

**Jens Martin Gurr, 2024, *Understanding Public Debates: What Literary Studies Can Do*
(New York: Routledge)**

**Animesh Kumar, University of Delhi, Delhi
Dr Ujjwal Jana, University of Delhi, Delhi**

The monograph attempts to synthesise insights from philosophy, contemporary political discourse, and the public humanities to demonstrate how literary studies can illuminate and potentially rationalise political debates within pluralistic societies. This approach positions the book as a fresh and vital voice within the emerging field of public humanities. It examines various fields of inquiry, including narratology, philosophy, music, odes, and Cli-fi novels, to underscore how literature can proffer a platform that facilitates constructive debates through multiple perspectives, narrative situations, and ambiguities. This work unifies three key areas: the examination of societal debates and conflicts within pluralist societies, insights into the societal roles of literary and non-literary narratives, and broader considerations of literary studies' functions in relation to a world in constant flux. In doing so, it examines how literary and non-literary narratives shape public discourse and the role of literary studies in understanding these debates. By historicising and contextualising conflicts, the monograph explores how literary studies can investigate, mitigate, and even ameliorate social fissures. The book is divided into six distinct chapters, along with an introduction and a conclusion.

The chapter titled "The History of Ideas and the Long Shadow of Plato" expounds on the works of Plato, John Milton, and Percy Bysshe Shelley to scrutinise the shaping of the modern American political divide between the conservatives and the liberals. It also provides a playing field for the social and historical forces present during different times of history to reveal themselves, which in turn helps contextualise the deep disagreements that inform the two antithetical standpoints. The chapter examines the potential challenges to demands for unimpeded democratisation that arise from the conservative front, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom. The chapter defines the contours of the conservative worldview, which, as Sullivan puts it, is "inherently a philosophy of human imperfection...[that] has traditionally been marked by a largely

pessimistic understanding of human nature" (Gurr 20). This undermining of human rationality as limited, and therefore something that warrants restrictions on individual liberties, is where the liberals disagree with the conservatives. This sets the stage for furthering the debate on more fundamental contentions like Berlin's negative and positive conceptions of liberty and Rousseau's distinction between *the volonté générale*, the idealised sense of what would be best for the collective, vs the *volonté de tous*, the demand of the majority, which, as Gurr, drawing on history, seems to suggest, is often misguided. Gurr subsequently fleshes out the Platonic body politic analogy to demonstrate how even the most radical thinkers who adopt the body politic standpoint cannot help but be influenced by the conservative overtones that the body politic analogy is infused with.

The second chapter, titled "Complicating the 'Culture Wars': Rereading the Human Stain," focuses on discussing Roth's novel as a model that explores the challenges and pitfalls of manic pivoting on half-baked ideas of political correctness. Gurr argues that while *The Human Stain* has largely been seen as a "conservative critique of political correctness," he aims to show in the chapter how Roth's novel is "a remarkably even-handed dissection of the... 'culture wars' over a complex set of issues, including those related to identity politics, political correctness, and cancel culture" (Gurr 8). *The Human Stain*, which follows the life of a man initially portrayed as Jewish, takes a dramatic turn when, halfway through the novel, it is revealed that he is in fact an African American. The chapter uses this as a starting point to comment on the broader implications of the persecutory aspect of political correctness and of the limitations and pitfalls of identity politics, which Roth's novel seeks to address. It employs these complex themes to observe how "attention to literary forms and questions of perspectives, rather than being an escapist exercise," are in fact a productive platform to engage with the fundamental conflicts in the public sphere. Additionally, the chapter considers the divide between the world of fiction and reality by posing a fundamental question. Quoting Daub, Gurr asks, "Can a novel logically be adduced to 'prove' the existence of real-world issues" (67). Ultimately, the chapter purports to highlight how literature can serve as a means of learning about and practising engagement with different outlooks, ambiguity, and complexity without, as Keats suggests, any irritable reaching after fact or reason.

The third chapter, titled "America the Beautiful? Neil Young's exploration of genocide, racism and the foundation of 'America,'" deals with Young's songs and their engagement/negotiation with America's deeply troubling genocidal and

racist past. His songs, like “Southern Man” and “Pocahontas,” carry within them snippets of the past, which animate conversations around the history of slavery and the genocide of the Native Americans. Neil Young, as a Canadian-born US citizen, is in a unique position as an “Inoutsider,” and as a cultural icon, the chapter suggests, “who has fans across the political spectrum, may be an occasion for conversations for people who otherwise have little to say to each other” (Gurr 101). In other words, what the chapter seems to put forward, and rather convincingly so, is that music (Young’s) has the potential to create dialogue between two factions who might otherwise not engage with each other, and also stresses the importance of utilising music as a tool that aids in commemorating disturbing histories.

The fourth chapter, titled “Edward Young’s Abysmal ‘Sea Odes’,” talks about the lesser-known 18th-century odes and how reading them into the present-day context can help illuminate modern debates on globalisation. The odes, the chapter argues, can also be read to gather fresh perspectives on how the two competing doctrines of mercantilism and free trade operated in the 18th century and their continuing influence on present-day debates over the modern socio-economic organisation of state/trade in a rapidly globalising society. Gurr suggests that prophetic proclamations about “imperium pelagi” that appear in the odes seem to prophesy the growing Chinese domination over the seas. The fifth chapter, titled “Cli-fi Novels as a Model for Climate Change,” posits that climate change communication has reached what appears to be a *cul-de-sac*. Utilising three contemporary novels written in the 2020s, titled *Migrations* (2021), *The Ministry for the Future* (2023), and *Deluge* (2023), and drawing on model theory, the chapter suggests how the theory of models can help inform the functions of literary texts in modelling and furthering societal debates on climate change and beyond. The final chapter, titled “Understanding Conflicts Through Conflict Narratives,” explores the concept of “narrative path dependency” to analyse long-standing conflicts like the Israel-Palestine conflict. The chapter suggests that examining the chances of/for compromise from a narratological perspective clarifies the mechanisms by which conflicts emerge and escalate, and the role that narratives or stories might play in managing them once they have intensified. It focuses on how storytelling and narrative mechanisms influence political and historical conflicts and whether they make reconciliation more or less feasible.

Ultimately, *Understanding Public Debates* is a theory-, history-, and philosophy-dense scholarly work. Non-academics might find certain chapters difficult

to engage with. The chapter on Mercantile Sea Odes is particularly suited to scholars working in the field of blue humanities. The chapter on climate fiction is useful for academics working in the field of environmental humanities and/or examining post-anthropocentric futurities in literature. The chapter on the Israel-Palestine conflict is essential reading for researchers in conflict and peace studies, and/or for those broadly interested in novel perspectives on the evolution of the conflict's narratives. The monograph's strength lies in bringing together so many disparate fields of inquiry into a cohesive, linear, meticulously structured, well-argued text. It is an essential read for those interested in dipping their toe into the emerging field of public humanities, its scope, and its potential to shape and understand public debates.

DOI: doi.org/10.64867/pjes.25435981.26.121.0609