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Unsung Heroes: The Struggles and Social Invisibility of Firefighters in the Humanities Discourse

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Abstract:

This research paper delves into the underappreciated societal role of firefighters, exploring their physical and emotional struggles and their relative invisibility in the humanities compared to military and police professionals. Although firefighters are publicly acknowledged as heroes during emergencies, they are often excluded from cultural and academic narratives that shape our collective understanding of service, sacrifice, and heroism. This paper examines the reasons behind this marginalisation and argues for greater representation of firefighter experiences in literature, film, and humanities scholarship. Drawing from cultural studies, gender theory, and critical discourse analysis, it calls for a reevaluation of how societies construct and honour public service.

Introduction

Despite being among the most respected professions in public opinion, firefighters receive limited attention in academic and cultural discourse. While soldiers and police officers are subjects of extensive literature, cinematic, and scholarly treatment, firefighters often fade from view once the crisis is over. This paper seeks to fill this gap by centring the lived experiences, emotional labour, and institutional challenges of firefighters, advocating for their inclusion within the broader framework of the humanities.

Public Acclaim vs. Cultural Erasure

Firefighters occupy a paradoxical position: they are symbols of bravery during crises but remain culturally marginal otherwise. After events like 9/11 or devastating wildfires, their heroism is momentarily spotlighted, only to be forgotten in peacetime. Unlike soldiers, who are mythologised through war narratives, or police, who are dramatised in popular media, firefighters lack consistent representation. This section investigates how temporary recognition fails to translate into lasting cultural visibility.

Notable real life examples include the heroism of FDNY firefighters during 9/11 (referring to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, where hijacked airplanes destroyed the World Trade Center towers in New York City and caused massive casualties), where 343 firefighters lost their lives trying to save others, an act commemorated globally but still lacking sustained cultural exploration. In India, during the 2020 chemical gas leak at LG Polymers in Visakhapatnam, firefighters rushed in without hesitation, containing the leak and preventing further casualties. Yet, these stories rarely become part of the larger national memory.

Physical Hazards and Emotional Toll

Firefighting involves exposure to extreme danger, including burns, smoke inhalation, structural collapses, and toxic chemicals. However, the psychological consequences of trauma from

witnessing death, survivor's guilt, and chronic anxiety are equally severe and often unspoken. Compared to military and law enforcement personnel, firefighters receive less institutional support for mental health, leading to high rates of PTSD, substance abuse, and suicide. The invisibility of these struggles is a major concern.

The 2019 Surat coaching centre fire in India highlighted the physical dangers firefighters face: they had to scale buildings without proper safety equipment. Many risked their lives while navigating narrow corridors filled with toxic fumes. These examples emphasise the need for better institutional support.

Gender, Labour, and Emotional Resilience

Firefighting is shaped by norms of masculinity that valorise stoicism, physical strength, and emotional repression. Cultural expectations discourage vulnerability, leaving many firefighters unable to process the intense emotional toll of their work. This section employs gender theory to analyse how emotional labour, consoling victims, witnessing suffering, and managing trauma are rendered invisible within dominant cultural frameworks that prioritise action over empathy.

In “Fireworks of My Heart” (2023), a popular Chinese television series, the emotional complexity of firefighting is explored through characters who navigate interpersonal challenges and professional danger. It disrupts gender stereotypes and explores vulnerability, teamwork, and emotional trauma, offering a progressive and nuanced portrayal of fire service life.

Literary and Cinematic Portrayals

Few literary works place firefighters at the centre of the narrative. When they do appear, they are often reduced to one-dimensional action figures or symbolic placeholders. This section critiques representations in works such as “Fahrenheit 451” (where firefighters paradoxically start fires) and films like “Ladder 49”, arguing that these portrayals oversimplify complex human experiences. Comparisons are drawn to more richly developed portrayals of police and military characters in works like “American Sniper”, “Band of Brothers”, and “The Wire”.

In Indian cinema, firefighting is rarely depicted, with a few exceptions like the Malayalam film “Virus” (2019), which showcased health workers and emergency responders, including firemen, during the Nipah virus outbreak. Even so, the narrative still leans toward medical staff, leaving firefighters underrepresented.

A significant recent international example is the Chinese series “Fireworks of My Heart” (2023), which centres on the lives, emotions, and professional dedication of firefighters. The show provides a rare glimpse into the daily risks, teamwork, and emotional struggles of fire personnel, blending action with psychological insight. It also challenges gender stereotypes and emphasises emotional resilience, making it a valuable cultural text for humanities analysis.

Disparities in Institutional Recognition

Fire departments often lack the political clout and funding granted to police and military institutions. Ceremonial practices, commemorative rituals, and public funding favor the latter, leaving firefighters with fewer resources, weaker pensions, and less legislative advocacy. This section examines how budget constraints and bureaucratic neglect contribute to a systemic

undervaluing of firefighter labour.

In 2022, Delhi firefighters called for better working conditions and modern equipment. Despite public support, little policy change occurred, highlighting the systemic gaps between visibility and tangible recognition. Additional real-world examples of underfunding include inadequate staffing and safety gear shortages during the Australian bushfires of 2019–2020, where volunteer firefighters bore the brunt of the crisis. Despite widespread media praise, governmental follow-through in supporting firefighting infrastructure remained minimal.

Theorising Visibility and Recognition

Cultural theorists such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Stuart Hall provide tools to analyse the construction of visibility and symbolic capital. This section explores how military and police visibility is tied to narratives of power, control, and nationalism, while firefighter labour is depoliticised and localised, leading to diminished cultural significance. The politics of who gets seen, heard, and remembered shapes our collective values and social priorities.

Butler's concept of "grievability" from "Precarious Life" helps us understand why the deaths of firefighters are less institutionally mourned because their lives are framed outside the hegemonic narratives of national sacrifice. Meanwhile, Foucault's insights in "Discipline and Punish" explain why policing is more celebrated: it fits the logic of state surveillance and control. Firefighting, by contrast, is reactive and community-centred, thus seen as auxiliary rather than central.

Reimagining Firefighter Narratives in the Humanities

To rectify this imbalance, the humanities must embrace firefighter experiences as critical texts worthy of analysis. This can be achieved through oral histories, autobiographies, community storytelling, and ethnographic research. Incorporating these narratives into literature, cultural studies, and public humanities projects can foster a deeper understanding of their sacrifices and enrich discussions of public service, risk, and resilience.

For instance, oral histories from firefighters who responded to the 2019 Delhi Anaj Mandi fire offer raw, firsthand accounts of decision-making under pressure and coping with trauma. Globally, memoirs like "Report from Engine Co. 82" by Dennis Smith provide similar insights from a Western perspective.

Academic projects and digital archives hosted by firefighter unions in the United States and India have begun preserving these stories, but much work remains in integrating them into school curricula, public museums, and scholarly debates.

Conclusion

Firefighters are vital to the functioning and safety of society, yet their stories remain sidelined in our cultural imagination. Their physical courage, emotional endurance, and institutional struggles deserve sustained attention. This paper calls on scholars, educators, and cultural producers to broaden the scope of the humanities to include firefighter experiences, ensuring that their contributions are recognised, honoured, and critically engaged.

The inclusion of series like "Fireworks of My Heart", real-life tragedies and heroics from Visakhapatnam to Australia, and theoretical frameworks from Butler to Hall, affirm that the story

of the firefighter is a story of modern public service, a story the humanities must urgently and ethically tell.

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