



# Book Review Sapiens: A Brief History of Human Kind by Yuval Noah Harari, Harper Publications, 2014, ISBN: 978-0-062-31609-7. Price: 499INR

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## INTRODUCTION

Sapiens: A Brief History of Human Kind, is a non-fiction published originally in Hebrew in the year 2011 by Yuval Noah Harari and later translated into English in 2014. The author, an Israeli public intellectual, historian, and professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has also authored "Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow", and "21 Lessons for the 21st Century". The book, which covers the last 70,000 years of human history, is organised into four major sections. Harari takes readers on an engrossing voyage through human history. A trio of important revolutions have influenced human history: the Scientific Revolution (about 500 years ago), the Agricultural Revolution (about 10,000 years ago), and the Cognitive Revolution (approximately 70,000 years ago). These revolutionary eras gave people the ability to conceive and collectively believe in concepts that only exist in the imagination, like politics, economics, and faith; a feat that no other form of life has accomplished.

In this book he amalgamates major disciplines like science, philosophy and anthropology and welds them with the human history through a compelling narrative. The author chronicles human history without relying solely on well-known philosophies, but rather argues and shapes the "text bookish" narrative of our understanding of the past. The book presents a persuasive overview of the development of world history as well as its future prospects. Earth came into existence 14 billion years ago, thereby establishing physics then chemistry and biology which intern set the stage for history to inherit the story of 'sapiens'. He confronts the contentious beliefs and worldviews and offers his interpretation of them by illuminating them with a combination of extraordinarily eloquent remarks and logic. The narrative is set in a chronological order where the temporal coherence delves a reader smoothly into each chapter. The clear, easy language makes it a guilt free experience for beginners. Unlike a text heavy history book, it has an encyclopaedic flavour that suits every mood. The assertions made by the writer are validated and supported by the illustrations.

The portraits of eighteenth century King Louis XIV of France versus twenty-first century portrait of American President, Barack Obama, are one such example of the changing idea of masculinity over two centuries. The cognitive revolution in the context of the "Theory of Evolution" explains how, in spite of all the obstacles, Homo sapiens became the sole species to diverge from other Homo species. Harari starts by observing that many other Homo species existed contemporaneously with sapiens who are the only one that remained rather survived which is both impressive and worrisome. Homo neanderthalensis, Homo erectus, Homo habilis, Homo floresiensis, and others all vanished around the time that Harari labels the "cognitive revolution" of Homo sapiens.

All of this is expressed in easily understood narrative rather than using complex scientific jargon. While explaining the sterile product of the union of Neanderthal and Sapiens he says,

*"...even if Neanderthal Romeo and Sapiens Juliet fell in love they could not produce fertile children because the genetic Gulf separating the two populations was already unbridgeable..."*

He points out that "tolerance is not a sapiens trademark" in order to explain the rivalry between different human species. He contextualises these archaic events by bringing them into line with contemporary perception and cognition and explains them from the perspective of modern humans.

The art of treating a subject with utmost wisdom, thus deconstructing and demystifying several "sacred beliefs" concerning historical events from the past, appears frequently in the text. As an example, Harari refers to the agricultural revolution as "history's biggest fraud" because of the unending misery it caused to humanity. Contrary to what modern man swears by, Harari thinks that humans are not equal by nature. He sums it up in the following statement, "Evolution is based on difference not equality. The same difference nurtured the big racist ideologies like the Nazism. The main ambition of Nazis was to 'protect' humankind from degeneration and encourage its 'progressive' evolution. Nazis enforced Aryans, the most advanced form of humanity had to be protected and the degenerate kinds of Homo sapiens like Jews, Roma, homosexuals and the mentally ill had to be quarantined and even exterminated. This and numerous other beliefs are refuted instead of given from an astonishing yet persuasive perspective. The

language makes us the most incredible creature and he argues how language evolved as a way of gossiping thereby calling the rumour mongers the original 'fourth estate'.

Many changes occurred at this time, but one that seems to have set us apart was our ability to gossip, using spoken and written language to talk about each other and compare notes on a broad scale. Add to this our ability to create fictions that allowed us to unify in ways the other species show no evidence of having done on a scale comparable to ours. He outlines how the most peculiar aspect of the human language has been non-fiction and myths. The writer's intriguing quirks are enhanced by the easy presentation of the most difficult historical concepts through innovative, hilarious, and sardonic insights. His analysis of numerous global religions and creeds, camouflaged as merely ideological beliefs, is enlightening. Animism, dualism, idolatry, or the philosophy of the "imagined order" illuminates several concepts which provide a comprehensive picture vis-à-vis theologies. He believes religion has been the third unifier of humankind alongside money and empires. The definitions of racism, gender inequality, and the caste system vary depending on who supports them and who is affected by them. Capitalism, consumerism, individualism and liberalism are dissected and their traces from the past are documented in this exceptionally convincing work.

*"... money is .. the apogee of human tolerance. Money is more open-minded than language, state laws, cultural codes, religious beliefs, and social habits. Money is the only trust system created by humans that can bridge almost any cultural gap, and that does not discriminate on the basis of religion, gender, race, age, or sexual orientation. Thanks to money, even people who don't know each other and don't trust each other can nevertheless cooperate effectively."* Sapiens offers light on the idea of humility, which distinguishes it in a society that values independence and self-importance. Harari calls consistency is the playground of dull minds and believes "cognitive dissonance" to be a vital asset, which gives scope to conflict and contradictory beliefs which is in-turn is essential for maintaining a culture. According to him, consumerism and nationalism work overtime to convince us that millions of strangers are part of the same community as us, that we all share a common past, common interests, and a common future. This is not a lie, but rather a figment of imagination. Not everything Harari writes or believes is the gospel truth but it propels us into some kind of motion for or against the narrative depending on our understanding and knowledge of the past and present world affairs. One can agree or contend whatever holds in the book but at no point can one escape the gravity of the logic presented by the writer.

Sapiens is an appeal to think critically, contemplate profoundly, and challenge the presumptions we constantly take for granted. It is much more than a history of humanity. The book deftly leads readers through significant historical sites, fostering a deep bond between the present and our ancestors. "We study history to broaden our horizons, to understand that our present situation is neither natural nor inevitable, and that consequently we have many more possibilities before us than we imagine," as Yuval Noah Harari so eloquently states. Sapiens is a must-purchase for anyone who wants to broaden their horizons and do critical research.

It is a book that welcomes all the readers with or without any knowledge of the past and promises to leave them totally mesmerized, courtesy the wise voice of the narrator. It is a must-read for all those who want to know about human race from the present back to the antiquity. The book is a bonus for history buffs as well as those who are curious about the relevance of existence to our times, and the storytelling style is captivating. Hard facts, statistical data, and explanations are presented to the reader by the author from an array of areas and their correlation quite convincingly, which deserves our consideration and gratitude. This book serves as a brief encyclopaedia, probing our assumptions and making readers reconsider how they see politics, religion, money, and power. It provides an extensive exploration of human history and the human predicament. I give it a perfect four stars.

## Author Biographies

Andleeb is a Doctoral Candidate at the Media Education Research Centre, University of Kashmir. She holds an M.A. in Mass Communication and Journalism from the University of Kashmir. Her research interests include health communication, ethnography, digital communication, and print media. She is currently undertaking doctoral research on the digital media consumption patterns of the Hanji community in Kashmir, with a particular focus on community narratives and media practices. She has published several research papers in reputed national and international journals.

Prof. Malik Zahra Khalid is a Professor at the Media Education Research Centre, University of Kashmir, with over 20 years of experience in teaching postgraduate courses in Journalism and Mass Communication. She holds a Ph.D. in Development Journalism. Her research interests include public relations, digital media, communication studies, crisis reportage, development communication, media literacy, and the history of Kashmir. Prof. Khalid has contributed extensively to the field through her teaching, research, and participation in academic forums, and continues to play an active role in shaping media discourse in the region.