes that we had to better understand our minds before the algorithms make our minds for us.

3. Conclusion

As, Bill Gates points out, if you are overwhelmed with the state of the world, 21 Lessons offers a helpful framework for processing the news and thinking about the challenges we face. He also acknowledges that he and his wife Melinda have gotten really into meditation lately, which he points out is a route to mindfulness.

If the anxieties of 2018 are getting to you, as Gates points out Yuval Noah Harari offers some relief. We should not forego worrying altogether; we just need to worry in a more organized way.

References

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