Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia

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E.L.A
MAGAZINE

'Identity and Displacement'
Image Generated by Dream AI

Guarding Theme

Reflections on Hybridity, Migration and Dismemberment in the Jamia Campus

Literary Corollary

With Critical Perspectives on Media and Culture

Editor's Note

Welcome to the Fourth issue of ELA Magazine, which features AI art on its cover. In 2023, when the world is debating on the sustenance of Art and Literature through rapid technological changes, our team deemed it possible to find a coalition between them.

The Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, stands for many virtues; being one of the oldest departments formed in a century-old University, it stands for academic and holistic development. Its vigorous and dynamic culture keeps it at par with the ever-changing world. To dwell in the changing milieu and posit itself as a home to future generations as well as the previous ones, this department celebrates the amalgamation of innovative ideas with its interdisciplinary research and flourishing environment.

English Literary Association continues to be one of the major outcomes as well as a proponent of these values as it contends to provide its students with the necessary support to grow and become whole. Enhancing its reach within the breathing mechanisms of creative expression, novelty, ideals, and illumination, it only breeds imagination amongst its students.

The ELA Magazine 2023 serves as a testimony to the ideals represented by the Department of English as students reflect them through verse, prose, and other expressions. The compositions here are a culmination of newfound identities which perpetuate personal as well as political beliefs, critiques, and a process of finding adequate space within this ever-expanding universe. They are not mere submissions but a window into the minds and hearts of the voices of the University. It successfully encapsulates a contrast of personal musings, extradition of media and culture, and outbursts of imagination.

The theme of the Magazine - although not previously sought - beautifully transgressed to be on the peripheries of *hybrid identit*y, a crisis faced by many who come to the university in search of a better future and education. The magazine aims to provide a platform for students not yet squandered under the capital's relentless pressures but diligently fighting to establish a place for themselves. This Magazine owes its deepest regards to the Head of the Department Prof. Simi Malhotra and the ELA Advisor Dr. Shuby Abidi. It is under their guidance and support that we students received the space to explore ourselves.

ELA Magazine 2023 functions as a collection of the new and unique thoughts delivered by the students in their varying degrees of effort, creativity, and sheer output, solidified in collaboration and symphony. It was only possible due to the combined forces of the Magazine Editorial Team, the Department and its students.

Amber

Editor-in-Chief

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I, LEVIATHAN

Md Afaan

My loneliness is a mute and oppressed peasant
From the fall of Adam
To my drunk self slipping on the road
All of its knowledge can be summed up as
"Endurance"

Look at me,
A nation of guilt-hidden desires, smiling
Trying to socialize

I refuse to be free
I am undoing ancestral journeys of freedom

Right in the heart of this crowd
Am I not the only one who deserves to be loved?
Who deserves to be reigned?

There she is, resting
Like a queen on the throne of my being
And why shouldn't I feed her my heart
Like strawberries and cherries?

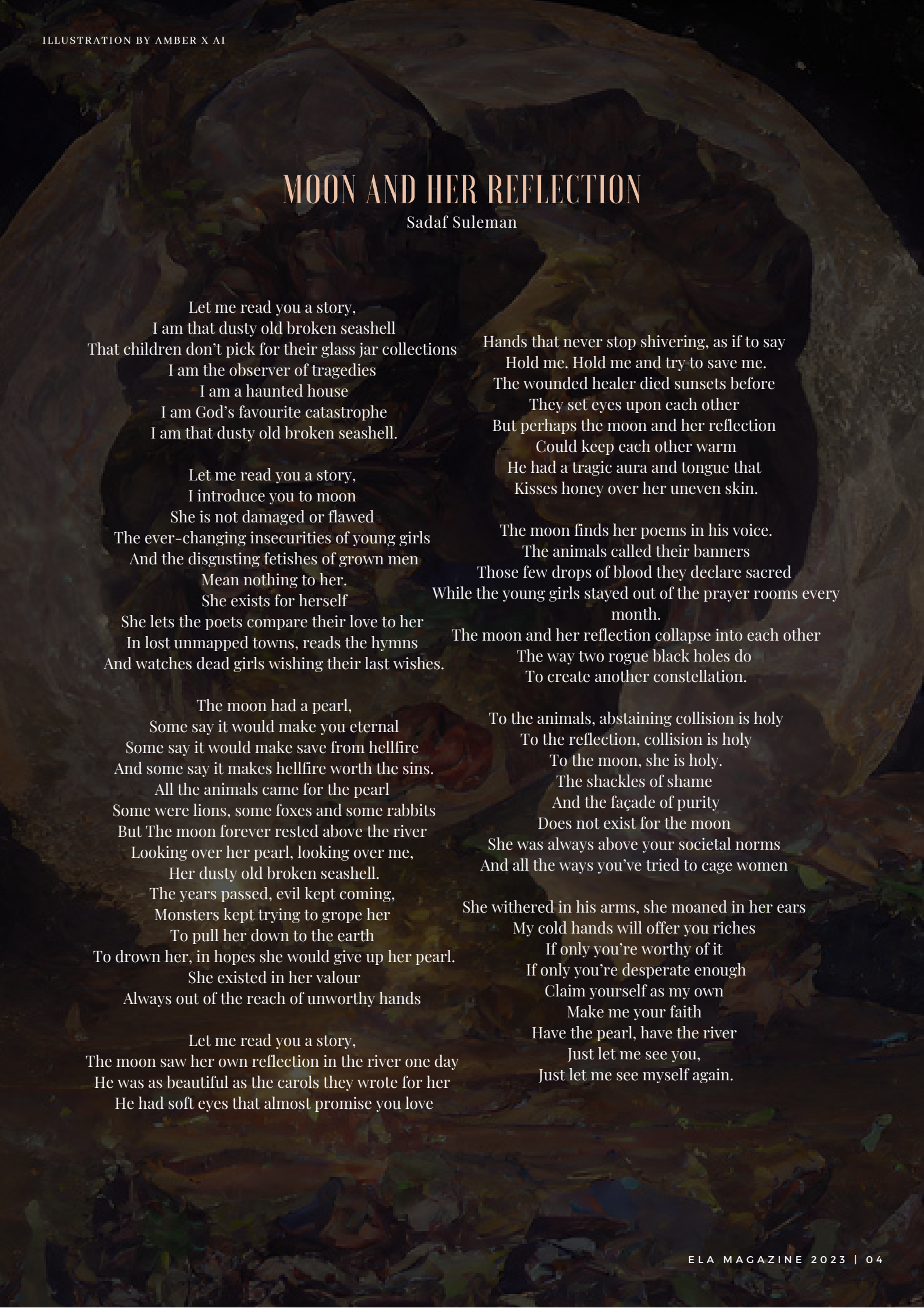


ILLUSTRATION BY AMBER X AI

MOON AND HER REFLECTION

Sadaf Suleman

Let me read you a story,
I am that dusty old broken seashell
That children don't pick for their glass jar collections
I am the observer of tragedies
I am a haunted house
I am God's favourite catastrophe
I am that dusty old broken seashell.

Let me read you a story,
I introduce you to moon
She is not damaged or flawed
The ever-changing insecurities of young girls
And the disgusting fetishes of grown men
Mean nothing to her.
She exists for herself
She lets the poets compare their love to her
In lost unmapped towns, reads the hymns
And watches dead girls wishing their last wishes.

The moon had a pearl,
Some say it would make you eternal
Some say it would make save from hellfire
And some say it makes hellfire worth the sins.
All the animals came for the pearl
Some were lions, some foxes and some rabbits
But The moon forever rested above the river
Looking over her pearl, looking over me,
Her dusty old broken seashell.
The years passed, evil kept coming,
Monsters kept trying to grope her
To pull her down to the earth
To drown her, in hopes she would give up her pearl.
She existed in her valour
Always out of the reach of unworthy hands

Let me read you a story,
The moon saw her own reflection in the river one day
He was as beautiful as the carols they wrote for her
He had soft eyes that almost promise you love
Hands that never stop shivering, as if to say
Hold me. Hold me and try to save me.
The wounded healer died sunsets before
They set eyes upon each other
But perhaps the moon and her reflection
Could keep each other warm
He had a tragic aura and tongue that
Kisses honey over her uneven skin.

The moon finds her poems in his voice.
The animals called their banners
Those few drops of blood they declare sacred
While the young girls stayed out of the prayer rooms every month.
The moon and her reflection collapse into each other
The way two rogue black holes do
To create another constellation.

To the animals, abstaining collision is holy
To the reflection, collision is holy
To the moon, she is holy.
The shackles of shame
And the façade of purity
Does not exist for the moon
She was always above your societal norms
And all the ways you've tried to cage women

She withered in his arms, she moaned in her ears
My cold hands will offer you riches
If only you're worthy of it
If only you're desperate enough
Claim yourself as my own
Make me your faith
Have the pearl, have the river
Just let me see you,
Just let me see myself again.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANANYA LAMBA

CAMPHOR

Md Saemul Haque Noori

I dreamt of a Raven,
Of a night when darkness became complete.
I stood content, called out for judgment.
I had all that I needed
A piece of white cloth,
A family of four.
All I needed was you
and an ounce of camphor.

And in my final hours
you grace me with your presence.
It cleanses, your tears bathe me.
Forget camphor,
we forego the ritual bath,
I didn't need it anymore.

ILLUSTRATION BY AMBER X AI

MULBERRIES

Sarah Mahajan

Unpeopled, this path today
Sleeping beneath the sky of May
Looks naked in its bath of dust
Looks warm and free as it must
In its summer clothes of clay.

The teeming trees which once beside
Had had their fill do now deride
Their narrow ways and seek to steal
Our places, where they now conceal
Their savage, stately, silent pride.

With pride upheld, with fullness bent
Their offsprings folded in the tent
Of brooding branches to defend
From ones like me who would not spend
Their time away at home as meant.

But for me, they rest unabused
But for me, have all refused
To move and crowd this burning day
To pass the hours in idle play
I walk the path, alone- seduced.

This is home and how to feel
How in the vacant days to heal
A restlessness that does not leave
Or leaving still does not relieve
The ghosts which slowly inward steal.

This is home but in my heart
A voice tells me to depart
I feel my difference from this crowd
For they are free and wild and proud
And I unlearned in Nature's art.

For barely through my fingers reach
For scarcely their seclusion breach
My hands they paint with telling red
And I with criminals newly wed
For pardon can no more beseech.

It seems like these were not for me
To touch, their sacred territory
Too holy for our human feet
Must every time we come retreat
And every time we seek should flee.

Unlearned am I in faith and love
They bury where I half but bow
And bathe while I lie on the brim
To float and hardly more than skim
I look at them and they above.

I may have better done to shrink
And softly from my dreams to drink
The pleasures which these paths deny
The berries from my thoughts to buy
And let the unlived summer sink.

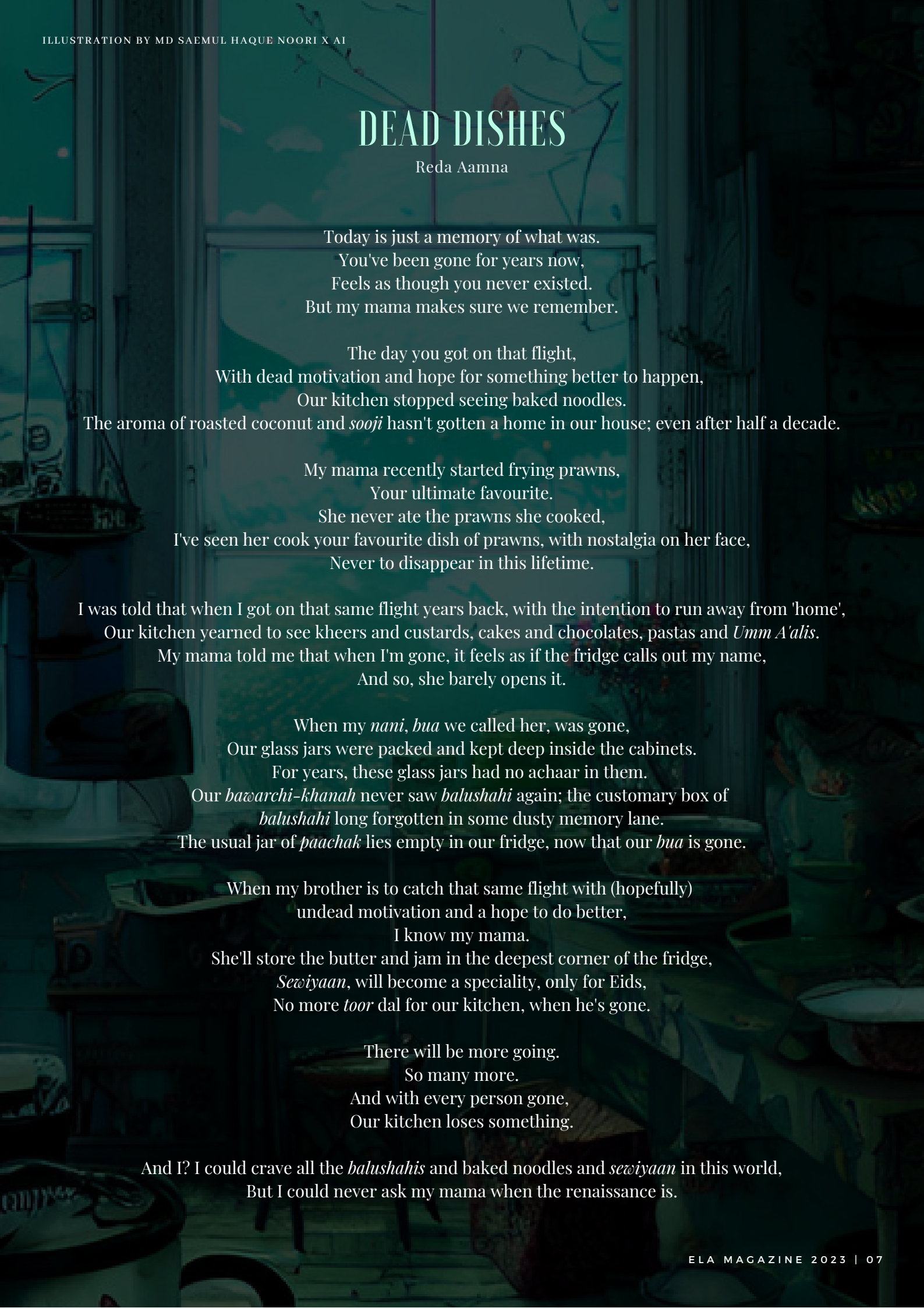


ILLUSTRATION BY MD SAEMUL HAQUE NOORI X AI

DEAD DISHES

Reda Aamna

Today is just a memory of what was.
You've been gone for years now,
Feels as though you never existed.
But my mama makes sure we remember.

The day you got on that flight,
With dead motivation and hope for something better to happen,
Our kitchen stopped seeing baked noodles.
The aroma of roasted coconut and *sooji* hasn't gotten a home in our house; even after half a decade.

My mama recently started frying prawns,
Your ultimate favourite.
She never ate the prawns she cooked,
I've seen her cook your favourite dish of prawns, with nostalgia on her face,
Never to disappear in this lifetime.

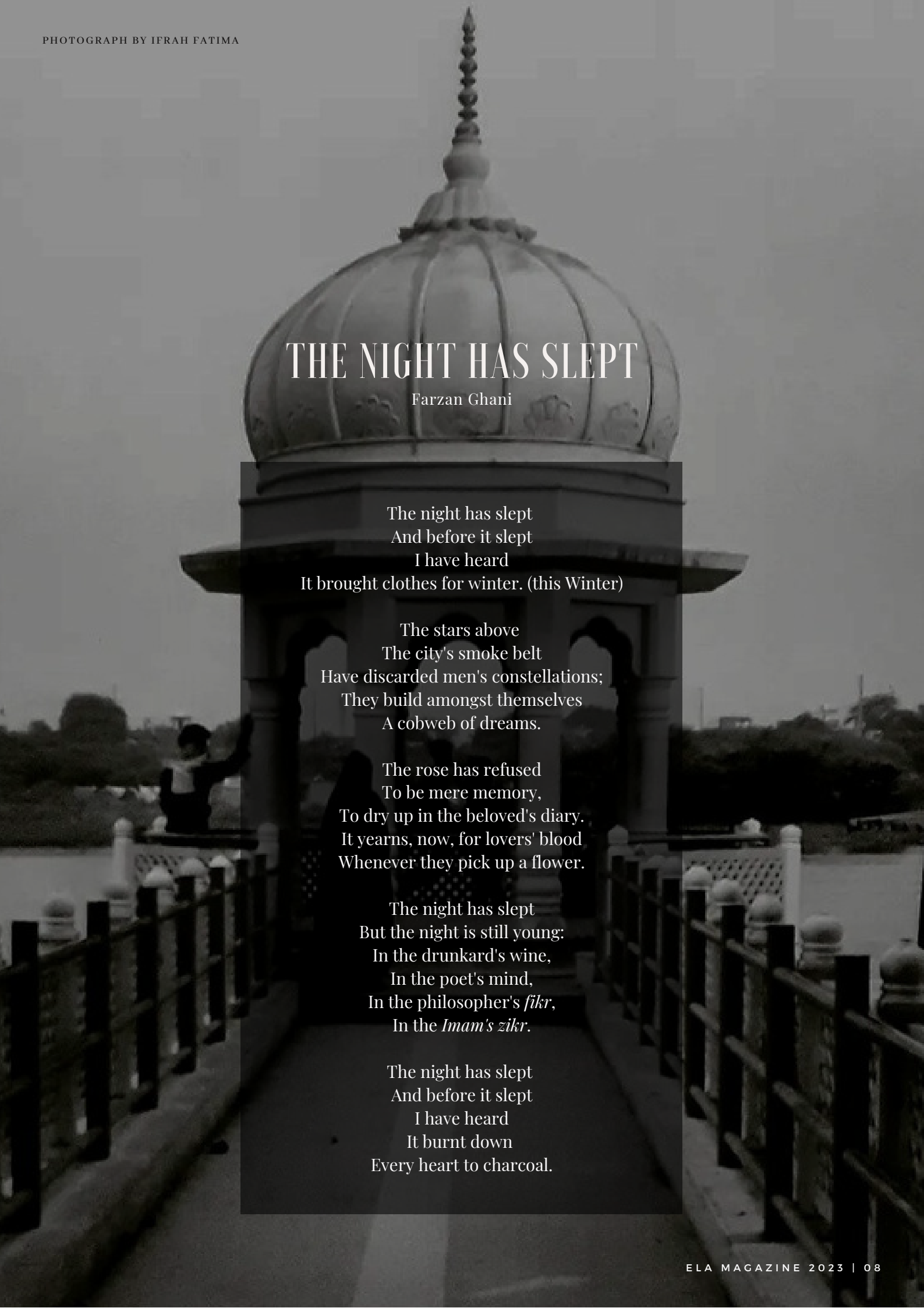
I was told that when I got on that same flight years back, with the intention to run away from 'home',
Our kitchen yearned to see kheers and custards, cakes and chocolates, pastas and *Umm A'alis*.
My mama told me that when I'm gone, it feels as if the fridge calls out my name,
And so, she barely opens it.

When my *nani*, *bua* we called her, was gone,
Our glass jars were packed and kept deep inside the cabinets.
For years, these glass jars had no achaar in them.
Our *bawarchi-khanah* never saw *balushahi* again; the customary box of
balushahi long forgotten in some dusty memory lane.
The usual jar of *paachak* lies empty in our fridge, now that our *bua* is gone.

When my brother is to catch that same flight with (hopefully)
undead motivation and a hope to do better,
I know my mama.
She'll store the butter and jam in the deepest corner of the fridge,
Sewiyaan, will become a speciality, only for Eids,
No more *toor* dal for our kitchen, when he's gone.

There will be more going.
So many more.
And with every person gone,
Our kitchen loses something.

And I? I could crave all the *balushahis* and baked noodles and *sewiyaan* in this world,
But I could never ask my mama when the renaissance is.



PHOTOGRAPH BY IFRAH FATIMA

THE NIGHT HAS SLEPT

Farzan Ghani

The night has slept
And before it slept
I have heard
It brought clothes for winter. (this Winter)

The stars above
The city's smoke belt
Have discarded men's constellations;
They build amongst themselves
A cobweb of dreams.

The rose has refused
To be mere memory,
To dry up in the beloved's diary.
It yearns, now, for lovers' blood
Whenever they pick up a flower.

The night has slept
But the night is still young:
In the drunkard's wine,
In the poet's mind,
In the philosopher's *fikr*,
In the *Imam's zikr*.

The night has slept
And before it slept
I have heard
It burnt down
Every heart to charcoal.

Notes on the Poetics of Generation Z

By Amber

It is 2023, almost half a century since Nietzsche's conception of Nihilism, you enter the famous **India Art Fair** happening at the epicentre of Delhi and find the crowd hoarded around an exhibition. The exhibition is a minimalistic performance, almost insignificant, inclusive of no aesthetics, politics, religion, or any other ideology maligning it. It is titled "untitled", making the only relatability that attracted you to the art piece insinuate a redundancy between you both, a *Verfremdungseffekt* effect as the Absurdists called it. You hold your phone and post it, "feels," you caption your post. If Esslin or Beckett saw this dialogue, they would mournfully celebrate it just like you and the crowd around. What makes it so close to a postmodern reality?

It was a grown man, of no origin, name, or even age. We knew nothing of him except the fact that we saw him oblivious of the world, playing with his cotton clothes all turned to mud. Just like the two men waiting fifty years, on a country road for a man named Godot. A woman buried to her waist continually concludes that it is indeed a happy day. The inhabitants of a French town transform into rhinoceroses, until one not-so-heroic, who is by no means a hero, is left to face them. A transient approaches a well-to-do man sitting alone on a park bench in a park and then kills himself by running into a knife. A married and award-winning architect falls in love with a goat. Two strangers finally realise that they are, indeed, husband and wife or an entire novel with no perceivable plot being narrated by an immobile man.

These examples are significant because they indicate a crude amalgamation of the philosophy of Nihilism to what Esslin meant by *absurdism*. As these philosophies were implored upon us, they themselves grew from one another and gave a significant rise to many offspring philosophies of their own. To Nietzsche, the *Übermensch*, or any human willing to lead a conscious life must craft their identity through self-realisation without relying on any transcendental aspect of their being. He believes consciousness to be our seldom effort as well as a price we pay to exist. This aligns well with Esslin's notion of absurdity which itself seeps from Camus' ***The Myth of Sisyphus***. Esslin states that WWII shattered all hopes of replacing religion with faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies, to note that, "By 1942, Albert Camus was calmly putting the question, why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not seek escape in suicide."

History was repeated when, with the lockdown, many felt the surge to question life themselves. Nietzsche became a sensation amongst the generation Z, causing a new spur amongst the trendsetters. The Pinterest Van-Gogh aesthetic was soon replaced by a Tumblr Nihilistic one. Camus got fame amongst the youth, Sisyphus became a name in group chats and the academicians sat down to watch the youth of the world present an absurd theatre of themselves. This gives rise to not just acknowledging but understanding the Gen Z dread. Why are we the way we are? Why did our peers read only a select few words of Nietzsche and renounced any meaning in their life altogether? What support did a 19th-century man give us in these changing, almost post-globalisation times?

Not just this, to the Gen Z, their lives are downright meaningless because of its unconventional, farcical nature. It is 'Absurd', it is "devoid of purpose". As Esslin suggests, "cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all actions become senseless, absurd, and useless." But the absurd also then reveals "the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparent logical structure." As far as statistics are considered, under a research conducted by the Guardian, 79% of GenZ youth was found to be worrying about getting a job and 72% worrying about debt. It seems near impossible for us to consider our futures without feeling this impending doom of dread. According to Dr. Mehezabin Dordi, a clinical psychologist at Sir H.N. Reliance Foundation Hospital in Mumbai, the pressure to exist in this sphere "is mind-blowing, they've [Gen Z] internalised that you must go beyond even the extraordinary to be special."

In this view, the exhibition "untitled" was then absurd. It had a crowd but a crowd full of open phones, planned outfits, pending assignments and no purpose. The exhibition on its own did not follow a structure, method or technique of art. It was a mere act, like Sisyphus, or the Can't Help Myself, the industrial robot continuously sweeping blood-like fluid leaking from itself. Quite similar to the plays by Beckett, Ionesco and Adamov, which were distant, repudiation and absurd in the beginning but became recognisable soon.

There comes a sense of reality when you witness two men mindlessly waiting for someone, a sense of embodiment when you see a grown man play in mud, a stark picture of life's meaninglessness when you see a once bubbly robot tired of sweeping its own

CAN'T HELP MYSELF ROBOT | SUN YUAN & PENG YU

blood and a disillusioned yet melancholic hopelessness in imagining Sisyphus happy. This constructs our reality not from the prejudices encountered by Aristotle's *mimesis* but from a grotesquely heightened picture of our world without faith, meaning, and freedom of will. For, in reality, do we not use certain words, emojis, memes and phrases as comebacks or even catchphrases? Have we not constructed different personalities for different people we meet? Are we really the masters of our destiny or do we meaninglessly follow the first trend fed to us as passion? "In a world too often governed by corruption and arrogance, it's difficult to stay true to one's philosophical and literary principles" (Snicket). And how long have we consistently stayed loyal to them?

Under the various influences of Dadaists, Imagists, Expressionists and Surrealists, even the Nihilists, Absurdists and the Existentialists, knowingly or unknowingly created a tradition. A tradition where the audience isn't spoon-fed with the meaning of the piece but finds comfort in knowing that day-to-day realities are indeed absurd in nature. Two old people making conversation with empty air and living in the expectation of an orator who is to preach profound truths about life, turns out to be deaf and dumb is absurd but also plausible. This sense of relatability resonates with the post-war and post-globalised reality. For when a Gen Z student comes across a video portraying a girl getting up and washing dishes and then going back to sleep and then getting up again to wash dishes and then repeating this cycle till the day she dies, they press the like button and reshare it. Because, for some reason, that Esslin suggested in his essay, they sigh and say, "major relate." Certainly not much different from a group of inmates in 1950s San Quentin Prison enthusiastically appreciating Beckett's ***Waiting for Godot.***

The inmates' affinity for the play may not seem surprising now, but it came as a surprise to many contemporary observers. The same response which was then quoted by Martin Esslin, "What had bewildered the sophisticated audiences of Paris, London, and New York was immediately grasped by an audience of convicts," to suggest that the conjecture to which absurd dramas function are subjective but they exist, and they exist solely because of their honest reflection on what it is like to be human in a meaningless world finding meaning in meaningless things, pinning significance to insignificantly significant things, till the day we die!

UNTITLED, 2022 | GURJEET SINGH

On Chick Flicks, Violence, and the Rise of the Sigma Female

By Umar Farooque Shaikh

A stark, desert landscape. The circadian activities of its native race make up for the only signs of life in this erstwhile silent panorama — not for long. A distant spectre looms ominously on the horizon. Ensnaring all eyes, it's getting closer. Closer. 'Ohh, it's a female!'. As ***Also Sprach Zarathustra*** reaches a crescendo in the backdrop, like a towering monolith, she eclipses the sun. Her blond hair very wires of gold and her legs propping up the skies. She slides down her sunglasses and flashes us a toothy smile. The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of Barbies.

The first teaser for Greta Gerwig's ***Barbie*** (2023) broke the internet in the middle of December last year. It was quite a revelation. The film enjoys an unprecedented craze even before its release. It has got the film critics scratching their heads, as the popularity of the movie seems almost inexplicable. It has transcended its target audience — which is presumed to be young girls — and is being eagerly awaited by women, men, queer people, and even the 'sigma male' types who are in it for Ryan Gosling. It is not the first film catered for a dominantly female audience — often pejoratively called 'chick flicks' — to become popular in this way, but it does herald a new genre of cinema: the sigma female movies.

Films about women, for the consumption of women, have historically been disparaged by critics and the film community in general. At best, these movies found a niche among young women and queer men and became cult classics; at worst, they are criminally underrated and go unnoticed, by and large. However, this seems to be changing. With the advent of film twitter and Letterboxd, certain films are being re-evaluated which had previously been unjustly neglected. This includes what is known as the 'sigma female' canon.

The genre of films that is parodically called the 'sigma female movies' on Letterboxd derives its name from the 'sigma male' subculture on the internet, which is a form of hyper-masculine narcissism endorsed (here, unironically) by a clique of misogynistic gamers, YouTubers and podcasters. It has a canon of movies associated with it — ***American Psycho, Joker, Fight Club,*** et cetera. Young men invested in this subculture, owing to very erroneous interpretations of these media, are prone to emulating the anti-heroic protagonists of these films, missing the entire point of them. This results in these men fancying themselves being a 'sigma' when they're just being plain old chauvinists. The 'sigma female' *genrification* is a counter-movement to this, which attempts to celebrate imperfect, anti-heroic female characters.

It has a minor canon associated with it, consisting of female-centric movies ranging from the extremely popular to the ones unjustly neglected by the film community for their feminine subject matter.

There are some very prominent titles associated with this canon — ***Gone Girl, Black Swan, Lady Bird, Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey, Harley Quinn (TV series), Midsommar, and Kill Bill***, to name a few. These can be further classified into the 'girlboss' movies: ***Mean Girls, The Devil Wears Prada, Legally Blonde, Brave, Little Women and the upcoming Barbie***; then there are the gory ones like ***Jennifer's Body*** and ***Pearl***. These are all vastly different movies, but what strings them together is the reversal of the patriarchal power structures. These movies centre the narrative around women. Women are the ones taking control of their own lives. Women are driving the plot. They are exacting revenge. They are committing gruesome acts of violence, and boy, are we here for it!

The lesson is not to go around faking your own death and blaming it on your husband or turning into a succubus and eating the male populace raw in a Plathian fashion — not that there's anything wrong with that — but it is to upend the patriarchal hierarchy and reclaim the narrative from men. These films give expression to the female rage. Since the birth of cinema, male violence has not only been portrayed but actively celebrated as an important rite of passage. Women have often been on the receiving end of it. Female violence has been rare, and the one that was present was mainly for humorous reasons. But as this element of womanhood is freshly unearthed in Hollywood, we find new expressions of female violence that neither sexualise nor ridicule it. Viewers are able to watch their own pain, grief or terror represented through such characters. In ***Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger***, Soraya Chemaly writes that anger has a profound purpose: it is a moral smoke signal, alerting us to inequality and injustice. And it's for this very reason that women, in particular, are taught to insulate themselves from it. So when Pearl goes on a psychotic rampage, or Jennifer exacts her revenge by cannibalising men, it is a deeply cathartic experience for many like me. Hey, I support women's rights, but more importantly, I support women's wrongs.

The sigma female sub genre of movies encompasses one of the best films being produced in our times. Though it is an ironic and possibly superficial categorisation, it makes us rethink these movies, and see them in a new light. It would be interesting to see how this genre develops in the future. And no matter what direction it takes, we are here for it.

Existentialism, Absurd Dramas and Postmodernism

By Vinay Rajoria

In the post-truth world of social media, we are conditioned, day in and day out, to think less critically and mindlessly consume for hours data that is algorithmically determined to garner money by ad clicks and promote capitalist propaganda. It is a meaningless world, where randomly hundreds of people die in a stampede on a working day at a railway station or drown in a river by the collapse of a corruptly repaired old bridge on a fine Sunday afternoon. There is an ensuing unnamed world war that justifies sending a 12-year-old girl to an orphanage and her father into detention for her crime of drawing an anti-war illustration asking to stop the ruthless bombing in Ukraine. We inhabit nations, where speakers of peace, love and equality are censored and incarcerated and world leaders are worshipped as *Übermenschs*, prophets and avatars, despite their unashamed promotion of jingoism, religious tensions, and dogmas.

Life, after reading these bits of 'top-five' trending news, presents itself to be inherently uncertain and chaotic. It causes constant catharsis by evoking feelings of fear and pain. With its naked realism, it drives you away from your preserved sense of optimism and normalcy to a tangent of pessimism and dread. Out of this abyss of hopelessness, you can escape solely by courageously admitting to yourself that - one must risk living to be able to live at all!

Rationality does not quell this existential angst of humanity; it turns it even more ugly and ruthless. And I would strongly argue, neither does religion solve it – at least not honestly or satisfactorily. It merely makes it more absurd. No sensible mind or a sensitive heart can buy the story of a couple eating an apple one day because a snake said so and hence, we are all doomed to suffer to be reassured.

Then what source of solace do we have? My answer is Art and, in this case, particularly, Literature. Unlike religion, literature does not boast of possessing all the right answers to our fundamental enquiries, but it certainly helps us in embracing life the way it is, here and now. It is a directory of humanity – a huge memory album – that holds our shortcomings, griefs, and anxieties along with our triumphs and happiness. It aids us in accepting the pointlessness of the world and motivates us to find meaning in it.

For instance, I believe this existential *sher* by Ghalib, who composed it in the 19th century, helps me in taking the bitter gulp and reflects the erratic and unruly nature of the current times. He said:

Rau men hai rakhsh-e-umr kahan dekhiye thame
Na hath baag par hai na pa hai riqab me.

It also reminds me of the amnesiac figures of the two tramps – Estragon and Vladimir – waiting for the enigmatic Godot on a post-apocalyptic country road dotted with a single leafless tree, the erratic personalities of Claire and Solange as they tussle over who gets to be the Madame, or Mr. & Mrs. Martin; a couple who, despite living in the same house, sleeping in the same bed, raising the same daughter, does not know whether they are a couple until they recognise it one day at a party – all bizarre, extravagant, 'absurd' fantasies but which, nonetheless, paint in grotesque proportions, the disillusioned, harsh, and stark picture of the indifferent and fractured world we are doomed to populate.

Besides, one must not mistake these excerpts from absurd literature, in any way, to be the trivial concoctions of a bohemian mind; merely transgressing the limits of traditional genres but as significant works that project displeasing yet honest reflections of the meaninglessness, absurdity, and utter incomprehensibility of not just the previous centuries but also the contemporary, post-modern world

Well, what is their idea of existential crises? How did they arrive at it? And, most importantly, what resolution do they offer?

For the greater part of human history, the heaven, the earth and all its constituent parts were perceived to be created by the infallible hand of an omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient God. Questioning it was to doubt the central place of mankind and eventually meant interrogating the will of God, which was and still is impossible and heretic. Immediately the gulp of hemlock by my dear Socrates in 399 B.C., or the sad death of the blind and brilliant Galileo comes to mind.

Moreover, humans – made in the image of God – were also believed to be created to play a definite role in this grand cosmic drama. In short, the universe, according to this philosophy of Essentialism, was a place permeated with deep determinism and superfluous optimism where the suffering and evil of life never made you doubt the absurdity of existence but, in fact, reaffirmed your faith by the temporary comfort and false hope found in religion – a role which has increasingly and efficiently been taken up by politics.

Up until the 20th century, backed up by the Church, this was the most endorsed version of the creation narrative employed by Man to find importance and meaning in this pointless world. But fissures began to appear when doomsday struck in the form of the two long and gruelling World Wars and the rampant inhumanity shipped out in the glossy garb of imperialism. These acts of prolonged violence inflicted humans with massive loss but, more indelibly, by the loss of faith and disillusionment. Interestingly, the death knell of faith came early in the 19th century itself, when Nietzsche proclaimed in ***Thus Spoke Zarathustra:***

"God is dead! God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves…"

What filled the void and continues to do so was the madness of aggressive nationalism and sadness of mass genocide where the moral order of the previous centuries was revealed to be fragile and ineffective. All that is left in its wake is psychological trauma and the philosophical vacuum caused by the annihilation of universally accepted moral beliefs.

As a reaction to this collapse of the value system that began in the last hundred years; the pain of being stripped of everything that gave meaning to our lives; humans have been forced to find alternate sources of morality and meaning in this world. Religion has failed us in Reason. In short, in the essence of Existentialism, the central question that confronts us is - "We are creatures who need meaning, but we are abandoned in a universe full of meaninglessness."

What resolution do we have? Does literature or absurd theatre for that matter come out as a silver lining?

Set in the form of absurd fantasies, located in desolate and unfamiliar lands, based on exaggerated and unrealistic characters, speaking a familiar language but which is yet bereft of any meaning, these absurd dramas – a genre of literature - sprung up as a representative theatre of the moral and human chaos of the post-modern society. They become a rumination on the existential questions which still affect and bother the human psyche in the stark darkness of misery of life and the realisation of the futility of human effort.

Therefore, their central motivation is – 'when life is absurd and lacks meaning, then theatre, which is but a reflection of life, should not make any sense either.' As Esslin elucidates in his essay,

"[Theatre of the Absurd] constitutes an earnest endeavour to penetrate to deeper layers of meaning and to give a truer, more complex picture of reality in avoiding the simplification which results from leaving out all the undertones, overtones, and inherent contradictions of any human situation."

Pondering this poignant piece of prose, I see an honest acceptance of the absurdity of life, which is but a prerequisite to smile in our contemporary times. A world that is forever *googling* for psychological substitutes in the form of meditation, drugs, fashion, popularity, and even love and money since it no longer has any universal, all-abiding values of the older times. No constants or blueprints to guide our actions or thoughts. And in such a muddled universe of "overwhelming cultural preferences" Theatre of Absurd comes the closest to giving any source of comprehension if not answers to our insanity and is, therefore, the true representative theatre of our chaotic and paradoxical times.

ENDGAME BY BECKETT | THE THEATRE ON KING, 2023

Eco-Horror and The Climate Crisis on Film

By Somya Dhuliya

In March 2023, the IPCC released its synthesis report for its sixth assessment, consisting of reports published over the last five years. The panel concluded its report with the statement, "There is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a livable and sustainable future for all." Even though mass ecological disturbances have been noted across the planet with the melting of massive ice shelves, loss of biodiversity, extreme weather patterns, and crop failures, the global response to the impending disaster has remained lukewarm. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, foreknowledge and repeated warnings from experts, humanity finds itself in a state of utter stagnation, like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, except this car holds the capacity to threaten the continuity of not just ours but the majority of the species inhabiting this planet. A partial cause for this response engendered by the awareness of loss on such a scale is the need to shun alarmism and despair, but for the most part, the extreme nature and the massive planetary scale of this threat make it harder to grasp in its entirety. Transfixed by the unnatural turn that "nature" seems to have taken, prompted by the Anthropocene, perhaps a dull complacency becomes preferable to continued cognizance of the looming calamity.

However, the anxieties underlying such a broken relationship with the environment find expression in our art, our novels, our poetry, and especially our films, with the last category being the focus of this article. Arguably, any media that takes ecological catastrophe as its subject stands to be a part of this category, including documentaries like Al Gore's 'An Inconvenient Truth'. But the genre, as it is understood to be a subgenre under the wider ambit of traditional horror, came into being in the post-World War II era with its critical interest in disaster narratives and anthropogenic impact on the non-human world. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the cultural climate of the Cold War gave rise to nuclear anxieties that birthed creature-driven horror classics such as Ishiro Honda's '**Godzilla**' (1954) and Jack Arnold's 'Creature From **The Black Lagoon**' (1954). Fears of otherness and distrust in the promise of scientific progress became palpable in Don Siegel's '**Invasion of the Body Snatchers**' (1956), which has an alien species slowly taking over a North American town, and David Cronenberg's '**The Fly**' (1986), where an eccentric scientist's experiments prompt a grotesque metamorphosis of him into a man/fly hybrid.

Mutated monsters that come into being due to the human intervention were followed by another wave of eco-horror in the 70s and 80s, which relied on a fundamental ontological separation of the human from the non-human, where the two are interlocked in an antagonistic relationship with the latter usually acting as an avenging force. These again featured mutated or unnaturally large apex predators such as in '**Jaws**' (1987), '**Piranhas**' (1978), and '**Grizzly**' (1976).

The next wave of eco-horror in the early 2000s with movies such as '**The Mist**' (2007) and '**The Happening**' (2008) continue in the same vein of featuring the non-human world as the source of terror, but this time the source of the horror is less localised and restricted and usually planet-wide. These movies are characterised by an unease caused by the recognition of the natural world and its agential capacity. In *Climate Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh writes, "Recognition is famously a passage from ignorance to knowledge. To recognise them is not the same as an initial introduction…The most important element of the word 'recognition' thus lies in its first syllable, which harks back to something prior…" This, then, is what acts as the source of horror in these movies, a recognition of the interconnectedness of life on the planet and the idea that our existence is constantly being modified by forces vast in scale and unrelenting in action. These films arose from a cultural milieu where the depletion of the ozone layer and the rising levels of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere (and, by extension the damage caused to the environment by anthropocentric activity) became a part of the public consciousness. A representative film of this wave is Larry Fessenden's **'The Last Winter**' (2006) where oil drilling in the Antarctic unleashes natural forces that seek revenge for the plundering of the earth and its resources.

The general mistrust and fear associated with natural or non-human forces is replaced by awe, wonder, and revere with the latest wave in eco-horror, best exemplified by Alex Garland's 'Annihilation' (2018), based on Jeff Vandermeer's novel of the same name. 'Annihilation' follows a cellular biologist named Lena who is employed by the U.S government to join a team of scientists to venture into a mysterious quarantined zone termed Area X which is inaccessible remotely and demarcated by a shifting veil termed "the shimmer". Area X features a range of mutated species, brought into existence by a meteor impact roughly three years before the events of the film. Teams previously sent into Area X would mysteriously lose contact and never be heard from again so when this team enters the shimmer, they

they plan to reach the southern shore in the impact area which has a lighthouse, believed to be the epicentre of all the alien activity in the shimmer. However, as soon as the team enters the area, they lose all sense of time and direction and come across creatures transmogrified by the shimmer into perverted hybrids. The exploration team is picked off one by one by the shimmer and its members undergo a sea change, becoming a part of the landscape, almost as if digested and assimilated into it by it.

'**Annihilation**' challenges the ontological separation between humans and everything else. The horror then stems from the breakdown of the apparent stable boundaries that segregate us from the world around us. As humans inside Area X dissolve, degenerate and even double at one point (the impact area in the lighthouse produces a perfect mimicking double of Lena), they are faced with the precariousness of subjectivity and identity as what was considered the "outside" and therefore permanently severed from them becomes them. Another example of this kind of natural assimilation of the human into the non-human can be found in Jaco Bouwer's '**Gaia**' (2021), where an ancient eldritch goddess digests and incorporates the humans with the use of fungi, eventually turning them into the living dead that carry out her will.

As the landscape violently subsumes the human, effectively annihilating the self/not-self frontier, it brings to light the original violence that powers the subject/object binary which forms the basis of most political thought. Within this paradigm, the non-human world of objects has no agential capacity or subjectivity, is permanently segregated from the human world, and is accessed only through human perception. But **Object Oriented Ontology (OOO)** argues for a theoretical paradigm that is capable of conceptualising the real without centering human perception. It argues that objects exist independently of human perception and that nonhuman object relations can distort their related objects in the same fundamental manner as human consciousness. Thus, all object relations, human and nonhuman, are ontologically equal. This haunting idea powers most contemporary eco-horror. It asks its viewers, what if that which you considered inanimate could act and think and affect just as you do? And what if when that happened, you could only stare in awe at the forces that acted upon you, brought to your knees by the knowledge you always had but chose to forget?

ANNIHILATION (2018) | SCI-FICTION HORROR

Subjective Spatiality: The Limits of City Aesthetics on Social Media

By Alfisha Sabri

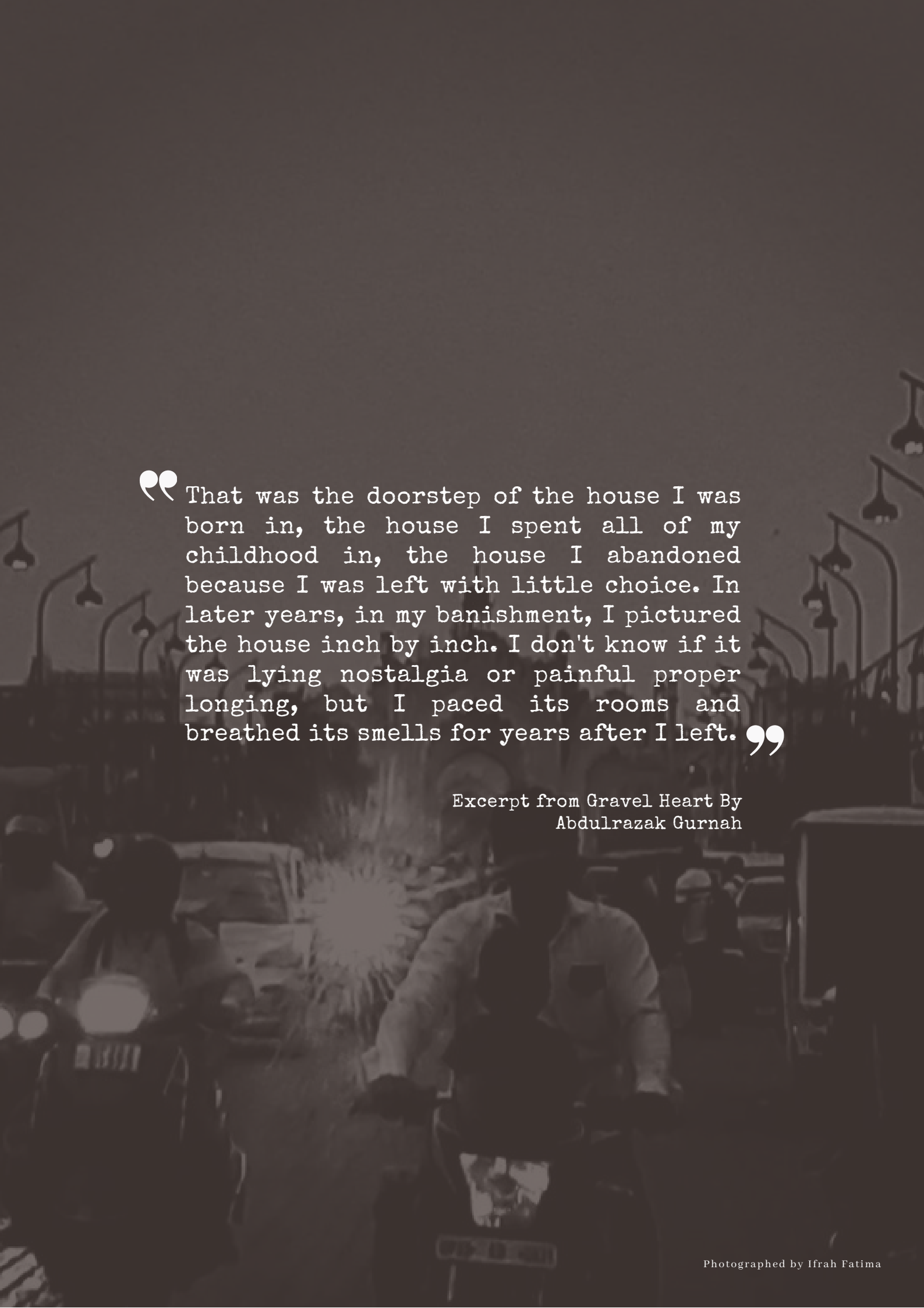
Some minutes of scrolling through Instagram reels and you are bound to find yourself looking at a montage of old timely doors, narrow lanes with overarching houses, a maze of electric wires attached to dilapidated poles, children with unclean but smiling faces, either angry or extremely happy old bearded men with skull caps and so on, appearing to the beat of some song or poetry about the charm of decayed and decaying Old Delhi. The most common ones for example are, "*tumse milna purani Dilli mein…"* (meeting you in Old Delhi), *"suna hai log ussey theher ke dekhte hain…"* (I've heard people pause to steal a glance at her) and others. This presentation of a certain kind of decomposing, desolate beauty is increasingly being known as "aesthetic" in common parlance. Although such imagery is perennial, it becomes more profound during Ramzan, Makar Sankranti, and other such occasions. Most of these are created by outsiders (even foreigners) who have come to visit and "experience" the charm. Of course, there might be some truth to the charm but there is more than just *ishq mohabbat pyaar* to it.

There are two ways of understanding this- a) the different experiences that different people have in that space and b) the conscious concealing of any experienced problems. Old Delhi here is just an example to contextualise the politics of space, but this applies to several such other localities of an apparently vibrant culture but an absence and/or degradation of any kind of structural stability. Furthermore, Instagram is just one of the many social media platforms that can be placed in this context but its extreme exploitation of the visual aspect, as compared to other platforms, makes it the most relevant one here.

As for part 'a', geographer Doreen Massey talks about the subjectivity of experiencing spaces, meaning different people can look at one space differently based on their social, economic, and ethnic position. Similarly, a person's relationship with a space might change with the development of these factors in their everyday reality. Massey critiques the idea that cities are fixed, bounded entities with clearly defined identities and argues instead for a more dynamic, fluid understanding of urban space. According to her, cities are shaped by a variety of social and economic forces that constantly reshape the urban landscape. These forces include global economic processes, immigration patterns, cultural and social practices, and political struggles over resources and power. Massey also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diversity of urban space is always political, with conflicts and struggles over the meaning and use of space shaping the urban landscape. Being a local resident of Old Delhi might come with its benefits but they also have to deal with the lack of proper infrastructure, poor sanitation facilities, overcrowding, excessive traffic, noise pollution, ignorance from the governments, etc. An outsider will enjoy the mouth-watering food, hustle, colour, and so on of the place and convert the visit into romanticised content for their Instagram travel diary. However, it would be highly unlikely that they would understand the social and political vulnerability of the space.

Secondly, to think about it, visiting the overcrowded and overheated streets of Old Delhi in the heart of Delhi summer might not be the best experience, or an experience as good as the Instagram archive portrays. Clearly and this is not news, there is a conscious effort to present only the bright side on Instagram. However, what we must think about is how this concealment of the ugly reflects on the perception of the space. Nathan Jurgenson contends that Instagram, like other social media platforms, is not a representation of reality, but rather a performance of reality. People curate and craft their online identities and the images they share on Instagram in order to create a particular impression of themselves, rather than simply reflecting reality. This performance of "aesthetics", in and of itself might be harmless but when considered in comparison to the problems at hand that are being overlooked, it becomes a deliberate act of hijacking space that can be used to address these problems.

More so, the current political climate of India is marked by several kinds of violence against minority groups including a series of nomenclatural changes where Muslim-sounding city names have been changed to names with some association with the majority's dominant culture. Dealing with charged spaces like Delhi then becomes a matter requiring some interest and careful inquiry. Such romanticisation limits spaces like Old Delhi to being ghettoed reservoirs of history and culture for privileged outsiders, whereas the gated colonies that they come from are reserves of modernism, future planning, development, and all kinds of ease.



"That was the doorstep of the house I was born in, the house I spent all of my childhood in, the house I abandoned because I was left with little choice. In later years, in my banishment, I pictured the house inch by inch. I don't know if it was lying nostalgia or painful proper longing, but I paced its rooms and breathed its smells for years after I left."

Excerpt from Gravel Heart By
Abdulrazak Gurnah

Photographed by Ifrah Fatima

Affinity in Hybridity

The search for a steady place in this world has been one of the primal needs of human civilisation. The same has become increasingly elusive and complex in this globalised world, where things have been falling apart for a while now. From all the conversations with my peers, it is apparent to me that my generation struggles with labels while simultaneously chasing binaries and definitions to pathologise our anxieties and neuroses — it is in the air. My generation is a postmodern conundrum, a labyrinth of ideas and ideals colliding with each other, constantly educating, organising, and agitating but never arriving. In one of the postcolonial lectures on the novel ***In An Antique Land***, Prof. Nishat Zaidi declared: *"Migrancy is linked to the depraved colonised; he lives his life from a suitcase, and there is no point of arrival."* These statements best describe the condition of this digital age: globalised and connected through the internet and super efficient modes of transportation, yet a growing sense of alienation is the product of this economy; the idea of origin is displaced; our only inheritance is exile.

In a YouTube interview titled "The Music of Words," Meena Alexander says, 'We are all exiles in time, even if one is not a migrant in space, but we are all built to lose, gain, and endure time, and poetry returns us to the earth we have been severed from. It's a function of art; it takes us from where we are and returns us with a transformative experience. Therefore, literature absorbs all the tensions and ambiguities surrounding home,' making space for our plural and hybrid identities. We are fraught with identities that oppose and coalesce, run parallel, and combine, resulting in beings that are disjointed in both experience and expression. The nexus of self-exile from home and the tensions of my age have created a hybrid identity; the edifices of this conflict rest heavily on language.

During Sikh rule, Urdu began to be extensively used in Kashmir and later became the official language under Maharaja Pratap Singh's regime in 1889, as a significant number of officials were Punjabi Hindus. The promotion of Urdu by the Dogras led to its widespread adoption among the masses, with prominent Kashmiri poets such as Ratan Nath Dhar Sarshar and Brij Narain Chakbast composing their works in this language. Urdu is also the predominant language for books on Islamic history as well as for the widely read translations and texts of the Quran in Kashmir. It is undeniable that Urdu's influence over Kashmiri was dominant. Ananya Kabir, an Indian literary scholar, says that the Kashmiri language suffers from "colonised linguistic consciousness," a systematic way to downgrade Koshur as "domestic vernacular" compared to the vortexing "affective orbit" of the more elite lingua franca, Urdu.

While I was growing up, my mother wanted me to get the best education possible and study in a Christian missionary school that used English and Urdu as a mode of instruction; both of these have an elite status in Kashmir. But it was my maternal grandmother who taught me Kashmiri through *daleele* (stories), which she narrated only in Koshur, simply because it was the only language she spoke. The stories included myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, and songs that have been passed down through generations orally. The stories of *Hemmal te Nagrai, Gulrukh Posh* (The Flower Queen), *Yusuf te Zulaikha, Lal Ded, and Habba Khatton* transported me to the world of lovers, their trials and tribulations filled with complex themes of separation, longing, suspicion, and even betrayal. Her stories would begin with a sombre narration, *"Dapaan akh wakhta oos" (Once upon a time)*. The *daleel* were narrated in episodic form; each night after dinner, my cousins and I would lay on our mattresses beseeching her for a story, *"Bobai! Bobai! Daleel."*, After a carefully calibrated show of reluctance, she would give in, stopping on intense cliffhangers that captured our attention in a trance. I was able to retrieve and preserve my origin story, language, and customs, which otherwise I would have been alienated from. Despite continued attempts at erasure and subservience, my mother tongue has refused to die. Its resilient character endures.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that I have indeed internalised the aesthetics and standard for good and refined languages and literature, which is mainly in English and Urdu. I have also, for the longest time, regurgitated the ideas passed down to me without any critical thought, and that too in the language of power - English - which plays the

most important role here. This hypocrisy towards my language has been one of the key facets of my hybrid identity. I too would like to write in my own language, subvert the system and create an ethos of soul-searching that does not primarily derive its framework from the vocabulary, language, and episteme of my hegemonic power, rather than just being a subject to the experiments of the empirical knowledge and theoretical frameworks developed by Indian postcolonial theorists who are alienated from our state of ongoing oppression. They talk about decolonisation, while my home is not even post-colony yet. This dissonance and incongruity of my experience yet again find expression only in English and not in my mother tongue. My cultural heritage is Kashmiri, but my affinity for the same falters in front of the synonyms, antonyms, metaphors, and similes that I can access in English. English is a giant oppressor that I have fallen in love with. My illicit love affair with English started with journaling, then reading, and later scribbling down paragraphs that always fell short of being categorised as poetry. The beauty of making a sentence come to life by arranging and rearranging commas, hyphenating words to add seriousness, making grammatical errors, mispronouncing words, and using the wrong tense and spelling has consumed a greater part of my teenage years. But I remind myself of the pitfalls of this fatalistic logic of internalising the superiority of the English language.

Speaking and writing in the native languages was associated with negative qualities of backwardness, underdevelopment, humiliation, and punishment in school, which is the experience of many of us, so my love for English has its undertones of subjugation and oppression. When we cannot sustain longer conversations in our native language, the sense of alienation is heavy because we never got the practice of expressing ourselves in the same way because of the fear of humiliation in our English schools and ostracisation from our ‘cooler’ peers. Many people of my generation are trying to achieve a sense of harmony within this complex relationship with language, which has layers of politics and shame embedded in it. My friends have left their homes for higher education, but the separation from them creates its own set of anxieties. So whenever I am roaming around the university and I see a familiar face, I only speak in Koshur, despite having a decent command of English or Urdu. Similarly, many of my friends can be seen speaking in their native language when encountering someone from home. Nobody is forcing us to revive that tradition, but the need for identification and origin will make us seek out chances to communicate in the language that reminds us of home, however broken our mother tongue may be or chequered with English words here and there.

While I may not be able to create an iteration of English that has the syntax and rhythms of Kashmiri like Krio or Pidgin, I hope my origin doesn’t gather rust under the hostility of English and I am able to use and preserve my mother tongue with the fluency of the former. Every day around me, I experience an onslaught of assertions of identity with such ferocity that it almost feels like a competition. At any given moment, one is getting ‘cancelled’ for appropriation, another is being shamed for inappropriate grammar, and ongoing debates on language and identity politics dominate our every sphere of life. In one of our classes, the HoD of our department, Prof. Simi Malhotra, said identity politics has not taken us far; let's talk about affinity politics, and I hold this very close to my heart. I hope to move closer to the people of my generation with an affinity for our hybrid identity, a space where discourses of freedom, oppression, identity, and the self are not primarily dominated by debates about what language would be more appropriate. While that has its place, can we not get bogged down in semantics for a while?

"I am a dealer in words
That mix cultures
And leave me rootless:
This is an excellent trade
I swear
Dear Editor
I have hopes
Hopes which assume shapes in
Alien territories."

- Agha Shahid Ali

By Rutba Iqbal

Ejaak Boroxunor Hepaah: Navigating Temporary Homes

The intensity of the last couple of days has subsided a little, and I'm finally able to sit at my old study table to write. My mind is wandering. There's an old Bihu song by Zubeen stuck there since last night, and right outside, a pile of cars has lined up in a deafening cacophony — which is very particular to Guwahati of late — as they make their way to the nearest Bihutoli (a communal stage set up in localities to celebrate Rongali Bihu). It is not an ideal environment to write an essay or do anything rational; it is, after all, the most wonderful time of the year for the Assamese — the annual Rongali or Bohag Bihu celebrations.

It is a timely coincidence that I'm attempting to write about my identity during Bihu. It is arguably the most significant marker of the Assamese identity. Bohag Bihu is the most important Bihu out of the three Bihus, which also include Magh and Kati Bihu. We celebrate the agricultural cycle with each event, and Bohag Bihu is the veneration of the seeding period. It also marks the Assamese new year, as Bohag — known as Vaisakha in Hindi — is the first month of our calendar. It is the time when people like me who live away from home feel a strong pull toward Assam and our Assamese identity. I try to fly back home for a few days or find my own little ways to celebrate. It is also a time for introspection for me. Every year without fail, I find myself grappling with mixed emotions, oscillating between feeling like an inadequate Assamese or that I'm overcompensating with my enthusiasm. I feel like an NRI kid doing a 'Bole Chudiyan' Tik-Tok trend, holding on to a moment in the past because I've not bothered to keep up with my own culture.

I first moved out of Assam at eighteen to pursue my undergrad at Delhi University. Except for two years during the pandemic, I've lived the entirety of my adult life — I'm now twenty-five — away from home. Over the years, I've gone from viewing my life outside home as an act of rebellion to feeling debilitating homesickness, and then finally to making peace with the fact that 'home' sometimes is an arbitrary term. However, this trajectory hasn't been smooth; with every stage of my life comes the guilt of leaving something behind.

I have always felt smothered by my hometown. It is a city too small, too invasive to be yourself. Growing up, I always thought it made me timid. Even now, I mask parts of my identity before getting off the plane — what I really look like, what I eat, whom I love — the city doesn't need to know.

However, I haven't always been myself outside of Assam either. I've trained myself to speak English and Hindi with an accent that doesn't let my mother tongue's influence slip out. When I lived in Mumbai, I tried to pick up Marathi, incorporated words like 'y'all' into my vocabulary, and adopted a ruder, sharper tone of voice that helped me navigate the unwelcoming, overcrowded public space there. After moving back to Delhi, I found myself buying more kurtas to fit the 'DU-girl aesthetic' better. I've been told that the stud on my nose makes it look "slimmer," and I have taken that as a compliment, knowing the racial connotations behind it. I have also taken advantage of the fact that my name enables me to sometimes 'pass' as a mainland Indian, shielding myself from potential discrimination. 'Passing' refers to a sociological concept coined by Erving Goffman in ***Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*** (1963), wherein a person from a stigmatised community sometimes chooses to 'pass' as a member of a non-stigmatised or privileged community. Most commonly, it is used in discourses around race where a person of colour who has the ability to be perceived as a white person has more social advantages than their peers whose racial identity is visibly apparent. My name and facial features have shielded me from the extent of racism most of my fellow Northeast Indians go through, but there have been microaggressions, plenty of ignorant interrogations, a few PGs robbed, and a few minor incidents here and there.

Bit by bit, I have shed parts of myself that could prove to be disadvantageous. When I meet another Assamese person in the metro, I no longer introduce myself to them. I only acknowledge their presence in my head and notice how they perform, just like me. How easily they code-switch from their conversation on the phone to the one with their friend.

Unless, of course, I'm feeling very sentimental. But this is only temporary. At home in Assam, I pull out my Assamese identity from an old trunk and iron it for use. Like all my old clothes, it is comfortable, just a little tight around the chest.

When you put on a performance that is so ingrained and so constant, you are bound to feel confused. What do I do when no place feels like home or no version of me feels authentic? Do I also exist in a 'Third Space' (as proposed by Homi K. Bhabha), negotiating and straddling the two (or more?) identities? Or is that an oversimplification of a complex, rudderless problem?

One of the reasons why I feel so conflicted is that I have no command over my mother tongue, Assamese. I only have basic literacy in the language. I know how to read and write in Assamese, but I don't know how to write in Assamese. I don't know how to think, how to form sentences, or how to draw from life experiences in my mother tongue. When I write about Assam in English, it feels hollow. When I write about the Bordoisila — the myth of the monsoon storm personified as Assam's daughter, who comes back to her parent's home, bringing home rain showers, eventually floods, death, and destruction — it feels superficial. I feel like an outsider, romanticising the perennial tragedy of the state for Instagram likes.

Jeet Thayil ends his 2015 poem '*Malayalam's Ghazal*,' an ode to the language, with, "Jeet, such drama with the scraps you know/ Write a couplet, if you dare, in Malayalam." These simple lines make so much impact because there is an acknowledgement that we are not equipped to translate the finesse of our work in English to our mother tongues. As Ngugi wa' Thiong'o writes in ***The Language of African Literature***, former colonies have accepted the 'fatalistic logic' that English has an unassailable position in our lives, our culture, and our literature. We have made this language our own. There is no dearth of ingenious and revolutionary Indian writing in English, but I'm always unnerved by the question: is writing about your identity, your home, enough if you can't (or don't) write in your own language?

There is also always a sense of otherness that you feel when you come from a place or a region that has a history of being overlooked. The only text from the North East that we will read in our syllabus is a chapter of Temsula Ao's ***These Hills Called Home*** for our 'Writing from the Margins' CBCS paper. No other translation or English work of a writer from the Northeast has been canonised. It is only one example that comes to mind because this directly impacts me as a student at the university, but there are several instances of Assamese or North Eastern migrants feeling like we aren't Indian enough or that our stories don't matter. Getting into a political discourse about NE vs. mainland India is overwhelming, and the region is not a homogeneous entity. There are too many complexities and layers that can't and shouldn't be justly addressed by someone who belongs to just one state; however, the feeling remains.

On this very hot April night, when I'm desperately wishing for some moderate and not-harmful rain, where do I stand with the question of my identity? Am I an Assamese who is inadequate and lacking, who has severed her roots and needs to overcompensate because of her guilt? Am I the Assamese who will only have good things to say about her state on paper but will never actually live there? My mind is constantly distracted by the faint music coming from the Bihutoli nearby. I might be an imperfect Assamese, but I'm Assamese nonetheless.

By Antara Kashyap

Not Yet Duggar Enough

अजें शीशा मिरा खबरै
मिगी गै ओपरा चेतै
क में सदिएं गुआचे दा
अजें आपा तपाशा नां।

My own mirror perhaps
Finds me a stranger still
Lost for centuries as I am
In the quest of self.

From '**Mirror**' (**शीशा**) by Susheel Begana

While I was attending one of the discussions in a literary symposium organised by Amit Chaudhary earlier this month, a professor said: *"Indian languages like Gujarati, Assamese, and Santhali face such a dearth of critical discourse that the mere act of writing in these languages is considered praiseworthy."* When one considers the expanding significance of English instruction in Indian homes as well as schools, this idea becomes increasingly fundamental. Children are urged to abandon their native tongues in favour of learning an allegedly global language that would help them find employment and even gain entry into affluent social circles. At this point, both home and the world become sites of surveillance.

In 2001, my father moved from a small village 60 kilometres away from Jammu City to a town called *Akhnoor*. Relatives left behind would colloquially call it Nagger, a Dogri rendition of the Hindi word Nagar, or town. Like every other newly married man in the late 90s, he thought it smart to migrate in search of better educational avenues for his children, who had not yet learned to stand on their own two feet (literally). As time passed, we frequented the ancestral home in the village for every other festival and summer holiday. To claim that I have no idea what it means to live in Jammu is to treat my family with erasure.

I can't forget the taste of *kieurs*, *bajra rotis* impregnated with ghee served with *pahadi kadhi* (curry). A simple dish made from gram flour mixed with curd or buttermilk that is slow cooked with a ladle constantly stirring it (lest it coagulates). But all of these memories and observances do little for me to claim that space. Or is it this distance from that landscape that makes my loss apparent? Is there any loss in the first place? Is a certain limited lived experience constantly awaiting integration into some exhibit space titled "This is what it means to be called a Dogra"? If yes, then I have always found myself outside of that sphere.

Postcolonial studies frequently revolve around the issue of language. When imposing or encouraging their native language dominance on the populations they colonised, colonisers frequently forbade natives from using their mother tongues. In "***Decolonising the Mind***", his 1986 "*farewell to English*," Ngũgĩ makes the claim that language has helped individuals comprehend themselves as well as the world around them. He views English as a "cultural bomb" that perpetuates the erasure of pre-colonial memories. In a broad remark, Ngũgĩ observes that language and culture are intertwined and that the loss of the former results in the loss of the latter. Therefore, the strategy was to keep an eye out for kids speaking in their mother tongue. Children were made into witch hunters, and in the process, they learned about the monetary advantages of betraying their own community.

What happens if your parents and professors exalt themselves to the status of colonial lords? I was seven years old when my father told my brother and me that we could only communicate with him and each other in English. Any violation of the rule would result in a harsh punishment. Every time I got a sentence right, I felt smarter. However, as time went on, I became aware that my readiness to talk in English was accompanied by a certain discomfort with inarticulation. Many ideas, if not expressed in English, never found their way out. Thus began a process of eliminating conceptions that didn't fit into the context of the English language. This can be extended to the humiliation connected with Dogri. There is an unjustified snob value associated with Hindi or English versus Dogri.

The Dogri language is regarded as "*graeen*," or rural. Even in the countryside, the name "*graeen*" is derogatory, and Hindi or English speakers are admired. I envy my brother, who had the brains to pick it off the streets when I was too busy taking pride in not knowing a language. I had unconsciously witnessed a rebellion.

A native Dogra recounts his experience visiting a jewellery store in Jammu:

"I recently went to the Tanishq showroom in Jammu and had a conversation with the salesman in Dogri. I didn't get much attention. The situation drastically shifted when I criticised him in perfect English! The gentleman then made sure I was happy and properly taken care of."

Many people believe that the colonial language should be overly praised and that the local language should be disparaged. Salman Rushdie would say that working with new English, which transforms a colonial language to represent the postcolonial experience, may be a medicinal act of resistance. Therefore, it becomes our responsibility as literary researchers and critics to convey the picture of the Indian Muse in all of her lineaments while maintaining the identity of a ‘single muse’.

Jhumpa Lahiri, according to a passage I once read, has a persistent sense of certain linguistic homelessness. Which reminds me, I occasionally find myself boasting that I know a total of five languages: English, in which I hope to write; Hindi is which I have always used, only to find out it's Hindustani; Sanskrit, which I studied for a while in middle school as part of the curriculum, and to covertly acknowledge that it is a component of being raised in a Brahmin household — I regret having to bring it up, but that constitutes another story; Urdu, which remains like a hazy memory — I periodically go back to reciting the Urdu alphabet in my mind to make sure I haven't forgotten it; and Dogri, which was supposed to be the mother tongue I was brutally deprived of. It feels like these languages have passed me by without me taking any notice of them.

So that said, can I identify as a Dogra, when my life has been nothing but a deprivation of that society’s culture, language, folklore, idioms, and aphorisms? I no longer miss my motherland, if there is one. Idiosyncrasies and familiarities do not exist for me. I recall telling my friend in Meerut last year that the city reminded me of Jammu. At least for me, it was a monotonous landscape of nothing. Dogri was clearly not a piece of jewellery that my family would have passed on to me. For the first seventeen years of my existence, it seemed like I was living with a ghost — to constantly feel the *unbelongingness* and on top of that, to take pride in it. All that is left of me now is this buggered linguistic identity.

By Pranavi Sharma

Photographed by Ananya Lamba

Homely Enough to be called Home

"Bas bhaiya yahin rok dijiye," I said to the e-rickshaw driver, giving him a 20 rupee note.

It's 11:30 p.m., but the energetic atmosphere on the streets of Zakir Nagar will not let you realise that it is way past your curfew time. My PG is still quite a few blocks away, but walking there is the only option this crowd will allow. These streets are packed with people throughout the year, at least until midnight. However, Ramadan witnesses the entire population of Okhla shopping and eating here until the *Fajr* adhan is called.

The sudden realization that these jam-packed streets now induce comfort is a thought enough to make me involuntarily smile under my mask. The chaos does not feel alien anymore, the rush does not feel unsafe, and the bickering of the drivers is an adjustment done already. Comfort, however, is not enough to identify 'home' or induce complete belongingness. Among the numerous things one is subjected to by adulting, the ability to accept the temporary solace in this seemingly unending transitory phase has been the most unexpected. One's identity is very much affected by one's residing place; so when one realises that the 'place' is temporary, there might not be a lot of choices.

There are less than 48 hours left before the commencement of Jamia's PG Entrance Exams, and the sickening feeling of uncertainty is looming over all my peers. Our graduation is in about a month, and the events after that are undetermined. The entire bachelor's course has passed by, and it all feels so surreal. Most of my classmates, including me, shifted to Delhi back in July 2022. After having spent four semesters online, we were begging for the offline mode—to spend at least one year on campus. However, the excitement did not reduce the immense and overwhelming feeling of stepping foot in the muddy streets of Zakir Nagar, the monsoon humidity on the university campus, and the conflicting emotions of seeing all my classmates and friends in real life. The fast-paced life of Delhi was in complete contrast with the relatively peaceful atmosphere of my hometown. I couldn't have related more to Khushwant Singh, who in his work '***Delhi: A Novel***', wrote,

"Delhi was about running faster than everyone else. I often thought of Ruskin Bond when I stopped my motorcycle at a traffic light. 'In Delhi, you are either fast or you are lost. I did not want to be lost."

It was as if the overwhelming emotions refused to let my mind relax, making me dread the upcoming semester. While the amiable atmosphere on campus hardly ever made me feel like an outcast (and I am extremely grateful for this), this doesn't mean that there weren't instances that served as reminders about how this place isn't the home.

Jamia Millia Islamia's campus is full of youngsters who are extremely passionate about the Urdu language. It is the biggest common factor on which at least half of the campus can bond. The shared references of Ghalib, Iqbal, Mir Taqi Mir, Jaun Eliya, etc., ignite a warm atmosphere for Urdu lovers, particularly North Indians, with passion visible through their eyes. After all classes conclude, these aspiring lovers and poets gather in the lawns, to sing and laugh together. The crowd would attract and welcome more students, even those possessing limited knowledge of the domain, to sit and reminisce. However, to feel disassociation, one does not need support or hostility from the concerned group. In her memoir 'Fault Lines', Meena Alexander reminisces in a cross-cultural space—a space between her old and new locations—where she delves into her past locations in order to search for 'self'. In the essay '***Language and Shame***' included in the same book, she talks about how she had to relearn the English language in order to feel like she belonged—to become a part of American society. While this is nowhere near my experience and trauma, there is a distant sense of shame in those whom neither were much impressed by Jashn-e-Rekhta, nor by the passionate Urdu-centric discussions in classrooms.

Adjusting to this capital city might be everyone's struggle, but it certainly wasn't an alien one. The clueless glances that my friends and I shared, in the beginning, served as the first comforting factor that this wasn't an isolated journey. The beauty of studying at a Central University is that there's immense diversity, where one is bound to find comfortable company to enjoy together.

Hailing from the state of Jharkhand, the most notable feature of my dialect is the use of *hum* instead of *main*. To my surprise, half of my friends come from Bihar, West Bengal, and neighboring states. Hence, in a solidarity move, we all decided to stick to our *hum*. Consequently, our friends from UP and Delhi now stumble between their usage of first-person pronouns.

As can be best expressed in the prevalent lingo, the past few months have been a rollercoaster. Discovering the tourist spots of Delhi along with the struggle of maintaining the minimum requirement of attendance has been endearing. One thing that my friends and I have commonly concluded is that Delhi does not have its own individual taste—it is all a mixture of palates from different parts of India. Even then, most of the food cannot do justice to the original flavours. Despite the excitement to explore the new city, there's always the involuntary search for similarity—and the one thing that almost all of the distant student fraternities crave is home-like food. It is in these moments of reminiscing that Zakir Nagar's crowded food lane as well as Old Delhi's streets feel more like a blessing.

Born and brought up in a considerably diverse environment, it was new for many of us to be part of the majority in an educational institute. Predominantly Muslim, here I came across a culture that I thought could only be possible within one's intimate family. The mosques in and around the campus, the separate common rooms for girls to pray, relax, and study, the lively atmosphere in Ramadan with each lawn harbouring a group of students preparing for iftar—all of this made Jamia feel like home—a distinct yet significant one.

A very popular opinion shared on social media along such lines is that once you leave your home to pursue your higher education, it can never feel permanent again; you will be stuck between temporary locations until you settle down later in life. Whenever I went back to my state in these previous months, I could feel the anxiety of the impermanence and how I needed to go back to Delhi in a few days. This internal hollowness does get better with time, but it is still a cycle bound to repeat. And now that we are heading for our graduation, the cycle is bound to get more intense. Had we known that adulthood consisted of such conflicting sentiments, we might have yearned for it a little less.

By Zaina Shahid Khan

Photographed by Amber

Where are you from?

Home is a distant idea to me. This distance comes from the surety that others have and my lack thereof when they talk about their cities, homes, and grandmother's house. In Rushdie's words, I am someone who is "elsewhere". As a Kashmiri Pandit migrant who has lived in nearly three homes, my perception of a home is still under scrutiny. The after-summer break question, "Where did you go this time around?" brought on the discomfort, I recall. My companions generally have a city reserved exclusively for them, without any questions. My house has a lot of doubts. I have not been so sore with questions ever. Being somebody who needs to educate herself on everything concerning herself, I can't say where I'm from. Which part of "India" do I belong to? Do I belong?

I have no village to claim, no hand pump to drink water from, no *jheel* to get drenched in, no *kanger* to feel the warmth of, no sight in my eyes that sees a valley, and no sight in my eyes to see a lake. My life has been filled with recreation. I have reproduced my present; my past is lost to me, and my future is to return to it. I need everything back that is in fragments of what my mother and grandmother taught me about Kashmir. There is a thing that I have understood about memory: women remember, and their remembrance is the most untainted. No one's history comes in the way of their memory.

My aches started when I entered Jamia. For the first time in my life, I met people who could contest my being a Kashmiri. I surrounded myself with the thought, How much of a Kashmiri are you? Or simply, can you even call yourself one? The ache could only be alleviated with a medicine that was out of my family's reach, to be found on the other side (growing in the gardens of the people living there), the one we left behind. I took it because I wanted to be cured. Because of the relief it provided, my pain was validated by my medication. The validation was nice, even great, but it was threatening. Because this was the first time I had been put in a position where I felt the need to explain who I am, where I come from, and why I say I come from Kashmir, with a tongue that has never tasted the waters from the valley or breathed in the same air, whose Kashmir is still in black and white pictures. A Kashmir that has the smell, taste, and music of a past loan whose due date is approaching and the interest is being passed down to generations, mine being the first. The dependence feels threatening. I feel like a lie living against multiple truths, and I do not wish to stand out. I want to assimilate and become one. In this case, I ask for no individuality; I ask for conformity. I do not wish to be called a Pandit migrant; I only wish to be called a Kashmiri.

The chapter in Farah Bashir's book "**Rumours of Spring**" contains a list of the names of the Kashmiri pandit students who were in her class during the disturbing year of 1990 and have gone missing. A very distinct desire to see my mother's maiden name on the list developed while I was reading that chapter. I wanted to appear more relevant and approachable. It could have been an attempt at being remembered by a Kashmiri's ink only to temporarily comfort myself in the question of whether the valley and its residents could recall me as a known daughter. It was to bind myself, as a child, to the valley.

I've tried to get used to the idea of an "imaginary homeland" in every text that talks about home or homeland. I am starting to discover that I had begun settling for one and had begun believing in it only through a distant imagination, which made having one sound almost romantic. I believe that this is a path of resurrection, a reverse cremation. I have burned myself out by accepting my distance from home throughout my childhood. The left-behind fragments of my burned body are aching now. They have transformed into a magnetic field, forcing my body to piece itself together in a specific alignment, and I am disturbed again.

I am disturbed by the fact that I must now use my mother tongue very consciously. So that I don't forget the only thing that binds me to my homeland, I need to use it every day in my vocabulary. One can witness how food can be copied and made available in different hotels, streets, and cities. But language can either be learned from someone else or you're born with it. My dispute is that I was brought into the world with its sections (everything is in parts, even my set of experiences and my starting point), and although my body was brought into the world naturally, I needed to utilise the extraneous to learn it.

Where are you from?

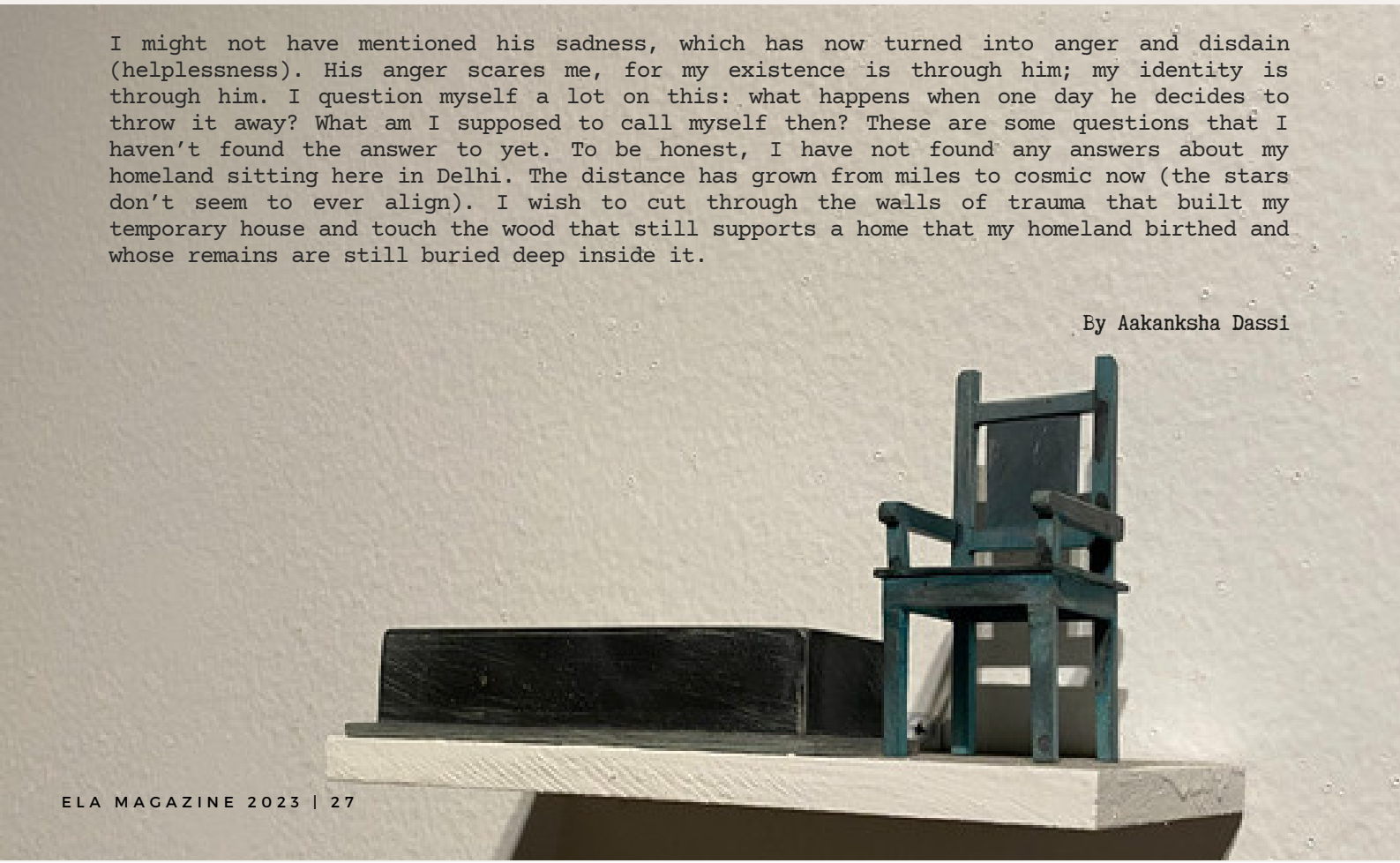
One could say that my Kashmiriyat comes only through rigorous practice. I frequently use language to conceal my birthplace, my late recognition, and my identity questions. I use it constantly to show myself that it is something I was born with. It is the most crippling feeling when the seed of uncertainty has leaked in. I would have cherished a seed of courage instead. I believe Jamia has brought uncomfortable and comfortable polarities to the same level for me, and with each conversation I allow myself to feel closer to people who are known to me.

During the lockdown, I wrote something to make sense of my grandfather's longing for home, which he so heavily despises now. I had to resort to Hindi because my language still fails me sometimes, or my time away from it makes me a failure in its eyes.

पुराने घर की याद ऐसी सताई
फीकी खिड़कियां और आंगन मे सिम्टी तनहाई
छत और खत के थे सिलसिले
बाग़ आज गुलाब के थे फिर खिले
उस छत की याद ऐसी आई
फीके खत और कलम मे सिम्टी तनहाई
रसोई के गिरेबान मे झाकुं
तोह पिस्से बादाम की सुगंध है आई
वो दालचीनी की महक, लगा आज जैसे हुई रुसवाई
उस केहवे की याद ऐसी आई
फीकी मिठास और भरे गिलास मे सिम्टी तनहाई
नया घर, पुराना घर अगल बगल
इदर उधर
कही ना मन को चैन की खबर
ऐसी उस पुराने घर की याद आई
फेरन की आड़ मे और ललेष्वरी*(Lalleshwari)*
के वाख मे सिम्टी तनहाई
आज फिर सिम्टी तनहाई

I might not have mentioned his sadness, which has now turned into anger and disdain (helplessness). His anger scares me, for my existence is through him; my identity is through him. I question myself a lot on this: what happens when one day he decides to throw it away? What am I supposed to call myself then? These are some questions that I haven't found the answer to yet. To be honest, I have not found any answers about my homeland sitting here in Delhi. The distance has grown from miles to cosmic now (the stars don't seem to ever align). I wish to cut through the walls of trauma that built my temporary house and touch the wood that still supports a home that my homeland birthed and whose remains are still buried deep inside it.

By Aakanksha Dassi



RED EYES

By Mir Umar

I hate mirrors. I know it's an unusual thing to do but you can't expect well-defined things from me, because I have become unusual. Every time I stand in front of the mirror, something stirs inside me.

I don't know what it is but I feel angry. No, not towards the mirror but towards myself. Guess that's why I hate mirrors. I was not always like this. "He has become like this" is what Dr. Amjad told my father after my routine check-up. I hate this feeling when I become angry at myself. But what can I do? It comes naturally to me. Maybe it is natural, isn't it?

When I meet people, which I rarely do, or when they visit me nowadays, there are only questions. A lot of them. A huge package of sympathy. What else could they store for themselves after all these years of turmoil? They've stored it, preserved it, and reared it with care because that comes only with loss.

Every time I face the mirror, a dark memory like a colossal cloud surfaces in my mind. I become stiff, I become cautious, and I become angry. My parents are often confused about my anger. They think it is normal to be like this, but what they don't know is that I cry silently when I am angry because it makes me helpless, and hopeless. It drives away my life slowly. Sometimes, I think it should leave me forever so that I don't exist to feel this. Yes, I feel things like no one else does. I can only feel things. In the mornings, I hear the chirping of birds, and I feel it. I feel my mother's helplessness when she starts crying whenever she is around. I feel my father's silence every time he is around. They tell me to be strong. How can I be strong when they can't themselves be strong? Though my father is a strong man. He was not like this always. I have made him like this.

Dr. Amjad had assured me that I could resume playing cricket but under supervision. He had been nice and patient with me. Cricket: that's how it started.

It was near evening when I had scored thirty runs from twelve balls. The best part was that I had scored the winning shot and that was a sixer. We had won the match. Majid, my dear friend, was not present that day, and couldn't see my batting performance. 'You're really a good player, boy,' the captain of the rival team had said while patting my back. I was returning home happily with my cricket bat. When I reached the stream, four to five boys ran past me. They were in a hurry, and they were nervous. After witnessing their sullen faces, I moved ahead humming a song. I didn't know it would be my last day of happiness. My fate awaited me. Had I not moved ahead, I could've saved myself, I often wonder. But then this is what fate is: a cruel thread attached to our life. You can't escape it, can you?

Each of my footsteps was joining threads with time, and completing the act of life. After I had moved a few steps ahead from the stream, I saw a vehicle approaching me. On the vehicle was a khaki-clad towering figure wearing a helmet. His eyes were fixed. It looked as if he was on a hunt with his long-barrel gun. He raised his long barrel gun, aimed at me, and in the next moment, my senses vanished. Boom!

Afterward, it was dark everywhere. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't see where I was. I could only hear my parents crying. But I remember some voices crying, '*O Khoddayo, O Khoddayo,*' when the light was about to fade. After that, it was all dark. Days, nights, mornings, evenings, people, landscape, everything. It was like I was forced into a dark tunnel where there was no light. The pain was unbearable and dark. You need a certain sense and colour to understand pain – but for me, it was the dark pain that I had never felt. Sometimes, the pain was so unbearable that I had to bury its sensations inside. It was like a thousand women weeping inside me.

I was told later that right after I fell, I was rushed to the hospital, where my parents met Dr. Amjad, an eye specialist. My father says that he examined me very well. But I know inside that Dr. Amjad didn't tell me the complete story at that time. He was just being kind to me and didn't want me to lose hope, which I have nevertheless.

When my senses were back – not all of them though – I could hear noises from all around. I could feel a bandage wrapped around my face. Dr. Amjad removed the bandage and told me to open my eyes slowly, and I did. It was nighttime, I thought, but it wasn't. All I could hear was my mother crying furiously.

During my routine check-up at the hospital, Dr. Amjad said, '*Beta*, you're not alone.' What did he mean by this? Who was with me, like me? When my sight disappeared, my sense of feeling became stronger. So, I felt that I was not alone. During my stay at the hospital, crying became routine. I could hear multiple voices, multiple women, crying nearby.

Maybe hundreds of them, partially or completely pushed into darkness. That monster or I can say monsters, were still on the hunt. So I thought Dr. Amjad was not wrong as I was not the only one with a pair of red eyes.

After I was home with polythene full of medicines, I was led to my room by my parents. My mother cried while giving me support, holding my shoulder. Imagine: a young boy led to his room by his parents. It looked as if my parents were my two crutches, supporting me. Who was supporting them? God, maybe. They had been made equally disabled, forever.

I had lost my cricket bat but I was given a new thing to wear – goggles. They were big and smooth, with half of my face covered under it. My mother told me to wear them when somebody visited me. But why, I asked myself? Later I came to know that people couldn't deal with red eyes. Once I wore them, there was not much difference. All things remained the same – the darkness, the whispers, the pain, and not to forget, the image of that monster.

Things didn't remain the same after that. My father decided to drop me out of the school. I was very angry at my father. How could he do that to me? But then one day I overheard his conversation. He was talking to someone on the phone, saying, 'Medicines are expensive.....*Ji*.....routine check-ups.....I can't pay....' and that was all for me to understand.

One day my dear friend Majid visited me. That was a joyful moment amid the darkness. We talked non-stop, but I could sense interruptions in his voice. He was stammering while talking. He asked me to show him my eyes. How could I've not shown him? When I put down my goggles, and opened my eyes, slowly, he screamed so loud that my mother came running from the kitchen and took him away. That was the last time we met. He has never visited me since.

I was the first one in my district with red eyes. I had made it to history. I was of some importance to the world. So, the people with big cameras came, those who wanted to document my pain, and show it to the world. The problem with them was that everybody had the same question: 'How did this happen to you, and what do you feel about it?' All I wanted to do was to scream at them and say *fuck you*. Why are you asking me? Ask that fucking monster who did this to me. Ask the largest democracy in the world, I wanted to say. But then pain overwhelmed me, and I would start narrating my tale. Every day there were new people, with new sets of questions. With time, I became formal with the structure of my story. I had a start, a middle, and an end. The most irritating part was when they would ask me to pose near the window where there was light. Unfortunately, they didn't know that the world was already in greater darkness than mine. Yet, I posed for their pictures. With their cameras, they put light into my eyes. It was like thunder bursting on a barren field. They came and went. This repeated for so many months. But when the toll increased, I just became a number. Now, they only come once a year. Honestly, the world doesn't give a fuck. Nobody gives a fuck.

That was how I was turned into an angry youngster – a tick from the monster's gun, a sudden flash, and then dark. After that day I've never gone out to play or to wander just as I used to. I spend my whole day in my room doing nothing. Majid didn't come after that. My only connection with the outside world is my monthly check-up with Dr. Amjad.

When I try to sleep, the image of that monster with his long-barrel gun comes back to haunt me. He points his long-barrel gun at me. When he is about to hit the trigger, I wake up sweating. Sometimes, I want to have that gun and kill him forever. I want to put an end to this game. I am stuck in this endless night. There is no morning, no hope for the dawn, only darkness — here, there, everywhere. It penetrates me and leaves me only when I cry. I suffer. But am I the only one suffering here? Suffering is everywhere here. In every household, every structure, every street, every landscape—surrounding us like air. We breathe it. It is inside every heart. It is in you, me, and everyone living here.

Oh, did I tell you why I hate mirrors? They are of no use to me now. To us! World forgot to create something for us, something for the people with red eyes.

DAWAKHANA

By Vinayak Bhardwaj

In the old shop at the corner of the new Haji market, the scent of ground mustard became stale from the youthful fumes of plastic. The crowd no longer gathered around Pansari Kaka's shop, abandoning the half-ripened petals of gold.

Pansari's shop was the only old shop that still stood in the new market. His real name was unknown to us, particularly to the younger generation; he used to refer to us as "*Kalmi Nasal*" (Generation of Pen). He used to go by the name Pansari Kaka, occasionally known as Pansri among everyone in the village. Usually, you could see him sitting outside, in front of his old *DAWAKHANA*, the family business he inherited from his forefathers. He used to sit there on a three-legged wooden stool with his legs crossed, which was barely stable enough to hold his doughy, non-round torso. With a radio placed directly next to his ear and an antenna that could pierce the sky, he would sit there the entire day. He had this habit of keeping his collection of books neatly stacked on top of one another in an old wooden cabinet in his shop, filled with powder of medicines wrapped elegantly in the papers, organised so neatly that not even a single title was obscured by the others.

It was about that time of autumn when he began keeping his shop closed, and we hardly ever saw him sitting in front of it. The whole neighbourhood had already descended into chaos due to ongoing border shelling. A constant ring of gunfire, locally known as *Chotta* fire, and the ominous noises of military aircraft could be heard every evening. People were frequently carried to community bunkers in the nearest city, where they would sit together. The same fear lingered on each and every face; some would chant something so silently as not to reveal the panic on their faces; some would discuss how these conflicts have put their lives into misery. *Pansari Kaka* wasn't to be seen either in the village or even in the community bunkers during this time. It was rumoured that he went to *Bade Shehar* (the big city) with his sole daughter, who used to be sick most of the time.

Nassi aa hosi Ji Shehar, aj kun rehsi inn Halatan vich ider. Aj Lok halat taki nikli Jaane, jaan Keemti hai sareyan ki.

(He might have fled for the city due to these circumstances, leaving his land and cattle behind. Who would live here in these circumstances?)

People were talking about how he had left the village and run away like a coward. He would occasionally open his store, but he stopped sitting outside the store like he used to. Explosion sounds would fill the skies, and people would flock to community bunkers like herds of cattle.

Everything was getting almost normal with the onset of winter. It was during the early winter, the feverish days of November. The whole village gathered around the market for the community festival on a rainy Sunday evening. The bustling crowd, children running and splashing the water with their feet, and women sitting around the *chullahs* with shawls wrapped around their bodies Suddenly, the surface began to tremble as a sudden explosion in the middle of the air rocked everything. Everyone started screaming and searching for cover, but they couldn't locate any place that was secure enough for them to hide. The harsh sounds of the guns, the heavy military vehicles screaming against the wet roadways, and the pain of being powerless drowned out the soft cries of the people. The military advised the local sarpanch to evacuate the people to the closest town due to heavy artillery fire from the past three days.

Ohh, ji maal maveshi na keh hosi? Piche koi tah Ruksi ek Banda!
(What about our cattle? Someone should stay here for their sake.)

No one cared to speak there, and the speech of ruthless arms was once again met with the dead silence of living bodies. Pansari stood up and declared, "I will remain behind and take care of the cattle in *Sarpanch's bandi* (cattle shed) and hide in the mud bunker beneath his home".

"It is not possible; it will soon be filled with water, and you will die down there because it is pouring heavily", the *Sarpanch* sternly scolded Pansari like a school teacher. "Do you see any choices?" Pansari fixed his attention on the *sarpanch,* showing him that he understood what he was doing. Everyone's ears began to ring after an explosion near the river. Pansari made a hasty approach to the sarpanch's bunker. He was running, and the voices were getting feeble in his mind.

"Step inside the vehicle! Step inside the vehicle!"
Men in trucks, women in buses, and children in buses Don't remain still! Move! Move!

The ladder was lowered by Pansari far into the bunker, but it was not firmly planted in the muddy ground. When he went down, his eyes could barely see anything. He feverishly shifted his hands in an attempt to locate the bulb, but it was ineffective. His hands could only barely grip anything as he groped into the darkness with his feet submerged in the

thick muck. He could hear the vehicle's engine roaring as it left. He leaned up against the wet wall and felt the surface of the wall on his naked body. His eardrums were being tortured by the sound of explosions, thunder, and the rain dashing on the roof. He sensed that the water was progressively filling the bunker; his feet were almost submerged. He lifted the top cover of the bunker with his hand, attempting to drain the water with the help of a bucket. It was difficult to discern if it was just the water or if he was digging in the ground. He finally stopped because he saw that his efforts were in vain. He put his head between his knees and felt a drop gently trickle down his old, wrinkled face. It was hard to distinguish between his fruitless perspiration, the raindrops penetrating through the surface, and the blood drops coming from his ears. His legs were entirely submerged in water as he reclined against the wall behind him; tears streamed down his face.

This time, he understood.

He remarked, "At least you are lying there peacefully in the city, where the blanket is not wet and where no noise would disturb your sleep again," as he thought about his daughter. He remembers when she asked him, "Why don't they see that blood spills on both sides? Why don't they stop? My ear aches, and my heart too. I feel numb when they make noise with their guns; my limbs shiver too. I feel heavy in my chest as if my heart is filling with every drop lost there. It's the same colour that drips down the soil—those crimson patches are difficult to wash; there always remains a stain that gets deeper with every wash. Who made these weapons, and why? These metals were moulded from misery just to add more misery to this world. Why don't they stop? When will they?"

His body was shuddering just like his thoughts. "Why did I stay back? Did I do the right thing? Were those villagers worth this?" And there lay Pansari, a helpless healer who is slowly moving towards his daughter with a faint smile on his lips.

Photographed by Vinayak Bhardwaj

LEXICON 2023

By Shivangi Sarkar

With the opening of the gates of Lexicon 2023, the barrage of creativity and art in its truest form came to the surface. The fest was inaugurated through the profound words of the Head of the Department of English, followed by Padma Shri Prof. Najma Akhtar, Mr. Jeet Thayil, and the ELA Advisor. Jeet Thayil, in the inaugural, mesmerised the audience with a collection of his poetry.

On Day 1, the following events took place: A Panel Discussion on 'The Nostalgia of Barbed Wires', a Slam Poetry Competition, a Street Play Competition, and a band performance by Gargi's choir group, Euphony.

In the panel discussion, Mr. Sarabjeet Garcha commenced the discussion by linking the experience of 'barbed wires' with the concept of religion and death. Next, Mr. Subhro Bandopadhyay brought in the theme of the fest 'hiraeth' in his speech and charmed the audience with his humour. To quote a panellist, Mr. Sango Bidani, 'It is a sense of nostalgia for a root which is never fulfilled and cannot be fulfilled'. Ms. Madhulika Liddle brought in an entirely new perspective on 'barbed wires': for the wires to symbolise privacy more than exclusivity. The discussion was moderated successfully by Prof. Anuradha Ghosh. The host Shivangi Sarkar concluded the discussion by reiterating the recurring subject of 'not having a home to be nostalgic for'.

After a short break following the discussion, Slam Poetry Competition began, which oversaw the participation of over thirty students from various universities across New Delhi. The event began with the introduction of the judges for the event, Dr. Saba Mahmood Bashir (Faculty, Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia) and Dr. Akhil Katyal (Ambedkar University Delhi), and concluded with the announcement of the winners.

The Nukkad Natak or the Street play started soon after. In total, six colleges participated on the first day, namely SGND Khalsa (DU), IIT Delhi, Kamala Nehru College (DU), PGDAV(M) (DU), Motilal Nehru College (DU), and Bhagwan Parshuram Institute of Technology (BPIT) Delhi (according to the sequence of performance). From cautioning the audience and the Judges of the evils of generational abuse by the women of Kamala Nehru College to believing that healthcare, too, is a noble pursuit and

must not be harshly judged, by IIT Delhi. Moreover, Avaran, the dramatics society of BPIT created impactful imagery for the audience where they talk about the different issues an orphaned child faces. The competition was adjudicated by Madiha Musarrat and Shariq Aziz. The performances were so alive and energetic that no one could help but connect to them. The songs and music of every team were so aptly chosen and heavy with important messages that it left the audience baffled, clapping and whistling with awe. The first day of the Nukkad Natak, safe to say, was a success!

The day ended with a vibrant and engaging performance by Euphony, the choir group of Gargi College, Delhi University

On day 2, the fest began with the screening of the documentary 'Ruuposh', which was accompanied by a panel of Prof. Shohini Ghosh, Mohd. Fehmeed and Zeeshan Amir Khan. The panellists elaborated on the process of making of the documentary. With a fulfilling session of Q&A from the audience, the screening was an enriching experience.

Moving further, the next event of the day was a talk on 'Galvanising Graphic Literature', wherein the panel consisted of Dr. Sakshi Wason, Siddhesh Gautam, and Vishwajyoti Ghosh. They explored the ins and outs of the creation and consumption of Graphic Literature with Amber as the student moderator. The place of comics in academic circles was discussed and with active participation from the audience, the event was an engaging one.

Following the aforementioned was a series of evoking performances in the Open Mic Competition which was judged by Sanjana Chawla and Syed Ali Haider. The event brought in the largest competitive crowd among all the events and was managed by the host Syed Taqui Haider. The hour-long event had participants performing poetry, song, and dance. The first position was acquired by Parvez and Sahil for their instrumental performance. Syed Ali Naqvi stood second for his poetry and the third prize was bagged by Karia Javed. Several others received special mention for their mesmerising performances.

Consecutively, the Nukkad Natak continued with the rest of the participating teams giving their enrapturing performances. The fest came to a close with the Valedictory Ceremony with Mr. Manu Joseph as the Chief Guest. The ceremony was also graced by the presence of Dr. Simi Malhotra and Dr. Shuby Abidi.

The winners of the events of the two-day fest were felicitated and the day was concluded with musical performance and dance performances.

Overall, the event was a successful one with students and faculty from not just the university but all around Delhi attending in huge numbers. Additionally, the stalls set up by students and small businesses were an added charm to the two-day fest, Lexicon 2023.

Editorial Board

Message from the Head of Department

Amber | Editor-in-Chief

A natural leader, Amber, with her exceptional qualities, dedication, and rigour, has been able to steer a team of committed and talented students to the production of a fantastic ELA Magazine. Her work ethic and commitment have been inspiring for all.

Rutba Iqbal | Editor

Rutba's fervour for literature holds a vital place in her life. She is hardworking and reflective, and her diligence has helped shape the ELA Magazine so exceedingly well. As an editor, she has been most responsible in shouldering her responsibilities.

Shivangi Sarkar | Editor

Being exceptionally organised, Shivangi has never been fazed by any challenge thrown her way. She has a fine eye for detail, which has contributed to the high-quality ELA Magazine she has so dedicatedly helped produce, with her quintessential quiet confidence and intelligence.

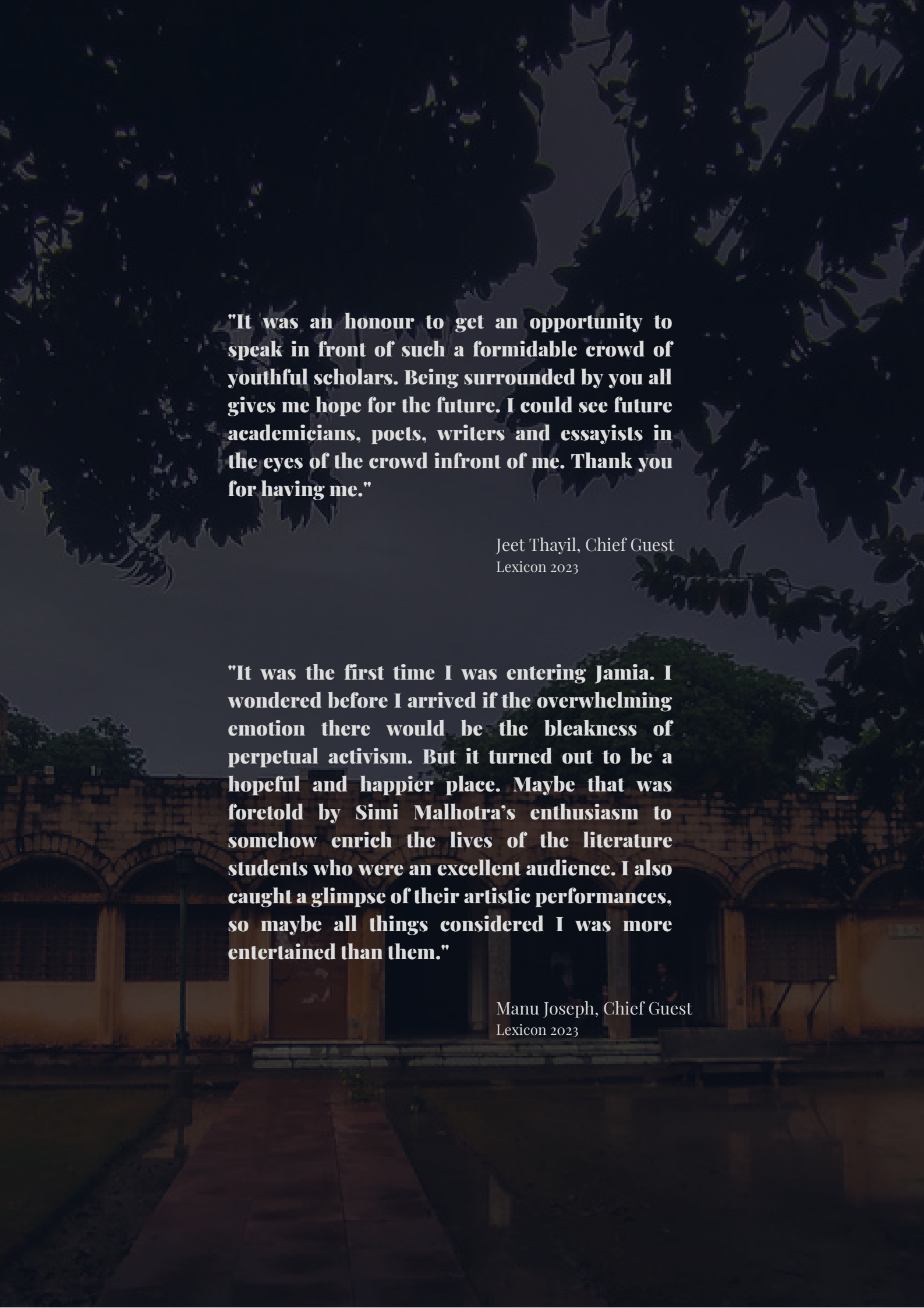
Umar Farooque Shaikh | Editor

Umar always manages to bring a fresh perspective to the table. With his interest in literary theory, his analyses are always sharp and rigorous. His presence on the team has been vital for the magazine's exceptional journey.

Md Saemul Haque Noori | Designer

Saem has been consistently creative and imaginative, both with his ideas and designs, leading to the excellent aesthetics of ELA Magazine. He is gifted and dedicated and has been vitally instrumental in the creation of this beautiful ELA magazine.

*We thank our **Head of Department Prof Simi Malhotra** and **ELA Advisor Dr. Shuby Abidi** for their guidance and unwavering support throughout the compilation of this Magazine*



"It was an honour to get an opportunity to speak in front of such a formidable crowd of youthful scholars. Being surrounded by you all gives me hope for the future. I could see future academicians, poets, writers and essayists in the eyes of the crowd infront of me. Thank you for having me."

Jeet Thayil, Chief Guest
Lexicon 2023

"It was the first time I was entering Jamia. I wondered before I arrived if the overwhelming emotion there would be the bleakness of perpetual activism. But it turned out to be a hopeful and happier place. Maybe that was foretold by Simi Malhotra's enthusiasm to somehow enrich the lives of the literature students who were an excellent audience. I also caught a glimpse of their artistic performances, so maybe all things considered I was more entertained than them."

Manu Joseph, Chief Guest
Lexicon 2023