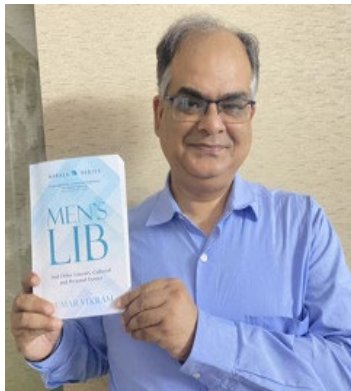


Book Review: MEN'S LIB and Other Literary, Cultural and Personal Essays by Kumar Vikram

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews MEN'S LIB and Other Literary, Cultural and Personal Essays by Kumar



Vikram (2022). The book provides a hope that essay as a genre is here to stay for years to come. Vikram has presented a unique bouquet of his literary, cultural, and personal essays written and published over 15 years from 2004 to 2020. The essays in the book have been categorized as socio-cultural, literary, and personal. The book showcases Vikram's own evolution as an essayist who creates his narratives based on lived experiences,

academic rigour, critic's mind, and layman's inquisitiveness. The author provides a fresh perspective on some of the historical, literary, cultural, and political figures as well as imageries and provokes the readers to challenge their worldviews in inimitable style. Essays in the book are likely to trigger discourses and conversations around contemporary social, literary, and personal issues.

KEYWORDS: Men's Liberation, Culture, Gender Discourse, Relationships, Identities, Essays, India

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MEN'S LIB and Other Literary, Cultural and Personal Essays

by Kumar Vikram

Published by Nirala Publications (2022); Pages: 260

Writing a review on MEN'S LIB and Other Literary, Cultural and Personal Essays by Kumar Vikram, acclaimed by literary giants of the stature of Prof Prasanta Chakravarty, Prof Anisur Rahman, and K. Satchitadanandan, among others, was an experience of learning the thought process of the author, so varied and stimulating and enriching to the mind. The book covers a wide range of diverse subjects and issues: 19 essays in all –seven socio-cultural, 8 literary and 4 personal –in that order, all written and published between 2004 and 2020.

An essay attempts to express thoughts in writing, which may be literary criticism, political proclivities, well-thought-out arguments, observations of daily life, or the author's recollection/reflections. It is an analytic or interpretative literary composition usually dealing with its subjects from a limited or personal point of view. In the book's Introduction, Vikram expresses deep anguish over the lingering memories, traces, and realities of more than 200 years of colonial domination. He mentions the imposing statue of British General Henry Havelock at Trafalgar Square and public parks named after him in Singapore and New Zealand and his tomb in the Alambag area of Lucknow. Reference is also made to the statue of British Brigadier General James Neill (who is identified as the butcher of Allahabad). Furthermore, the Introduction specifically refers to two lead essays: MEN's LIB and Taj Mahal. Vikram makes a strong case that in 21st-century India, Men's Lib is an idea that needs to be brought back to the centre of popular discourse in academic or general discourse through a process.

The first preferred choice to scan four personal essays is an attempt to ascertain the author's mindset. Personal essays are autobiographical and relate to a significant personal experience. Since these are conversational, there is a sense of intimacy and impact on the writer's logic. No subject matter is untouchable and need not pass through the rigours of structure. The first lengthy essay is devoted to Prof Damodar Thakur (1923-2012), a family-folk hero, an English scholar and a contemporary of Prof C D Narasimhaiah at Cambridge. Vikram developed a camaraderie with Prof Thakur by sending him the National Book Trust Newsletter, of which he was on the editorial team. Prof Thakur was a literary giant, well respected and fondly

referred to across nations, among them by the US-based Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid. Deeply rooted in the Indian traditions, Prof Thakur, speaking in a seminar, says, "The influence of the Western culture can be resisted if we have high self-esteem and learn to have faith in our own culture and transition".

The second essay reminisces his father, Prof Arun Kumar Sinha (1940-2011), whom he calls English Professor and Activist. Prof Sinha was an exemplary human being, a committed teacher known for his works on T S Eliot and Mark Twain and his role and contribution to the socialist and Sarvodaya movement spearheaded by Acharya Narendradev, Karpuri Thakur, Ram Manohar Lohia, and Jaiprakash Narayan. Prof Sinha's general refrain was that a teacher must be able to 'stimulate' the students' minds and that a teacher's knowledge or research was good enough only if it got delivered effectively in the classroom lectures and students benefitted from that.

The third essay is related to his elder brother Kumar Vivek, who also had multi-dimensional interests and rich reading habits, love for French writers Sartre and Camus, and who subscribed to the Hindi literary magazine '*Sarika*'. He played gully cricket, learned to sing Kishore Kumar's songs in the bathroom, and watched parallel and masala action films. The fourth essay, captioned 'Male bounding', is an autobiographical essay in verse wherein Vikram is nostalgic about his family –mother, wife, daughter, father, and brother.

The lead essay, "Female Foeticides and Limitation of Feminism," ponders the question, "Can Men's Lib provide the answer?" Female foeticide and infanticide are monsters, as reflected in the northern Indian States, and raising their ugly heads in some southern states. Votary of Men's Liberation Movement, Vikram strongly feels that the skewed male gender role (the idea that manhood depends on how to oppress and subjugate other people) inflected upon the men as they grow up, stifles their development as 'wholesome human beings'. Also, the biggest scepticism that the Men's Liberation Movement in India would have to suffer may come in the form of enquiries from the margins through Dalit/Minorities/Tribal discourses. Whereas Mark Shelley suggests, 'I don't wish to have power over men; over themselves', Steve Biddulph, the Australian author, suggests a Men's Movement/Women's Movement alliance so society can develop comprehensive solutions to gender bias. Vikram concludes

that Men's Lib, emphasising freeing men from the illusions of superiority and fixed notions about gender roles, seems as varied and compulsory a necessity among the marginalised communities as it might be for those holding on to the centre of things. Reference may also be made to Jack Nichols' book *Men's Liberation: A New Definition of Masculinity* (1975), wherein the author delves into how men can be liberated from the culture of toxic masculinity.

In the second lead essay, "Taj Mahal and the Image of Womanhood and Love", Vikram views the Taj Mahal as a tool for perpetuating male notions about proper womanhood or love. He wonders whether the Taj would have gotten that much attention and praise had it been made in memory of independent-minded, freedom-seeking, and feminist personalities like Razia Sultana or Noor Jahan. With the image of Mumtaz Mahal in mind, the writer refers to Madhu Kishwar's analysis of the way 'the pervasive popular cultural ideal of womanhood sustained of a woman as a selfless giver, someone who gives and gives endlessly, gracefully, smilingly, whatever the demands, howsoever unreasonable and harmful to herself. Right now, criticism of the Taj Mahal is growing increasingly bold. Some people feel that it was built by the blood and sweat of India's farmers and labourers, that it was costly to construct, that its beauty and historical significance are overstated, and that it does not represent Indian architecture. In his book *Taj Mahal: The True Story*, P N Oak furnishes evidence to prove that the Taj Mahal existed years before the death of Mumtaz Mahal, that it was a temple place, and that records were falsified to show it was a grave.

In an essay, "India: Nation –State vs. Civilization", Vikram lamented that the Marxist scholars dominated the Indian intellectual scene since independence and referred to the Marxist interpretations of Indian culture and society by historians like Vinay Lal, who taught history at the University of California and was more interested in addressing an audience outside India. Kumar Vikram says, "It's rather strange that the author (Lal) would like to hark back upon the intrinsic qualities of India as a civilisation while remaining completely oblivious of the suppression and discrimination that kept that idea going, which has precisely been the focus of attention of India as nation state'.

The essay captioned “National Consciousness and the Bihar Movement” highlights the contribution of Brajkishore Prasad (1877-1946), a lawyer and eminent leader of the Indian National Movement and a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Rajendra Prasad. He focused on the educational and intellectual training of the youth. Visionary as he was, Prasad emphasised the importance of technical education for bringing about national self-reliance. He said merely a century ago that our education should be on national lines. Unless we know our history, study the ancient civilisation of the country, and have pride in our race, we will never be true Indians. He also stressed the need to translate texts and content into vernacular languages, remarking that it was the first step towards enriching any literature.

In the essay, "A Finished Product of Indian Culture Caught in the Crossfire of Communalism," Vikram talks about his 'hero' Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad who was unfortunately sidelined because he found himself at the crossfire of the majority and minority brands of communalism. Very appropriately, C Rajagopalachari described Azad as the great Akbar of Modern India. Nehru referred to Azad as 'the caravan leader, a very brave and gallant gentleman, a finished product of the culture that pertains to few'.

The essay captioned “A Global City Called Book Fair” applauds the contribution of book fairs organised in various parts of the world in promoting new ideas that carry human civilisation on their shoulders. These book fairs give faces to the names and can create avenues even for the smallest publishers. Here, a quote from Nobel laureate Ernest Hemmingway comes to mind, 'There is no friend as loyal as a book'.

Captioned "An American View on Reading as Socio-economic Skill", the essay decodes Barack Obama's views on the importance of reading. The famous scholar President of the US is widely respected among the intelligentsia. My daughter, Prof Anupama Arora, Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts –Dartmouth, tells me that the writings and speeches of Barack Obama are part of curricula in colleges in the US. I, too, follow Barack Obama and have thoroughly enjoyed reading his beautifully written and powerful political memoir, 'A Promised Land'. Unfortunately, a habit of reading is waning across the globe. Vikram laments that the inculcation of a reading habit has yet to seize society's imagination, mainly because book hunger cannot become more overpowering than food hunger in the Indian context.

The twin essays are devoted to nation-building and translation dynamics in Europe and India. The author notes that the coming of nation-states in European countries is marked by the unification of various regions of particular cultural and political communities into nation-states. He extensively refers to the role and the contribution of John Dryden's translations as a vehicle for contemporary political criticism and into the making of England and a modern nation-state. Referring to the Indian context, the author opines that nation-building exercises in colonial India came into being through a very intricate process. The translation works of the Orientalists led by the Asiatic Society of Bengal, especially Sir William Jones' translation into English of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, Wilkins' translation of *Gita*, Schopenhauer declaring the *Upanishad* as the product of the highest human wisdom. The author mentions explicitly the contribution made by Raja Ram Mohun Roy and the translation of Tagore's *Gitanjali*.

The essay "Post-Colonialism and Beyond" refers to India's contemporary Dalit literary discourse. While critic Sisir Kumar Das referred to Dalit literature as a narrative of suffering, Dalit critics objected to it as a manifestation of the elites' condescending attitude towards Dalit literature. The author, referring to the philosophy of Edward W. Said, who said that 'Victimhood does not guarantee or necessarily enable an enhanced sense of humanity', demands a more mature response from Dalit thinkers.

The essay, "The Changing Dynamics of Negritude Movement and Pan-African Identity", refers to the poem 'Prayer to Masks' by the legendary Senegalese poet, politician and cultural theorist who was the country's first President for two decades. The poem brings about a black man's longing for a spiritual and emotional state of being, which the enforced superiority and bestial repression of the colonial/white/western world has snatched from him and his contemporaries. Further, the essay on Baba Nagarjun (born Vaidyanath Mishra, who embraced Buddhism and acquired the name after the Buddhist scholar) compares him with the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda in the manner he juxtaposes the personal with the impersonal and with D H Lawrence, who approached the psychological dilemma of his characters in the backdrop of their social realities.

In the essay, 'The Kalevipoeg is more akin to our Dalit-Folk-Tribal Traditions than the Epics', the author shares a conversation with Vishnu Khare on the presentation of the State

Decoration of Order of the Cross of Terra Mariana IV to him as a translator of Estonian national epic the *Kalevipoeg*. Khare also talks about translating the Finnish national poetic epic 'Kalevala'. He says that both the epics have common family roots and are culturally interrelated. *Kalevipoeg*, an epic of a predominantly rural civilisation, is present in all curricula from the primary school level to the Master's degree in Estonia. Khare says, 'I consider Krishna to be the most ideal human being of all times and both Vainamoinen, the hero of Kalevala' and *Kalevipoeg* have a touch of the flute player from Vrindavan.

In the essay captioned "Poet Manglesh Dabral" (1948-2020), the author talks about the poet's consistent tryst with exploring the idea of 'the other' and specifically refers to his two lines from a poem,

'My one hand often pushes the same mountain
With my other hand, I hold on to a piece of sky.'

In another poem, the poet says,

"While walking, someone else is found walking alongside
And in darkness too, an arm appears with love."

In the essay, "Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes" the author talks about the original masters of modern English poetry and observes that while Ezekiel's approach to poetry as a vocation was rather methodical, Moraes somehow could not shake off the reputation of being someone who wrote poetry by fits and starts. On the question of belongingness, the author suggests that Ezekiel returned to India from England to start the complex life of an intellectual focused on finding some space for Indian –English writings, especially poetry. On the other hand, according to Khushwant Singh, Moraes disliked everything about India, particularly Indians, adding that the only exceptions he made were good-looking women he took to bed. Similar uncharitable remarks were made by Geeta Doctor, 'the greatest asset of Dom Moraes was his closeness to women and poetry'. In all fairness, Dom Moraes made a single contribution to Indian English literature by penning more than two dozen books. He was a distinct personality who conducted one of the first interviews of the Dalai Lama when he was barely twenty years old. He had a lifelong battle with alcoholism and led a colourful love life, including marriage to Leela Naidu.

Indeed, reading 'MEN'S LIB and Other Literary, Cultural and Personal Essays' was an intellectual treat. Vikram has successfully resurrected the 'essays' as literary and creative genre and readers are likely to be informed, entertained, stimulated, and provoked at the same time while going through the book.

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