

# Exploring Perspectives of Humanism

Muhammad Arif Khan\*

## Abstract

*The present study attempts to investigate the term humanism in its denotative as well as connotative meanings. Derived from the Latin and Greek roots the term in the beginning was known with different names such as humanus, homo, genus humanum, humanitas, studia humanitatis, and humanitas. It has also been comprehended in opposing categories as homo humanus and homo barbarous and this opposition, interestingly, is still alive today. Humane, humanitarian, and humanities are some other derivations of the term. In all its multifarious derivational roots, definitional and referential senses, it seems to be a study of man in relation to society but with individual supremacy foremost. This ism has, thus, a reduced or no role of religion in the affairs of human beings. Humanism, from its historical roots to the age one is living in, has been but a contested terminology because of a wide variety of meanings it has acquired over a period of time. Despite being a contested terrain human interest in this ism has not yet waned, rather it seems to be resurging because of the ceaseless heterogeneity of modern life.*

**Keywords:** Humanism, humanitas, homo humanus, homo barbarous

## Introduction

In the current academic as well as non-academic circles humanism in its different shapes seems to have been acquiring a considerable currency because man appears to have become the center of attention in his own eyes and the eyes of others. The others could include the family, peers, social, political, religious groups or institutions. A number of reasons could be tracked down behind this tendency. The foremost appears to be the challenging but growing independence the modern man has started hankering after in matters pertaining to his deepest personal as well as public life.

This pursuit seems to have resulted in such a heightened individualization of the self that many of the dogmatic and non-dogmatic beliefs in social, political or religious spheres of life appear to have been jolted beyond measures. Life in the global spectrum with the fast changing technological advancements is another important factor that has been coloring this individualization quite sharply. It, therefore, does not seem out of place to take up humanism once more by tracing its roots,

---

\* Muhammad Arif Khan, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, E mail: [arifg6@hotmail.com](mailto:arifg6@hotmail.com)

and finding its definitional and referential senses for a thorough understanding. This basic knowledge could be helpful in understanding the emergent shapes of humanism as they are influencing the lives of individuals, groups, communities, nations, etc.

### **Humanism: Derivation**

It is believed that humanism is "derived from the Latin word 'Humanus' which means a system of thought concerned with human affairs in general".<sup>1</sup> The word 'humanus' however needs to be used with great care in the presence of the view "the common meaning of *humanus* as 'whatever is characteristic of human beings, proper to man' . . . should not monopolize our inquiry," because "In Classical Latin *humanus* had also two more specific meanings, namely 'benevolent' and 'learned'".<sup>2</sup> The word humanism, on the other hand is said to have been "derived from the Latin words "*homo*," man, and "*genus humanum*," mankind. It derives from "*humanitas*" which Cicero used to denote the education of man or human excellence".<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, with reference to Cicero and some other classical authors, it is suggested that "*humanitas*" signified those values which could be acquired from "*studia humanitatis*" as the latter was concerned with the education of human culture which is embodied in language, literature, history and moral philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it is remarked that the Latin term "*humanitas*" has a wide scope as it covers a number of liberal education studies like philosophy, history, literature, and oratory, and that moral attributes like philanthropic acts and human gentleness are also referred to this term.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the word "*humanitas*," seems to have been used first in the Roman Republic where it was translated from the Greek word *Paideia* which was associated with culture and education and that Hellenistic philosophy, particularly Stoicism, had inspired Romans to inherit the ideas of humanity. Douzinas further states that the Romans had learnt to distinguish between *homo humanus* – a person educated in Greek culture and

Philosophy and the *homo barbarous* – the one who lacked sophisticated manners of an educated person. The former, it appears, enjoyed a high status in the society, while the latter had to live a peripheral life in the empire.<sup>6</sup>

There is still another reference to the link between humanism and *humanitas* and it is believed that humanism and humanities have though come from the Latin roots but none of these two terms have their equivalent even in their roots.<sup>7</sup> Another writer finds that it was Cicero who first used the term *studia humanitatis* which signified the intellectual pursuits befitting of an education that was gentlemanly "or

for developing what he calls a man's *humanitas*".<sup>8</sup> Similarly, there is also an effort to understand the term humanism in relation to three important terms named as *humane*, *humanitarian* and *humanities*. The term *humane* symbolizes positive qualities of being concerned or showing concern for other living beings, like sympathy and compassion. And the concept of the promotion of human welfare and the social reforms are said to be linked with the second term which is *humanitarian*. Penman and Adams further explain that the third term called *humanities* is associated with disciplines of learning which deal, primarily, with language, history and philosophy – all being the cultural characteristics. They further state that since these three terms have come from the root word human so they are self-evident but they point to three different aspects.<sup>9</sup> And "At first glance, the term *humanism* has a simple meaning, the suffix *ism* referring to the study of the root of the word human. Therefore, humanism would seem to be, simply, the study of the human being".<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, there is another view that the word humanism was first used by a German author known as F.J. Niethammer who had taken inspiration from Cicero's concept of *sc. Studia humanitatis*. Niethammer wanted to train his students in Greek, Latin and classical literature. He further says that the term humanism reflects the works of the scholars who reinvented the Greek, Latin and the studies of liberal arts from the periods 1300 to 1600 and that these scholars had a particular interest in nature and were believed to be the role models for those who were well educated.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, "For them the *homo humanus* is the Roman citizen who distinguishes himself by the practice of the traditional Roman virtues and has - to a certain point - made his own Greek *paideia*".<sup>12</sup> All these derivatives suggest that humanism is the study of human beings and it is this fact, perhaps, which suggests "in its primary connotation Humanism simply means "human-being-ism," that is, devotion to the interests of human beings, wherever they live and whatever their status".<sup>13</sup>

### **Disagreement over a common definition of humanism**

Though humanism has been a familiar term in almost every discipline including the literary studies, yet its definitional side has raised greater disagreements amongst its advocates and critics, and it appears as if there is no common definition of the term. For example, there is a view that the question of humanism seems to be "notoriously difficult to define," but there is also an understanding that "all humanists share the desire to respect and enhance the integrity of human existence".<sup>14</sup> The second part of Schweiker's comment though talks about the respect and integrity that

human existence enjoys or it might enjoy, yet this conception despite seemingly a common thread amongst humanists might not yield a common definition of the term as the respect and integrity surrounding human existence is in itself a diversified phenomenon in that for an individual it is different, for a group it might be something else, and for a school it may still be defined in an altogether different fashion, and so forth. Almost similar thoughts find their echo in the words of other researchers who negate the presence of any such definition of humanism which is accepted universally. They, therefore, bespeak of various definitions which are competitive as well as restrictive. This approach towards humanism even challenges its very nature.<sup>15</sup> There are, however, humanists of the modern times for whom this ism may be "an attitude towards life, a way of viewing the world constructed in different ways in different areas. Some might even say that humanism defies analysis because it, above all, is neither creed nor dogma."<sup>16</sup>

These views regarding humanism seem to be threefold. Firstly, there are competing definitions of the notion; secondly, there are different world views on it in different areas; and thirdly, it is denied to be a creed or dogma. First and second view appear to be linked because different people have different world views and this idea seems to be unchallenging. Third view, however, can be challenged keeping in view the forms or categorizations of humanism which will be discussed below during the course of the argument. An important question that arises here is that why is there so much disagreement amongst the advocates as well as the critics of the debated term? Here is an attempt to address this query:

Most definitions of humanism are attempts to state the *meaning* of the term by selecting from the rich reservoir of humanist thought those ideas that seem to capture what is essential. Discrepancies among definitions arise when humanists disagree about what ideas to leave in or leave out or how the included ideas are to be interpreted.<sup>17</sup>

Can the *meanings* create ambiguity? No doubt, the rich reservoir of thoughts on a particular issue might create certain ambiguities but the same reservoir might help one resolve many intricate problems too. As regards the exclusion or inclusion of ideas it does not seem to be an extraordinary thing because depending upon the choice and scope of one's approach towards any given area of research, there might be witnessed a natural inclination to select what is relevant and reject or even overlook what is irrelevant. Meanings, whether included or excluded, however, matter. There is, however, yet another dimension of the idea of humanism advocated by its proponents who after seeing its definition in its meanings try also to understand it through the references

which this term has acquired over a period of time. For them the scholars' interest in the reference side of the term enables them to scrutinize a wider cluster of ideas. And that the purpose behind this scrutiny is to see how logically, historically and thematically are these ideas connected together. In this process, the themes are identified and followed to see to which ideas they fit most to. Resultantly, these scholars come up with a vast reservoir of ideas of varying shades, but all of them belong to the huge corpus of humanism.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the meaning and referential aspects of the words cannot be delinked as both play a vital role in our understanding not only of the words but their associations involving the complex time mechanism of the past, present and the future. Going back to the inability to reach on a common definition of humanism it is further deplored that the word does not have a single meaning despite the fact that it is present in all the modern languages of the world like English, Italian, German, and French. Its meaning, therefore, fluctuates not just between the languages but also within any given language.<sup>19</sup> This fact bespeaks of the various shades that humanism has acquired worldwide. Likewise, "humanism is fraught with ambiguities and controversies".<sup>20</sup> The controversies surrounding humanism seem to have taken an altogether different turn as "'Humanism" and "humanistic" are among the stock of once respectable words which have been so emptied of meaning that anyone foolhardy enough to try to rehabilitate them is in for an uphill flight",<sup>21</sup> but it sounds a sweeping statement because declaring humanism of being 'emptied of meaning' seems to be saying that life is emptied of meaning.

Another scholar is also unable to find some definite meaning of the word in the critical as well as theoretical environment of his day when he tries to assess humanism in comparison with human universals. He finds that both are mostly various and conflicting terms because of their incoherence and it is this variety that precludes their positive understanding.<sup>22</sup> The inability to understand humanism results in the view "Just as there is no such thing as history, only histories, so there is no humanism, only humanisms, a confusing, often contradictory, array of humanisms".<sup>23</sup> Another confusing element that surrounds the term is beautifully summed up in this explanation, "Adding to the confusion is the combining of the word humanism with adjectives to come up with terms such as classical humanism, literary humanism, new humanism, rational humanism, secular humanism, enlightened humanism, and "scientific humanism"". <sup>24</sup> But despite all these inability to find meanings of humanism, the term has managed not only to survive but has also succeeded in yielding meanings which have the potential to attract the attention of interdisciplinary areas of knowledge and scholars.

### Perspectives of Humanism

Humanism is "a system of thought that considers that solving human problems with the help of reason is more important than religious beliefs. It emphasizes the fact that the basic nature of humans is good".<sup>25</sup> The term also means "literary culture; classical studies; any system which puts human interest and the mind of man paramount, rejecting the supernatural, belief in god, etc; pragmatism (*philos*); a critical application to the logical method of pragmatism to all the sciences".<sup>26</sup> Similarly, it is also defined as:

1:a: devotion to the humanities: literary culture, b: the revival of classical letters, individualistic and critical spirit, and emphasis on secular concerns characteristic of the Renaissance

2: Humanitarianism

3: a doctrine, attitude, or way of life centered on human interests or values; *especially*: a philosophy that usually rejects supernaturalism and stresses an individual's dignity and worth and capacity for self-realization through reason.<sup>27</sup> Britannica online dictionary, on the other hand, attempts to define the word that it is:

*"1 a devotion to the humanities, literary culture . . . b or Humanism the learning or cultural impulse that is characterized by a revival of classical letters, an individualistic and critical spirit, and a shift of emphasis from religious to secular concerns and that flowered during the Renaissance 2. Devotion to human welfare :interest in or concern for humankind, humanity, humanitarianism, 3. a doctrine, set of attitudes, or way of life centered upon human interests or values."*<sup>28</sup>

These dictionary definitions share a common point that reason is preferred over religion and are thought to be more helpful in solving human problems. The second, third, and fourth dictionary definitions, however, show humanism as a vast field which surrounds literary culture and human interest and this might have been one of the many reasons behind the disagreement over its understanding. There is yet another aspect of the term which links it with instinctual habits of every human being who display their feelings and concerns for their fellow human beings. It is further stated that it should not be considered as an act of self-realization but that the knowledge of this ism comes from the human society which provides values, traditions, moralities, ideas and customs. This is the reason that Kharal considers humanism as the cultural need of the human beings which is linked with the human nature.<sup>29</sup>

Humanism is further considered to be a philosophy related and associated with the educational and cultural programs of the movement of Renaissance when Greek and Roman philosophies were explored and idealized with dignity of man as a leading and essential principle. By this

virtue it appeared to be an intellectual movement.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, humanism is believed to be a system of thought where the central importance is given to the human being who despite being in possession of a mechanical body is considered a mind, essentially. This mind is radically free, and logical and rational, inherently. This human being possesses rationality and the capacity of knowing, doing good is thus something not unfamiliar to him. A man having such potential and capacities does not need God, or other human beings or their help. Being an absolute person he can choose his values freely and rationally and can thus give birth to a utopian society.<sup>31</sup>

This impression of humanism appears to be like absolute individualism which disconnects man from God and other people, and, by this virtue, it could disintegrate essential human and social bonds which keep the societal structure intact. And, contrary to the belief that man needs no other person for existence is the view that he requires sociability. Another humanist scholar thus conceives humanism and man through anthropological lenses in three different ways. In the first place, it is considered to be the sole belonging of men as a species which is biological, so they need each other; secondly, it is the sociability and mutual dependence of the human beings for the purposes of nourishment, reproduction and conscious speaking beings. The third lens through which humans are seen is their relative indetermination which creates possibilities of their mutual engagement with each other. This engagement gives birth to choices responsible for different identities like cultural and individual and these may then create a history which is collective or biographical.<sup>32</sup> If Beck exclusively talks about man and projects his individuality, then Todorov attempts to impart sociability to him. Both, however, oust religion from this link, the former overtly, while the latter covertly. The anthropological connection that Todorov establishes is also expressed here, "'humanism' refers to an attitude to life, an explicit or implicit philosophical anthropology".<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, "Humanism is defined as the liberation cry of humanity, voiced at times and places where the integrity of life or thought was threatened or compromised, or when fresh horizons beckoned," and this cry is twofold "one seeking freedom from oppression, oblivion, or constraining horizons, the other seeking freedom to soar towards new heights of understanding, being and becoming".<sup>34</sup> This thought according to Buttmer reflects Western historical emancipatory movements, but the definition seems to have its general and holistic undertones as well. The liberation cry might involve individual as well as collective efforts on the part of human beings for a life or future that is independent of alien influences and this might have

roots like personal, emotional, psychological, political, religious, secular, and so forth. It may also serve as an agenda between competing nations in order to win over each other people by infusing such thoughts into the minds of the people through different means.

The emancipatory characteristic of humanism can be found reflected in a different sense in the following lines:

*“Humanism is not a way of consolidating and affirming what ‘we’ have always known and felt, but rather a means of questioning, upsetting, and reformulating so much of what is presented to us as commodified, packaged, uncontroversial, and uncritically codified certainties, including those contained in the masterpieces herded under the rubric of ‘the classics’”<sup>35</sup>*

Said's understanding of humanism is a sort of challenge to those views which are presented to us in the form of absolute truths, especially in the guise of classical literature. This conception of the humanism is, however, both beneficial and challenging. Beneficial in that one can ascertain the veracity of what is presented as a truth; and challenging because in the event of something really truthful one can even challenge its veracity by the same principal as is used to uncover the falsehood and this attitude may result in skepticism. It is perhaps on the basis of these liberatory notions that the very idea of humanism has itself been questioned and instead of being a universal principal it is said to be Western in nature. Another scholar is thus of the view that a great many subject matters ranging from doctrines to attitudes and beliefs, associated broadly with the term humanism, are in fact Western in nature. To prove his point, he refers to Hellenistic Greece, pre and post imperial Rome, fourteenth century Italy,

sixteenth century England, northern Europe for its Renaissance Humanism, Enlightenment Europe for establishing sciences of different sorts, the reformist England and France of the nineteenth centuries, New Humanism of the twentieth century, and secular and liberal humanisms. Humanism in all these manifestations has covered such a vast field of intellectual inquiry which we are mostly familiar with today. Whether it is beliefs, human behavior and attitudes, grammar, rhetoric, linguistics, history, poetry, morality, philosophy, goodness of citizenship and society, liberalism of art and men, individual freedom, psychology, sociology, commonness of human nature, all these subjects of greater human interest are the results of a centuries old Western approaches to human life.<sup>36</sup> So, if humanism has survived the test of time it is because of this versatility and scope.



**Conclusion**

Humanism is about the intellectual pursuits concerning human affairs and cultures and that language, literature, history and philosophy are some of its powerful ingredients which have acquired different shapes over the years. It is also about liberal education with a marginal or no role of religion at all in the conduct of human affairs. In the past, it was considered as a symbol of differentiation between the civilized and the uncivilized citizens of the nation and this cleavage is fairly discernible in the present global milieu. This tendency in humanism seems to have rather eclipsed its positive roles like human welfare and social reforms. Though there are clusters of existing or emergent ideas associated with humanism but in all its types and forms it appears to have turned into an unavoidable cultural need. The liberatory cry that it seems to have been embodying in its bosom is but challenging on numerous accounts, chiefly because there appears to be a hidden tendency of colonization beneath this beautiful slogan. This ism though talks high about the common good of all in matters pertaining to social, political or religious activities, but it seems to have turned into high individualism. Whether challenging as a system of certain values, norms, traditions or cultures, humanism is but all pervasive.

## Notes & References

- <sup>1</sup>Kataria, K., M. N. Roy's Conception of New Humanism. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 66(3), 619-632, Retrieved from; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856153>,(2005).
- <sup>2</sup>Giustiniani, V. R., Homo, Humanus, and the Meanings of 'Humanism.' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 46(2), 167-195, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2709633>,(1985).
- <sup>3</sup>Onwuanibe, R. C., *A Critique of Revolutionary Humanism: Frantz Fanon*. St. Louis, Missouri, USA: (Warren. H. Green, Inc. . 1983).
- <sup>4</sup>Mitsi. E., The Utopian Humanist In Karavanta. M. & Morgan. N. (Ed.), *Edward Said & Jacques Derrida: Reconstellating Humanism & the Global Hybrid* (pp. 199, 217). (Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2008).
- <sup>5</sup>Zagorin. P., On Humanism Past & Present. *Daedalus*, 132(4), 87-92, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027887>,(2003).
- <sup>6</sup>Douzinias, C.,The Many Faces of Humanitarianism. *Parrhesia*, 2, 1-28, Retrieved from [www.parrhesiajournal.org](http://www.parrhesiajournal.org),(2007).
- <sup>7</sup>Wright, G. H. V., Humanism and the Humanities. Retrieved from <http://www.jp.philo.at/texte/WrightG1.pdf>, (2007).
- <sup>8</sup>ibid
- <sup>9</sup>Penman, K. A. & Adams, S. H. Humane, Humanities, Humanitarian, Humanism. *The Clearing House*, 55(7), 308-310, retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30186123>, (1982).
- <sup>10</sup>Penman, K. A. & Adams, S. H., Humane, Humanities, Humanitarian, Humanism. *The Clearing House*, 55(7), 308-310, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30186123>, (1982).
- <sup>11</sup>Elders, L.J., Humanism. Its Roots and Development. What Humanism Consists of. *Congresso Tomista Internazionale, ROMA 21(25)* 1-14, Retrieved from <http://users.skynet.be/thomisme/Artikelen/Elders2003Rom.pdf> (2003).
- <sup>12</sup>ibid
- <sup>13</sup>Lamont, C., *The Philosophy of Humanism*. Half-Moon Foundation,INC, Amherst,( New York, Humanist Press, 1997).
- <sup>14</sup>Schweiker. W., Theological Ethics and the Question of Humanism. *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 83(4), 539-561, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/3172234?searchUri=%2Faction%2F> (2003).
- <sup>15</sup>Vaughn, L., Humanism and Philosophy. In Vaughn, L., & Dacey, A. *The Case for Humanism: An Introduction* (pp. 1 – 30). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Inc. Lanham.Boulder., (NewYork.Oxford 2003),.
- <sup>16</sup>ibid
- <sup>17</sup>ibid
- <sup>18</sup>ibid
- <sup>19</sup>Giustiniani, V. R., Homo, Humanus, and the Meanings of 'Humanism.' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 46(2), 167-195, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2709633>, (1985).
- <sup>20</sup>Burt. E. A. & Roberts. D. E. Discussion of Humanism. *The Journal of Religion*, 21(3), 300-307. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>, (1941).

- 
- <sup>21</sup>Graff, G., Humanism and the Hermeneutics of Power: Reflections of the Post-Structuralist Two-Step and Other Dances. *Boundary*, 12/13( 3-1), 495-505, <http://www.jstor.org>, (1984).
- <sup>22</sup>Battersby, J. L., The inescapability of Humanism. *College English*, 58(5), 555-567, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/378756>, (1996).
- <sup>23</sup> ibid
- <sup>24</sup>Penman, K. A. & Adams, S. H., Humane, Humanities, Humanitarian, Humanism. *The Clearing House*, 55(7), 308-310, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30186123>, (1982).
- <sup>25</sup>Hornby, A. S., *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (8<sup>th</sup> ed). (Oxford University Press, 2010).
- <sup>26</sup>Schwarz, C. (Ed.), *The Chambers Dictionary*. Chambers Harrap Publishers, Edinburgh, (1994).
- <sup>27</sup>Humanism. (n.d.). In Merriam – Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved June 6, 2015
- <sup>28</sup>Humanism. (n.d.). In Britannica Online Dictionary. Retrieved June 6, 2015, from <http://www.britannica.com/dictionary/humanism>
- <sup>29</sup>Kharal, A. A., *Humanism in Pakistani Novel in English From 1985 to the Present*. National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, (2008).
- <sup>30</sup>Humanism., *Literary Movements for Students* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed). Gale, Cengage Learning, USA. (2009).
- <sup>31</sup>Beck, W. D., Secular Humanism: The Word of Man. *Liberty University*, 1(3), 12-16, retrieved from [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor\\_fac\\_pubs/83](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor_fac_pubs/83), (1982).
- <sup>32</sup>Todorov, T., *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*. (Carol Cosman, Trans.)(Princeton University Press, 2002).
- <sup>33</sup>Wright, G. H. V., Humanism and the Humanities. Retrieved from <http://www.jp.philo.at/texte/WrightG1.pdf>, (2007).
- <sup>34</sup>Buttimer, A., Geography, Humanism, and Global Concern. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 80(1), 1-33. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2563326>, (1990).
- <sup>35</sup>Said, E. *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- <sup>36</sup>Battersby, J. L., The inescapability of Humanism. *College English*, 58(5), 555-567, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/378756>, (1996).