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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH | JAMIA MILLIA ISLAMIA

Issue 06

Voicing the Untold

Non-Fiction | Fiction | Poetry

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

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EDITORS' NOTE

In its fifth edition, the ELA Magazine continues to serve as a living archive of the voices, visions, and veracity of the students of the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia. Each issue becomes a mirror, reflecting the evolving temperament of literary expression and the intellectual and emotional pulse of our times.

The English Literary Association has long stood as a vital conduit through which students translate thought into form, through verse, prose, and experimental art. It is a space that resists stagnation, that breathes through dialogue, through critique, through imagination. In a time when the world grows louder and faster, ELA remains steadfast in curating depth, silence, resistance, and resonance.

This year's contributions testify once again to the intellectual agility and creative courage of our Department. The works compiled here are not isolated acts of self expression—they are responses, questions, and invitations. They arise from within the academic corridors of our department but reach outward, towards wider conversations.

We extend our sincerest gratitude to Dr Mukesh Ranjan, Head of the Department, for his vision and continued support, and to Dr Shuby Abidi, ELA Advisor, whose guidance remains the bedrock of this endeavour.

May this issue speak to you, challenge you, comfort you, perhaps even unsettle you. That, too, is the work of literature.

Taizeem Bilal

POETRY

MOIRAI'S PLAY

Innama Khan

[nascentes morimur finisque ab origine pendet]

I drag myself like a scathed soldier,
Bleeding through the shoulder,
Iron shards in the thighs and chest.
No point of return,
There was none to begin with.
"Keep pushing, keep on.
You'll get there."

[CLOTHO]
Where?
Did they ever tell you where from
The thread of fate got its hue?
Wrapped around our necks and wrist
Like noose cutting into the dermis
With its cold-blooded deeds.

Nonetheless, I keep on,
As one must.
Only glancing once in a while
My ankles tied to the corpses.
They smile coyly.
All of them, together,
In my blackened face.
My withered eyes stare
Until they vanish from sight.
The dull ache remains in my chest
Too chronic to be distinguished.

[LACHESIS]
I remember them
From the days of their vitality,
The gentler smiles
With laughter, more vivid.
The rose fragrance
Long replaced by a metallic scent,
But they bat their eyes
As they ever did.

I try my luck to spring loose,
Failing over and over again.
One would think it's safer now,
Farther away from the frontline.
So did I— an honest mistake.
Bury the hatchet?
I must bury the dead,
Lay them six feet under
The very ground we smoked together.

[ATROPOS]
What has taken so long?
I'm yet to learn the rites of a proper burial,
Farewell— a funeral for the dearest.
Before we bury the rotting carcasses,
We shall pay our respects:
To the sweet and shallow promises,
The sour days and hazy evenings.
We must fasten it all to replicate
A tomb big enough to hold their skeletons.

Yet, I keep on tugging further.
I have got to excel
These funeral processions,
Hear these chords chant
Lost in the translation of lament.

Perhaps in the end,
The strings will finally tie us together.
They might haul me in
Until there's no you and I,
Just heaps of bones
Tangled in red threads inside a coffin.

PALESTINE, TEMPORAL LOOPS

Shayan Mohammad

You see a man, a child, a woman—
Hot metal flowers; torn flesh.
Cold mortar; severed limbs.
You see a man, a child, a woman—
Locomoting in red-white ferries,
Antibiotics convulsing them.

But look now—
Men, children, women—processed debris;
Stacked, sorted, discarded.
You hear papers and pens
Devising mock-condemnations,
Mock-resolutions, mock-slogans.

And then, again—
Men, children, women—decaying,
Moulding into anthropoid isotopes;
Fossilizing into isomeric-sapiens.

Ceasefire.

Men. Children. Women.
Clumped, logged, mossed.

Menchildrenwomen—
Wuthering souls adrift.

Some souls buried; some sowed—
A soul grows green; unearths its past anew.

And lo! Its premature burial is prepared.

Temporal loops of wounds and recoveries.
Temporal loops of ambulances and tanks.
Temporal loops of rubbles and bricks:
We wonder if the loop can be breached,
We don't know if the cycle will end.

I know.
One end is here;
Another there.

But the End is not here—
Here, the time's winged chariot does not hurry.
It halts, it hovers, it lingers.
With deep sinking wheels and broken wings.
Reversing, rolling forward again,
Crushing flesh into dust;
Mixing blood with blood.
Here, no desert of vast eternity;
But a sky of past obscurity.
Ah, the End! It's not here—
But in a world free of temporal reality:
A world where death shall die,
A world where the dead shall live.

ERASURE, ERASER

Siddhidatri Pande

Cry my pretty fool,
Those iridescent drops–
Blot the ink that brought together you and me.
Alas, we're out of papers, notes, and
Books, what not?
I cannot–
Put together,
Your voice, your face,
But the memories are given life,
A new one at that–because of this glass screen.

The apparition comes
And haunts me. You left the ghosts
Standing on the threshold. Where am I to budge?
Foolish of me to let you
En-passant. My gambits–
Forgotten. Cage me now,
In these squares
Which seemed
Like HOME.

MY CANVAS

Aadila Irshad

Dedication

As days pass, a bloody year is coming to an end—a year that took away from people what was their hope to live. This poem is dedicated to every person who claims to share the burden of humanity and the warmth of compassion. It's a reminder that wars do not just happen, they are manufactured and the cost of these wars are young and promising dreams.

Painting a miserable masterpiece
Do you care to look at this horror from your ivory palace?
With bruises and cuts adorning their bare skins
Do you care to listen to the screams at solemn midnight?
When laughter disappears with no door to knock on
Do you care to ask where children go after tragedy befalls?
No, we don't! The callous world keeps going about its business.

No, I mean I, who has become an ugly sore on a disfigured body,
like a vicious monster ready to devour its prey,
It does not bother me when innocence is forcefully smothered.

The clock never rests, yet everything stays the same.
Do we care what this bloody transaction claims?
They create stories; we die believing in those.
They mould new truth; we are blinded by lies.
They worship profit; we ignore our conscience.
Their goals are clear as day, yet our humanity never recognises;
dead asleep on the comfy bed of lies, our minds have long rotten.

So, tell me, what do you see when the day comes to an end?
Well, what I see is haunting—a beautiful life cut short.
I see merry children running on my bloody canvas in a wasteland of dreams.

QUESTIONS BETWEEN THE STAINS AND SCREAMS

Sania Parween

(You live about, you don't hear for. You silence and shout for normality, the freedom lies buried, it's tenfold beneath your feet.)

Does the truth hurt in a place born out of the blood of differences?
How do you feel to wake up, walk barefoot on the green grass of your lawn,
the blades mowed fresh with the voices you had slit open last night?
Did you put them then on the walls of democracy?
Do you sip your tea in front of a mirror and say you look so damn, a Fagin?
It must feel so nice to slip into that rich fabric,
to get ready to put your fingers on a zone, to be bulldozed.
A festival gone, to decide who to be wronged, the years stained, and more to be satisfied.
On Thursday, an outcry from a distant land would soothe the chest,
universities silenced, and a peacock's lament would be more of a ring.

Do you fear this hatred?
Where did you dig this from, in 2002,
or was it long before when Aurangzeb was alive?
And where do you plant this now,
when everywhere the land has been mossed with the inference of changed narratives,
boiled and sparkled with the new history of lords?
Does this, demigod, like a blind avatar to write what is wrong
and to speak with the same tone, cracked pentameters lurking to attack communities,
bring you nothing but pleasure?
How do you decide it's a temple beneath a mosque beneath a temple beneath a mosque?

On Monday, blocked roads would be a national sentiment,
heads in surrender to the divine, should be snapped and if again, up should be "waqfed".
Do you decide?
What kind of jokes don't make you angry?
How many pleas, of voices broken and voices devoid, of dirtied secularism, will bring peace?
And when you prepare to retire to bed, the world already burning in different parts
and streets, the freedom beneath your feet screams,
the nation awakens to the crowd's failings and the death of democracy.
This will be our tryst with destiny.
Do you decide?

PURGATORY

Sadaf Suleman

Pitchforks for tongues, pride carves our love
I was fated to fall, to break, to atone
not lost, only bent, only bone
an ego war, I was bound to lose
you fought covertly and won in shadows
a condescending smile,
breaking me with wounds I couldn't refuse

Lord, I witness like an erased child
you hear these hallow men that raped and reviled
I've begged and begged on broken glass and molten rocks
like a public exhibition for you to visit
I've howled at nights to be saved
but you raised these men on prayer mats
and ignored my naive cries like a beggar's sacrifice

I breathe your presence in isolated rooms
your lake heart is my sea of smoke
I, a mere anchorite still tempest tongued
dancing in an involuntary labyrinth
I've outstretched my hands wailing in endless nights
all that remains is a damned wyrm
hell formed and havoc bound

I run and run to escape the prophecy
did you create just to abandon me?
I was neglected and forced to turn a daughter of dust
now I remain punished standing
to a fortress you built at my face
your holy ghost still bleeds my haunted name
now I chant and chant moonlight hymns
a mad witch and her soft doom song

now I lay in your arms, naked and defeated
where my rust and your shadow meet
you murmured, meek and low;
man is dog, dog is greedy and no love is ever enough
the last weight is shed, with divine breath on my shoulder
our story is sealed by three words in a covenant vow
now I exist in shame at an abandoned altar
all men and gold endlessly eclipsed by you

predestined to watch as many waste their feasts
I was always just skin and bones in torment
no hunger gnaws, no thirst is new,
I've watched pilgrims die black and blue
happiness was a room I didn't have access to
fountains of ripe fruits, a ghostly taste, a sin eater's route
all my desires die at times,
through burned teeth I build your shrine

I write odes for an all-consuming idiot plot
through endless flames, like a cephalophore
through chains and dreams that lead nowhere
no moon nor paradise, just your selfish serpent desires
forever cursed, forever ignored, deceived through love
mad and desperate on an eternal return

AFTER THEY ARE GONE

Talib Azimabadi

To reach for something
approximating perfection,
I yield tremulous to the despair
that beckons me.
There is a story that will be told—
that only I can tell;
I break apart in the stratosphere
and kiss the continents.
I rain past unknown horizons
that tumble into the oceans,
to reach a desirable end.
I fill in the blanks with fire
while waiting for the sentence to end—the end I
longed for
found me longing for a familiar scent.

SCREAMS

Nadeem Fayaz

With darkness the cell abounds
The light, a dream
That dwindles
Each time it is longed;
In the filth they dwell,
Severed bodies
Their floor,
Torn scarves their trauma;
Torment climbs like ivy
Choking every light.
Together they pant, wriggle
In the abyss of despair.
'Prisoners' they're called
By the bestial uncouth boors.
In the mist the crime
Of the infant;
Quailing in trepidation,
clutches to her mother.

Echoes of screams,
Shrieks of innocence
Resonate with
The crippling catastrophe,
Trapping this
Grotesque milieu.
Yet, the mother as weak
As a thread in a storm
Hopes for a tranquil dawn.
She begs no one
But one; and her scars
Implore the Almighty;
Behind her closed eyelids,
The light lingers;
And she holds onto this.

THE OTHER SIDE

Laiba Akhtar

We have lived on the same landmass.
Yet so far apart—I have played in the soil of Hindustan,
You have grown up planting olive trees in Falasteen
Differences abound with similarities.

Here, Haldi covers my skin,
And there, you are prepared for your final bath.
Here, I am cherished with love and joy,
There, you are mourned with love and sorrow.

Here, they've bought me a blood-red wedding dress,
There, your gown is white, but stained with true red—
A pure red, a deeper red, blood and blood.
I wonder whose red is more vivid, more real.

Here, the fragrance of roses fills the air,
There, incense smoke weaves around you.
Here, my family arrives to celebrate,
There, your loved ones come to grieve.

Here, laughter and chatter echo in every corner,
There, prayers and whispers mingle with tears.

Here, my body is numb, unready for this change,
There, you are still, for all is gone.

Here, I am adorned with jewels and scent,
There, you are draped in love, only love.
Here, my brother weeps as he holds me close,
There, your brother weeps as he carries you to the final home.

Separation here, and separation there.
The moment has come to say goodbye.
Here, I rise and sit in my doli,
There, you are lowered in the grave.

I journey to meet my beloved,
I wear my dress, while yours hangs unworn on the wall.
We both stand at a similar threshold.
Departure, forever.

ESSAYS

Literature, Culture, and Critique

A Defence of Piracy

By Prantik Ali

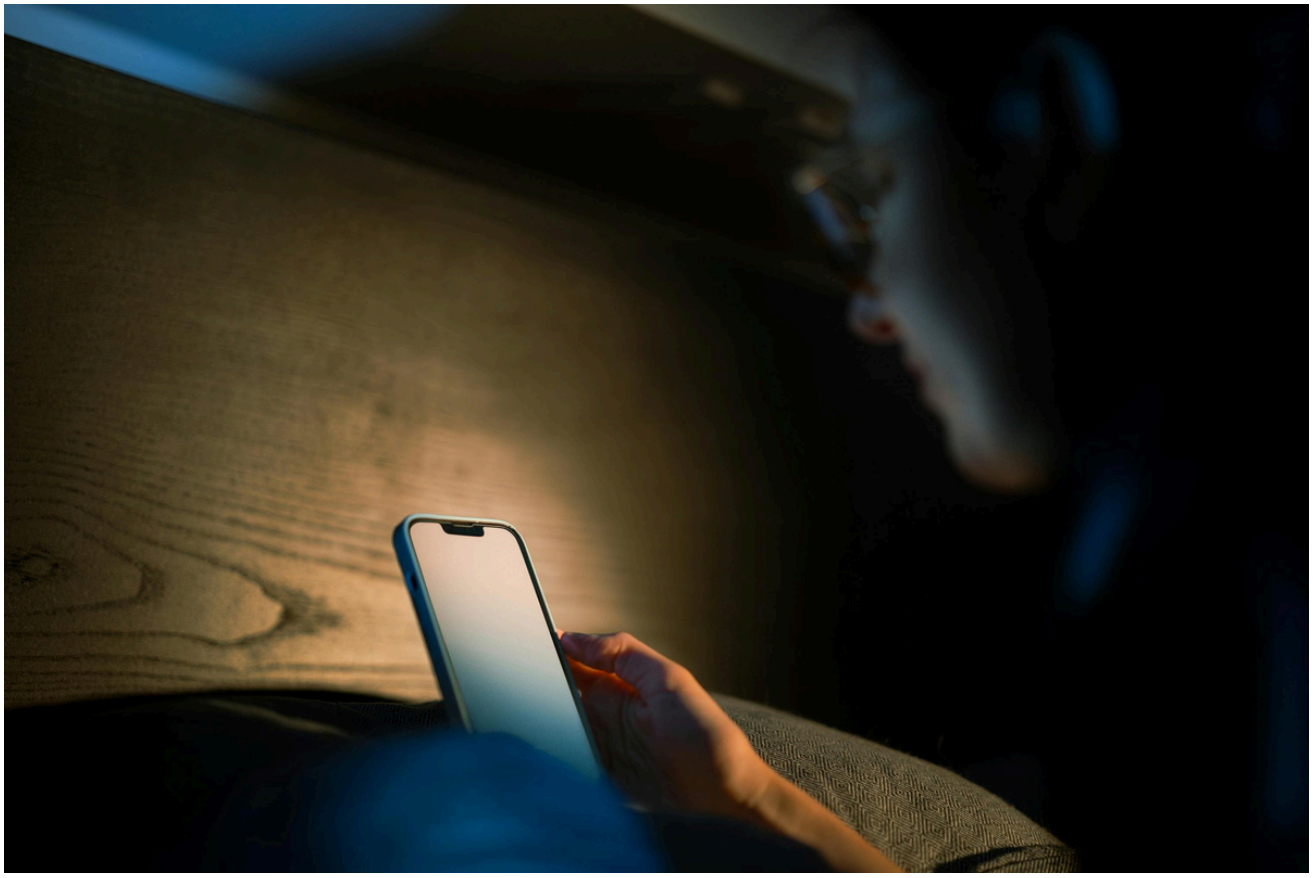
The other day, as I was mindlessly scrolling through a catalogue of films I was hoping to watch later that night, I found myself recalling how difficult it used to be, in my teenage years, to consume the films, books, and music that were shaping contemporary culture. There were bookstores in Park Street, and a few foreign film screenings if one was lucky or well-connected, but for the vast majority, exposure to art meant a homogenised cultural diet, comprising re-runs of Hindi soap operas, Hollywood dubbed in Hindi, and music channels that looped the same five pop songs in an endless repetition. Naturally, without a stable internet connection, I too felt that I was cut off from a vast archive of ideas – effectively lacking a window to other worlds.

In a world caught between DSL and internet cafés, I had relied on bootleg DVDs sold at roadside stalls, or passed around between friends, for my introduction to that artistic sphere which lay beyond the limited cultural palette curated by TV channels. Mislabelled, scratched discs became my most prized collection. At the time, I didn't realize that these fragments of pirated culture were part of a larger, informal archive – one that championed sharing and accessibility, instead of profit.

Aesthetic experience, whether watching a film, reading literature, or listening to music, has become increasingly enclosed within paywalled ecosystems, especially in the post-2010s, with the rise of streaming services. Under such circumstances, piracy emerges not as a moral failing, but as a form of cultural resistance – the only viable alternative to a commercially driven entertainment industry which hinges on the idea that enjoying art without paying money equates to devaluing the creator's work.

I think it was sometime during the lockdown – those long, indistinguishable days when time seemed to blur and the news was too heavy to bear. One night, with nothing better to do, I started looking up lists of great films to watch. That's when I stumbled upon a list: names I didn't recognise - Kurosawa, Tarkovsky, Wong Kar-wai, Fellini. The descriptions were strange and beautiful: 'slow-burning,' 'existential,' 'visual poetry.' I was curious. So, I looked them up, and proceeded to torrent them.

None of those films were available anywhere near me. They weren't shown on Indian television. They certainly weren't being screened in theatres anywhere around me. But here they were, available at the click of a button, uploaded by strangers from some other part of the world, who must have believed these films were too precious to disappear, and too important to be buried under corporate disinterest. I watched them one by one. I didn't always understand them, but felt a gnawing sense of



acknowledgement towards how they changed how I perceived the world itself. Piracy, in those moments, didn't feel like theft. It felt like access.

In the months following the beginning of Israel's genocidal attacks on Gaza, I found myself scrolling helplessly through graphic images and footage of bombed hospitals, amputated bodies, and dead babies, killed by the ruthless colonial machinery of drones and airstrikes. Somewhere in that blur of grief and rage, I came across a pirated Google Drive folder circulating on Twitter, which contained some thirty-odd Palestinian films. It was staggering, since I'd never even heard of these films. No streaming service had recommended them. No classroom had mentioned them. And yet here they were, passed hand to hand in digital form – illegally, and urgently.

This kind of preservation, of fragments of a people's history which the world has chosen to cast a blind eye towards, is an act of defiance. I contend, therefore, that piracy isn't always criminal, contrary to what we are conditioned to accept. When mainstream platforms ignore or erase stories like these, piracy becomes the only way these stories travel – across oceans, into bedrooms like mine, onto laptops of people who would otherwise never know of their existence. This kind of unauthorised circulation not only preserves the films, but ensures that Palestinian narratives of occupation, displacement, and resistance continue to be witnessed and remembered across geographies and time. In this sense, piracy does not just preserve dissent—it becomes dissent, functioning as an underground public sphere where suppressed voices can be amplified, protected, and transmitted.

Whenever people talk about how piracy undermines artists or damages the creative industry, I can't help but feel a disconnect. Because really, *who* are we defending? Is Warner Bros. collapsing because someone in suburban India streamed a grainy copy of a 1980s Palestinian film that never got subtitled, let alone distributed? Are global media conglomerates losing sleep over the fact that I accessed *The Battle of Algiers* through Pirate Bay instead of a theatre that never existed in my city?

In India, today, streaming platforms are cluttered with algorithmically sorted Bollywood blockbusters and formulaic Hollywood films churned out in the hundreds. And as for Palestinian cinema—much of it has never even *been* archived through official channels. How do you 'pirate' a film that has no market to begin with? How can you steal what was never for sale?

The discourse generated around piracy always speaks in favour of the rich and the powerful. By equating access with theft, it effaces the fact that the circuits of cultural distribution are structured by questions of class, profit, region, and so on. Piracy, for me, unlocked doors to worlds that I did not even know existed. It gave me access not just to art, but to sensibilities, histories, and voices that profoundly, yet subtly, recalibrated the manner in which I looked at politics, and beauty, and love. I didn't grow up surrounded by curators of taste; I had to stumble my way through bootleg recordings in movie theatres, pixelated DVD rips, and mislabelled files, to discover the things that moved me. And for that journey – for the chaotic, subversive, and generous archive that piracy offered – I carry in my heart only gratitude.

The Endangered Art of Satire in India

By Madeeha

It is a truth universally acknowledged that those in power must always be in fear of good satirists. A genre as old as time, the word is derived from Latin “satura” meaning “a full dish of various kinds of fruits”, a fitting origin, considering satire is itself a rich blend of irony, sarcasm, parody, and wit, all served in a bite. Though often associated with humor, laughter does not essentially follow in satire. As is famously said, “the rules of satire are such that it must do more than make you laugh. No matter how amusing it is, it doesn’t count unless you find yourself wincing a little even as you chuckle.”

At its core, satire confronts public discourse and acts as a counterweight to power. It is not just an art form; it is a long-standing institution which, despite its controversial and biting nature, has satisfied the popular need to debunk and ridicule prominent realms of power, for centuries. In olden days even the most ruthless of kings kept jesters in their court, knowing full well that the fool was often the only one bold enough to truthfully call them out. The state of political satire in any given society is a direct reflection of its tolerant or intolerant nature, as well as the state of its civil liberties and human rights. India has a long history of such wit embedded in its literature, theater, and cinema. Ancient texts like *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha* used fables to critique society, while colonial-era writers like Bharatendu Harishchandra and Premchand used satire to highlight social injustice. Not be mistaken since satire, by its very nature, offends and pokes fun at those in power, it has never been without its share of troubles.

The challenges did not end with the end of colonial rule. In independent India, satire has been repeatedly stifled. One such instance was the censorship of the 1978 film *Kissa Kursi Ka*, a satire on the Indira Gandhi government, exposing the atrocities committed during the Emergency. Despite featuring big names like Shabana Azmi and Raj Babbar, the film was banned before it even reached theaters. But the suppression didn’t stop at a ban—Sanjay Gandhi personally ensured that every print of the film was confiscated and burned.

In India, questioning power structures is an uphill battle, not only because of government crackdowns but because of deeply ingrained cultural complacency. Satire, by its very nature, exists to punch up, to mock, challenge, and expose the tyranny of power. But Indians from a young age, are taught obedience—to elders, to tradition, to authority. Dissent is seen as disrespect, and challenging the long-held beliefs as blasphemy. This is why satire, which thrives on irreverence and disruption,

is increasingly at odds with the Indian society. Not only the government, it's also a population condition to flinch at seeing its own contradictions laid bare; where nationalism is weaponized to silence criticism, satire is not just unwelcome, it's dangerous. So, satire disappears, not because there's no audience for it, but because fear wins.

Satire is the sharpest weapon we have in the arsenal of dissent, precisely because it does what nothing else can, it exposes power, stripping away its illusion of grandeur with nothing more than wit and ridicule. The suppression of satire is just about silencing comedians or cartoonists; it's a direct assault on the fundamental rights, on free speech, free thought, and the very right to question authority and demand accountability. A world where power goes un-mocked is the most terrifying world of all.

The chilling meta irony of satire often turns prophetic. What initially seems humorous because of its outlandish setup can, in hindsight, feel like a missed warning. Many times, the satirists, ridiculed in the present, are proven right in the future. Five years ago, the things satirists in India and the US mocked, warnings disguised as jokes, have already become a reality. The absurdities they highlighted, the authoritarian tendencies they exaggerated for effect, are no longer exaggerations. And in this increasingly absurd world, the warnings that satire offers are a luxury we cannot afford to lose.

Satire has always been a mirror held up to power, a voice for the unheard, and a reminder that no authority is above criticism. Its decline isn't just the loss of an art form; it's the loss of one of the last lines of defense against oppression. If satire is silenced, next comes dissent, and follows democracy. The responsibility to protect satire, then, falls on us all, the people, the youth, the ones who will inherit the consequences of a world where questioning power is a crime. Governments do what they do the best, they stifle and silence; institutions try and tame' but satire defies, it resists. It's as comedian Vir Das has said, "nothing terrifies the powerful more than the sound of our collective laughter." It is the most basic form of our defiance, and our refusal to accept blind obedience. And it's up to us to ensure that power never goes comfortable enough to go un-mocked.

Commodification of Resistance Symbols: A Reflection

By Zaina Shahid Khan & Sahil Alom Barbhuiya

It has been a millennia-old practice for the oppressors to loot the culture of the oppressed in order to deprive them of their original identity and consequently enforce the foreign 'universal'. The tactic is to colonise, homogenise, and eventually depoliticise everything. Whether under feudalism or capitalism, imperialist forces have always sought to implement the agenda of cultural expropriation. Since the turn of the last century, however, this phenomenon has further aggravated with global consumerism and mass production commodifying almost everything under the sun that is marketable, including resistance symbols which once emerged as tools of defiance and dissent in the face of oppression. It in turn reduces them to mere commodities, devoid of their cultural context and symbolic significance. German philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer had argued that this is how the cultural industry succeeds in neutralising dissent by mass producing specific cultural products to homogenise and standardise their value, thereby repackaging them as exotic consumables.

Since the Israeli aggression on Palestine accelerated in October 2023, the world finally became aware of this 70-year-old ongoing occupation in the Middle East. What followed was massive global outrage, calls for boycotting complicit brands, and protests – both on and off-street. All attempts to pressurise replacing ignorance with factual and historical insights gained space. It is within this uprising that the global population came across the Palestinian *keffiyeh*. Not that the *keffiyeh* was unknown prior to 2023, but it became much more popular thereafter.

Originally a Middle-Eastern head-scarf worn in the desert to escape heat and dust, the *keffiyeh* gradually evolved into a symbol of resistance after the Arab Revolt of 1936. Its symbolic significance was later solidified after the Palestinian freedom fighter Yasser Arafat donned it. Today, as part of the global solidarity, people all around the globe wear the *keffiyeh* over their attire, in an attempt to inform and declare their anti-genocidal stance. However, as the current fast fashion industry seldom lets any physically existing piece or pattern escape its capitalist clutches, the line between cultural appreciation and cultural commodification was bound to get blurred again – with the *keffiyeh* (and its olive leaves-shaped embroidery) getting incorporated as the latest design in sweatshirts, t-shirts, jewellery, etcetera.

Much like the *keffiyeh*, the image of the *watermelon* was adopted by Palestinians in place of their flag when it was outlawed by the Israeli government. Today, it is fashionable to carry this symbol in earrings, tote bags, necklaces, and other accessories. While the intent begins as one's public display of solidarity and anti-occupational stance, it slowly shifts into a nonchalant addition to their commodity collection. How, you may ask, can one determine the erasure of the *watermelon* or the *keffiyeh's* importance? Simply, by observing the can of *Coca-cola*, or the bowl of *Maggi*, in the hands of the same individual donning the resistance symbol. These edible items are at the top of the Boycott lists as part of BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanction) movement for Palestine, for their parent companies offer direct financial contributions as fuels for the ongoing genocide. The aim to adhere to the anti-occupational stance, therefore, cancels out.

The capitalist hijacking of resistance symbols is not just limited to the *keffiyeh* but spans across a long and ongoing history of cultural erasure and consumerist appropriation of resistance. *Jazz music*, for instance, once evolved as a way to express resilience and creativity in the face of social and political oppression in America. Later, it was systematically stripped of its revolutionary essence and repackaged as a mere form of entertainment. Emerging from Black Creole communities in post-emancipation New Orleans, *jazz* was a sonic rebellion against racial oppression. Its improvisational nature resisted commodification until musicians like Paul Whiteman diluted its radical edge for mainstream audiences. Today, *jazz* is institutionalized as "*America's classical music*" with its subversive Black roots obscured by Grammy Awards and elevator playlists.

This pattern of symbolic dispossession finds perhaps its most stark manifestation in the commodification of revolutionary iconography. Alberto Korda's *Guerrillero Heroico* (1960), originally a tribute to the Cuban leader Che Guevara, has now become a global brand slapped on T-shirts, keychains, coffee mugs, and every other marketable item. So much so that out of millions of people who encounter it daily, only a handful might know the revolutionary backdrop behind the image. This is what Walter Benjamin argued that when revolutionary art is mass-produced without the political and historical context, its '*aura*' is lost. Its power to disrupt is neutralized; it is merely reduced to background noise. Guevara's image is the ultimate postmodern paradox where a symbol of anti-capitalism is marketed by capitalism. These cases across human history reveal a recurring pattern of how resistance symbols are hollowed out by capitalism's aestheticisation of politics and depoliticisation of aesthetics. The *keffiyeh*, *jazz*, or *Che Guevra's icon* become what Baudrillard would call 'simulacra' – copies without originals, drained of their historical weight.

According to American sociologist George Herbert Mead who wrote extensively on symbolic interactionism, the self and the society emerge from communicative actions grounded in shared symbols, which acquire meaning only through human interaction. In the context of resistance symbols, this suggests that the power of a symbol like the *keffiyeh* lies not in the object itself, but in the collective understanding and historical context that people attach to it. However, when these symbols are uprooted from their original sociopolitical contexts and inserted into consumerist circuits, their meanings are no longer constructed through genuine social interaction but through market-driven reinterpretations. The *keffiyeh* on the fashion runway of *Coachella (2023)* or Che Guevara's face on a luxury apparel ceases to represent resistance; instead, it becomes a commodity that ultimately reinforces the same existing power structures and cultural hegemony which it once sought to challenge.

Have we then divorced these symbols from the people who birthed them, and participated in their depoliticisation – as imperialism always intended to make us do? There is no harm in putting on a watermelon earring, a *keffiyeh* scarf, a Che Guevara t-shirt, or even publicly declaring oneself as a *jazz* enthusiast; however, such acts demand a degree of introspection.

For the symbols we seek to adopt and represent, emerged against years of oppression, subjugation, and colonisation. If we, as informed students of academia, aren't able to stand up for what we declare to support, we have once again fallen prey to the very systems we sought to fight against through our education and privilege.

The Agency of Father and Semi-permeable Tragedy

By Faisal Javid

"Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time"
—Sylvia Plath, 'Daddy'

In literature, the father-child relationship is portrayed in many complex ways. The intricacy in such narratives is often woven in a space fraught with contradictions and affirmations. The father's agency becomes a prism for exploring personal and collective tragedies, mirroring the semi-permeable boundaries of human sorrows and conflicts. A positive relationship with the father figure, therefore, binds the cracks and blurs the distance between seeking identity and owning it. For instance, these two extremes are seen in Sylvia Plath's disjointed relationship with her father—for whom he was an authoritative and self-absorbed figure, as reflected in her poem 'Daddy'—and in Rabindranath Tagore's positive and respectful relationship with his father, evident in works like *Jiban Smriti*.

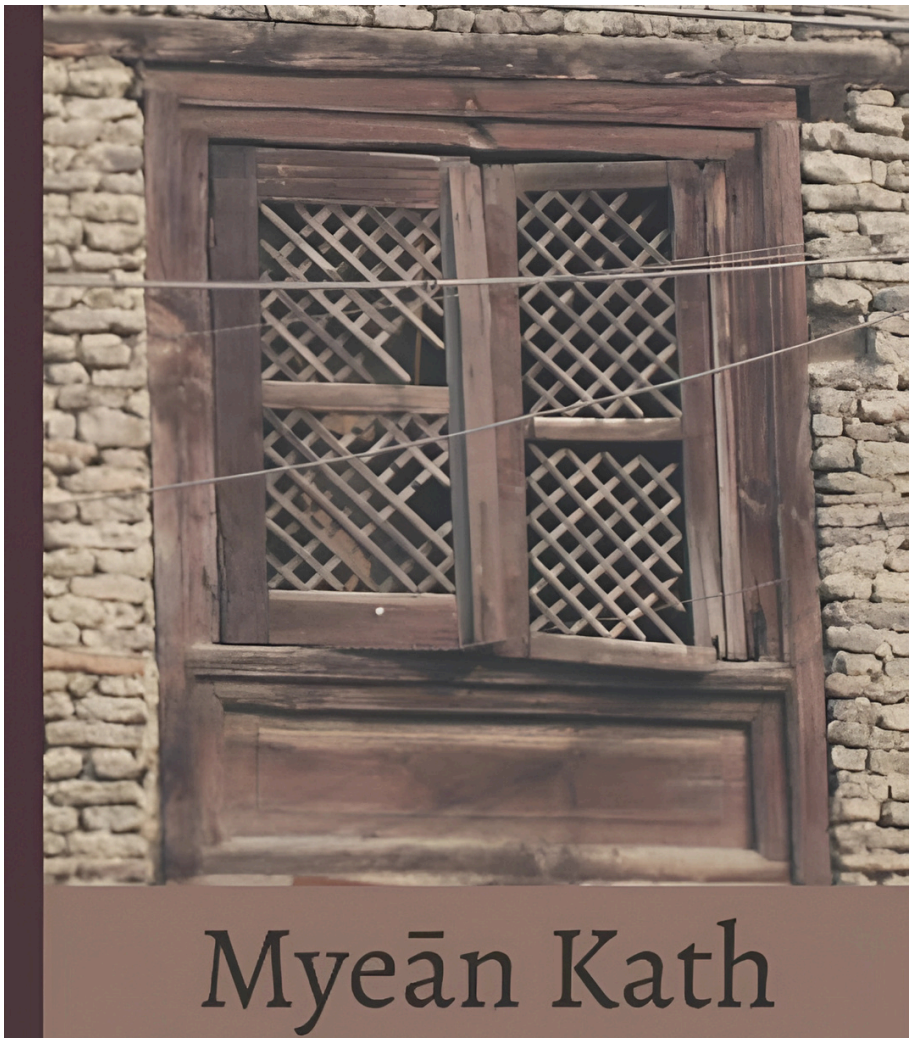
The ripples of such relationships may legibly be considered right or in agreement, but how often that is the case is reflected in Shamla Mufti's autobiography *Myean Kath* and Fakir Mohan Senapati's opus *Rebati*. It is widely regarded as the first Odia short story about a girl named Rebati who is 10 years old. The story portrays a tale of sacrifice, love, superstitions, and the consequences of the absence of a father figure. *Myean Kath* is the first Kashmiri autobiography written by a woman. The autobiography reflects sacrifice, marriage, empowerment, superstitions, and resilience. Although the two narratives are separated by space and time, they echo the commonality of experiences in olden times.

On the one hand, Rebati tries to break the loop of norms through her father's support and her growing curiosity. On the other hand, Mufti, through the agency of the father figure, navigates her identity and comes out victorious, helping her husband to self-actualise (to realise one's full potential), and breaking the history and cult of illiterate women in the house. The father figure in her life is the reason she is able to transform herself. She even dedicates the book to both parents for supporting her education. Her mother plays the opposite role of what Rebati's grandmother does. She supports her and helps her read the holy Quran. While Rebati's grandmother, who eventually remains the only person in her life, carves bitterness into her.

Throughout both narratives, the thin line between tragedy and victory is constantly blurred by external factors like society, norms, and superstitions. The story of Rebati culminates in dying young and unaccomplished, while Mufti's story ends in her marriage in class 7, yet becoming an accomplished woman. Both Mufti and Rebati indeed remain the agencies of change within their families, enabled by their fathers' support

Mufti is married into a household surrounded by illiterate women, who look down upon educated women. Lest her daughter should have a troubled life with her in-laws, Mufti's father decides to cut short her education. Her father exclaims, "There is no purpose of her going to school now... They look down upon the girls who are educated." (Mufti, 119-120). It is Qazi Ghulam Mohi-ud Din, his friend, who comes to Mufti's rescue and suggests that, while she is in her father's house, she should be free from such restrictions. Mufti's narrative highlights the nuanced effect of external factors that shape her life in one way or the other.

For Rebati, her father supports educating her despite her grandmother's constant objections. The grandmother repeatedly disapproves of the idea of educating Rebati: "What good will it do you? How does book learning help a girl? It is enough to know how to cook, bake, churn butter, and decorate walls with rice-paste" (St Pierre 13). Basudev, a school teacher, also becomes a catalyst in Rebati's education and tells her father, Shyambandhu, about a girls' school in Cuttack where they study and learn crafts. Rebati herself shows a strong willingness to learn and informs her father about it: "Father, I do want to study" (St Pierre 14). This tussle between the old order (illiterate women in



Mufti's in-laws and the Rebati's grandmother) and the new order (reflected by the two young women: Mufti and Rebati) continues throughout both narratives.

The importance of individual identity, recognition, and power is reflected in both works. While exploring her strengths, Mufti is unable to reach her full potential due to a lot of impediments in the form of traditions, norms, and superstitions. In Rebati, this external antagonist is cholera, symbolising the metamorphosis of the old order into a disease that is identified as a "demonic deity." Due to such superstitions, people shut their doors on kith and kin, abandoning each other. When her parents fall ill due to the cholera pandemic, she is left helpless and anxious: "Rebati ran in and out of the house, crying for help… help was neither expected nor forthcoming" (St Pierre 16-17). Senapati's story highlights the importance of education in emancipating people from irrational fears that might have saved the agency for Rebati to bring light to her community. At the time, the process had to be initiated by the father or father figure as the education of a girl was considered futile and demeaning. Rebati's grandmother is so engrossed in such superstitions that she even blames her for the tragedy of bringing death into the home and causing the deaths of her parents, while also depriving them of all remaining resources. Back then, "People conceived of cholera as an evil old woman who was out with her basket and broom to sweep up heads. There was no awareness or education propagated about the disease to prove to the people that they were wrong" (Das). The absence of her father becomes the reason she is not able to make any decisions or help herself. She remains on the floor, crying, as her grandmother's constant bickering makes her question her identity and self, more than anything else.

In Mufti's case, it is not a deadly disease that becomes a hurdle in her life, but the space and distance covered in a sheath of prejudice against women's education. It is a constant eye that keeps watch over her, just like the judgmental eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckelburg overlooking the desolate 'valley of ashes' in The Great Gatsby. These eyes are the reason that she is not able to benefit completely even after going to Aligarh Muslim University for higher studies, as she is unable to escape their ideas and interacts the least in the classroom. The eyes of the people who knew Mufti act as the cholera, ready to leap up and choke her. For instance, while returning from the university with a few other Kashmiri girls after a year, the bus halts at Qazigund. Keeping the burqa intact she lifts off her veil, and one of her close relatives working at a Unani hospital there spots her. This news reaches her home before she does and spreads among her relatives. "He told all that he had seen me without a burqa sitting in the bus… I could not know about the reaction of each of my relatives, but this much was made certain that the news was conveyed to me" (Mufti, 238). This incident nearly causes a disaster for her as no one from her in-laws comes to receive her. Her husband appears at her father's home to take her back immediately. She writes, "Mufti Sahib was adamant in what he said. My father tried to make him understand,

but he did not budge. All my kith and kin who were in ecstasy to see me home, felt disappointed; all wished that I stayed there at least for one night. My people had made all preparations for the dinner, and no one among them was ready to see me leave. I was completely bewildered and could not decide what to do. I was not able to take any decision on the basis of my own discretion" (Mufti, 239).

At this incident, her father wisely advises her to go with her husband to prevent conflict. The whole scenario also reflects that despite going to Aligarh, she is not able to assert her identity as separate from her in-laws or her husband. It shows the shifting of power from her father to her new father figure at her in-laws, divided into fragments among the various family members, including her husband. This further complicates her situation, with each figure needed for approval.

The influence of decisions made by the authority of a father or a father figure envelops both narratives, from going to school to choosing a fit marriage within the same caste. Rebati's self-actualising journey comes to a halt due to the absence of a father figure. There is no smooth end or linear progression; her thread is cut when her father dies. She is slowly drawn into silence and dies in agony. Her grandmother who would often call her: "Rebati! Rebi! You fire! You ashes!"—finding her dead—falls from the veranda with her. But for Mufti, the constant presence of the agency of fatherhood becomes the reason that she is able to survive in society, attain higher education, and stay at her parents' house whenever the need arises.

She is able to benefit her family, change their outlook towards women's education, and give back to her society. She becomes a living example of what Senapati tries to convey through his short story, Rebati.

Could Mulk Raj Anand Have Foreseen the Casteist Realities of Urban India of 2025?

By Sahil Alom Barbhuiya & Zaina Shahid Khan

If there has been an Indian author who never shied away from conveying the ills of our society with utmost veracity, vitality, and a barely concealed ferocity, then it has to be Mulk Raj Anand who bags the status of being one of the finest novelists of Indian English Literature. *Untouchable* (1935), his first novel, is a riveting description of an eventful day in the life of a young sweeper boy named Bakha, an untouchable living in the North Indian cantonment town of Bulashah. This fictional text does not just grapple with caste problems and torments meted out to the people inhabiting the lowest echelons of the social hierarchy, but also provides three solutions in its course: the evangelical zeal, the Gandhian social reform, and the urban mechanized sanitation. The salvation army has been very active in the subcontinent for decades and Dalits in large numbers have embraced the missionary fold to avert oppressions at the hands of the upper castes. Though Gandhism has its own limitations, Mahatma Gandhi's nationwide campaigns for reformation and revolution proved instrumental in building religious amity, curbing untouchability, as well as giving the Harijans a life with dignity. Urbanization, however, as a measure which would eradicate caste discrimination as envisaged in the novel, failed miserably. This article, therefore, addresses the disillusionment that has resulted from the failed expectations which the Dalit Liberation Movements had placed upon urbanization as an end to casteism.

The notion of urbanization as the final solution to rid the Indian society of casteism was further solidified by Dr B.R. Ambedkar. He viewed Indian villages as dens of narrow-minded and the true boiling-pots of all sorts of caste-based marginalization. In the urbanised rat-race powered by capitalism, Dr Ambedkar saw the opportunity of anonymity, wherein the burden of class struggle was to overpower caste discrimination. He envisioned a society where economic stability would become the primary factor of societal struggle, and people would empathize and bond on the basis of shared financial struggle. However, recent analyses reveal that caste still continues to be a foundational social construct in India where marriages, elections, employment, education, and even areas of residence are determined by one's *jati* or *janjati*.

The current reality, therefore, blatantly incorporates segregation and ghettoization. By visiting any high-class city housing societies one can witness the caste apparatus at its finest. The residential buildings would often have two sets of elevators – one for

the residents and their relations, and a second one for all other city-dwellers who consist of workers, maids, the milkman, etc. The maid, whose duty is to clean the entire house and/or cook food for her corporate-working employers, is provided with a secluded space to sit during chores, and separate plates to eat in. She cannot dine in any other utensil; however, she is the one responsible for washing and cleaning all the dishes in that household. Any worker who is called into the house, whether it's a carpenter or an electrician whose respective works ensure smooth functioning of the residence, are handed drinking water in old disposable plastic bottles.

This spatial hierarchy not only mirrors traditional caste-based segregation but also reconfigures it within the modern urban context, creating what can be termed as 'urban outcastes'. Such practices underscore how caste, though often concealed under the veneer of urban modernity, continues to shape societal structures and perpetuate systemic inequalities. Professor Gopal Guru, an Indian political scientist, asserts that caste in urban spaces operates through invisible mechanisms, where exclusion is normalized through everyday practices and institutional arrangements. Guru also explains the ghettoization of Dalit and other minority communities, wherein the ghetto they collectively reside in consequently morphs into the bodies of the dwellers. Thus, they carry the ghetto on their bodies as they navigate around the city, to participate in their daily occupations. Therefore, rather than dissolving, caste adapts to urban environments, reinforcing its role as a determinant of social order and inequality.

While Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* ends with a glimmer of hope through the means of urbanization, Ajay Navaria's anthology The *Unclaimed Terrain* (2013) reveals the hollowness of this promise. Navaria critically interrogates the promises of urban modernity and its failure to dismantle caste hierarchies, offering a nuanced portrayal of the Dalit experience in contemporary urban India. Through a series of interconnected narratives, he exposes the contradictions of urbanization, which, despite its veneer of anonymity and progress, perpetuates caste-based discrimination in insidious ways. The collection's titular story, along with others, delves into the lives of middle-class Dalits who, despite achieving professional and material success, remain tethered to their caste identities. Navaria's characters navigate a complex web of societal expectations, economic marginalization, and psychological alienation, revealing how caste adapts to urban spaces through mechanisms like residential segregation, workplace discrimination, and social exclusion. For instance, the protagonist in the story 'Scream' grapples with the duality of urban anonymity, where the city offers a semblance of liberation but simultaneously reinforces stifling caste-based insecurities. Navaria's work also highlights the intersection of caste and class, illustrating how economic deprivation exacerbates the marginalization of Dalits and other oppressed groups in urban settings. By interrogating the limits of modernity and urbanization, The *Unclaimed Terrain* underscores the resilience of caste as a social construct and calls for a deeper systemic transformation to achieve true emancipation. Hence, Bakha's aspiration for a mechanized, caste-free urban future stands in stark contrast to the lived realities of Navaria's characters, who grapple with their identity of being the modern urban outcastes.

Apart from representation through creative fiction, Indian academia has contributed to a critical enquiry into the caste apparatus in urban spaces. N. Sukumar's profound work, *Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities: A Critical Reflection (2022)* delineates how the dominant paradigms of knowledge production

pose critical challenges to Dalit students. Being a Professor of Political Science in Delhi University, his in-depth research highlights how casteist tensions remain prevalent in public university spaces to the extent of pushing the marginalized individuals to the brink of suicide. His book, consisting of six chapters, incorporates real experiences of casteist humiliation and exclusion faced by both students and teachers in the Indian higher education system. Sukumar ends his book with a ferocious critique of the 'merit' system which, in its numerous guises, has accelerated structural disparities based on caste, class, and gender. The entire enrolment process, often attacked for following reservation policies, has been limited to just tokenism instead of actual accountability.

While urbanization may have failed to deliver on its promise of eradicating casteism, the agency of Indian academia yet offers a glimmer of hope. The works of writers like Ajay Navaria, Gopal Guru, and N. Sukumar have laid bare the enduring realities of caste in both rural and especially urban India. These voices, rooted in the historical and social relations of our society, have not only exposed the systemic nature of caste-based oppression but also illuminated pathways for resistance and reform.

Though Anand or even Dr Ambedkar couldn't foresee the contemporary realities of a casteist urban India, the fight to eradicate casteism remains a significant responsibility, especially of the academia, and of the young urban as well as rural intellectuals forming this academic space.

ESSAYS

Women, Voices, and Words

Letter to the Reader

By Anusha Salaam

Dear reader,

I understand that the world is not my confessional and yet I don't think I can sufficiently apologise for the kind of woman I am becoming. Dear reader, kindly be gentle with me. I may startle you with some analyses, or bore you with my lack of objectivity. But treat this letter as nothing more than a lament. I offer no justifications. Every great man has had something to say about women. Most of them have cursed our pens and ambition and today as I write this, tired and vulnerable as I am, I find myself scouring the stereotypes for some truth.

I am now 22 years old and about to graduate soon. I have lived a moderate life of an undergrad. I have had my strange episodes of fury, bouts of melancholy, and fundamental existentialism. While Some have eyed me for my unchecked ambition, others have scrutinised my silence. Reader, I make no attempts to distinguish myself from you. I am equally languished, uncertain, deprived, famished, and enraged—all at once. Now more than ever. I have felt the same sense of rush and excitement at transformative texts. I assume one does find that ravenous excitement, a seething obsession in one thing or another in this feisty stage of our lives. They tell me it has turned them into lovers. What others have found in union, I have found in art, and life of the mind seems incompatible with the life of unions. My deliberate isolation in a world seeking love and 'counterparts' makes me a puritan for some. At times I feel like a martyr, at others, a pious woman, who always finds herself in some or the other contemplative practice, although I have found no worthy reason to justify this holy sacrifice.

There are more shortcomings to my isolation. Relationships have not been my forte for quite long, and like all solitary beings, I tacitly look for acceptance. I have had a penchant for banned literature —one I've never confessed before, for fear of being misjudged. I think too highly of Nabokov to admit him in feminist circles. I also admit I hadn't read enough women writers through two years of my undergrad for being a noisy advocate of the female sensibility. A killjoy on occasion.

Reader, perhaps by now you trust my legitimacy. I carry my heart on my sleeve, my passions on a platter, and not many people hate me. I suppose fiction has taught me to live by the truth I believe in. And yet, today as I stand on the edge of empiricism and rationality, I wonder if my beliefs have amounted to anything. Have I spent too much time looming over these dreadful paperbacks that I now feel incapacitated with these so called "realities" that stain my youth? Dear reader, you must not get me

wrong. These books have taught me lessons on living, these writers, on life. They have revealed to me the vile and the sublime. And yet, as dearly as I hold them, I see the world around me speaking a different language altogether—one of disdain and sheer nihilism, acceptance, and accommodation. One that calls for being saturated with mundanity while still daring to chase happiness. To hate rebellion and dream of better times. To strive, but only do so without an atom of hope. What a paradox, dear reader, do I find myself entangled in! It has become unfathomable.

I have realised, now that university is ending, that there must be, even in the world beyond but four categories of people, regardless of the time one finds herself in—the ones who seek questions alone, the ones who only chase answers, those who juggle both and lastly, the ones who give up their quests and ultimately look for none. Perhaps this is what they say growing up is about—a partial death, giving up on life. They have warned us about a gigantic mechanical apparatus, one that feeds off human joy, that converts people into marketable products to the others who fall prey to another similar machinery. The one that depletes you of every atom of honest hope for change. One that holds the banner of "another cog in the wheel". All of us might lose our pens here. The questions you must have, but finite, the world seems to tell us. Answers you must look for, but within appropriateness. There is no time for you to look for both and hence, lastly, it is wiser to give up on them entirely. Reader, this is where we trade our elaborate verses for the essentialist tongue. The language of monotony and dreaded reality, the one they had warned us about. And there has

been enough history to warn me that my story is not and will not be a different one. It will be daring for me to say that I shall not acquiesce and prove right the female protagonists from Victorian novels. With only dissent in my veins and sharp truths for a tongue. But that, dear reader, is no longer fashionable. We now only believe in equivocal silence and sugar-coated fascism. We humans have learnt the craft to make hell bearable. A dump yard can be pleasant if you know only where to look. We have built but monumental narratives through art and today, we can justify almost anything. We take delight in saturating our senses till we lose our abilities to distinguish human from subhuman, free from the enslaved. It is stupefying to witness even if stifling to live in.

But It's too early for my pen, too early for such statements, dear reader. This puritan sacrifice of isolation is here too early. I only have enough words, far little experience. I don't know the world beyond my own, or the ones I've interpreted from afar. I can only offer you with soliloquies. There is plenty that I have not witnessed. But what if, dear reader, have I known ink for the blood in my veins? What will account for this separation? Do I peel myself off, layer by layer, to truly get rid of what has grown on me, inseparable? To reach some boundary of what is read and what is lived? I suppose, I shall reach my roots only to lose myself in the process. Like a flower that withers, slowly but surely. But I have martyred plenty such certain selves before I stood in front of this mirror. I had been quite certain even then, the impermanence of self, and I have lived despite. I can carefully assume, most of us have and probably will. Human life, despite toxic contradictions, is surprisingly resilient. Just as Hope is. Even blood clots. Foreign implants still make us lead life like before. Life can be an Everyman's paradise and a fascist's hell even if it is to switch sides, one day to the next. Not linear, but circadian.

And haven't we already transgressed the boundaries between fiction and reality in these three years? Where does one end and the other begin? These have not been easy questions to answer. But even the apparent contrasts of blue of the sky and red of the sun, conflate at a sunset and such is life, it only grows into something unsurmised. Perhaps I shall be the woman I had imagined, perhaps I will dodge the essentialist vocabulary, and there will be time just like in Eliot's monologues. Moments I can hold on to and times I take pride in witnessing. For now, as a young woman of 22, I can only lament. Perhaps women are whiny and do little more than crib and complain. Do consider these uncouth allegations, dear reader. But beyond that, remember my intimate words to you as a dear helpless friend.

Farewell.

ART & FICTION

COMIC STRIP

Created & Illustrated by Shafin Hayat

SHORT STORY

ASHES TO ASHES

By Hamia Jawed

Winter was almost over, which was surprising as much of the human race of our clime expected her to overstay her welcome, or rather, they hoped she would. But as my partner always says, what is hope if not a beggar? (*Hope is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul/and sings the tune without the words/and never stops at all.*) I had just returned from Hamza's place. I want to say house/home instead of 'place' but none of us have neither houses nor homes in this weird city that did accept us, but also left us to our own devices, *khair*, more on miss Delhi later. She walked a kilometre out of her place to the main road of Zakir Nagar to receive me. Though I failed to notice as I stood with my back to *Pahalwan Ji's* crowd eager to enjoy as many piping hot gulab jamuns as they could before either the summer's heat or Ramadan's hunger robs them of this small pleasure. She chided me for not informing her sooner of my arrival, though I minded neither her concern nor the waiting. There was a lengthy and desperate struggle of where and what to eat, but time, my mistress as it was, was not on our side. The first shop our eyes fell on became our saviour, which was particularly odd as Zakir Nagar must have more than a hundred shops in such close vicinity that it becomes an Olympian task to differentiate one from the other, or to navigate them. Once our carts were full and pockets empty (when aren't they) we walked through the lane with our jeans held up to our ankles as someone had, yet again, forgotten to switch off their motor, though the people here were used to such instances.

The guard of Hamza's place was missing, and we climbed the flight of stairs to her room. Her roommate was busy managing to make something out of turnips, and I, who had never heard nor thought of such a thing, was highly sceptical. We sneaked off to her roof for some privacy to smoke in peace. In our little minds this idea was impeccable, but what we failed to consider was that this was Zakir Nagar, one of the most populated areas of Okhla. The adjoining roof boasted a splendid view of our hiding spot, and among the voyeurs was a little child, and exactly the audience you can't help but miss when lending a helping hand to your own ruin. We hid behind a wall comforted by the logic most ostriches use: if we can't see them, they can't see us either. I stood on the edge as this was Hamza's place after all and she could not risk being seen. Besides, what had I to lose? The sky was surprisingly full of stars that night. The company was far sweeter.

As we descended, the cigarettes were immediately forgotten as the entire building was filled with the aroma of something delicious. My earlier scepticism soon turned to dust as the mystery unfurled. Hamza's roommate was successful in her efforts, and the turnip curry turned out beautifully. She wanted us to taste it, but the ash on our fingertips had to be washed away, and soon, lest we intended to incur the wrath of one of the

many aunties who lived there. Hamza asked me for dinner, and I wanted to stay. But I had promises to keep. And these are not the areas one would feel particularly safe past 10 o'clock in the night. Hamza had a lot on her mind that day, concerning things I won't disclose. She had already figured out the best course of action, and it was almost exactly what I would have done (see, this is why I love her so much.) Adulthood had made a fool out of us all, but as Hamza says, how long can you blame something or someone for how your life turned out. At the end of the day your life is in your hands, to mold as you see fit. No matter how much we want to shirk this burden.

I wanted to find this maturity disgusting, wanted to be wild and free, and mean to people who were mean to me. I wanted to scream and sob and tear my heart and eyes and hair and hands out. I wanted to be a girl again. Alas, I had no time for this ancient grief in this ancient city. I had to attend classes, had to complete my readings, return books to the library, work through the night for my internship, had to figure out what to have for dinner and lunch and dinner and lunch and dinner and lunch forever and forever and forever till at last nothing but worms that feed on me in the grave would know the taste and finally come somewhat close to discovering earthly pleasures, though I did hope it would not incite hubris in them.

The rise up Dhalan was blessedly uneventful, or maybe the reason I failed to notice anything worthwhile was because I was too caught up in my own head. Visits to Hamza often had this effect on me. She had had many wretched experiences, and she did not buckle under their weight. wanted to be that strong. There is a certain kind of intimacy in drawing strength from her while also making room for her pain in my heart. To show each other our most damning parts and love despite the ruin.

The boy driving the rickshaw wanted to ascertain himself a man, and thus was being overtly prideful and sleazy, as was the norm. I paid no mind to his attempts at manliness. The HR at work was calling me concerning some issue or the other. It was about time to log in for work though I did not want to in the least. Umrao Jan peeked at me from the copy I borrowed from the library as I opened my tote to take out my keys. I cursed myself as my gaze fell at the mistakenly stolen artefact. There, nestled between discarded receipts and old tissues, laid Hamza's beloved Marlboro lighter.

پھر سے مالقات کا بہانہ مل گیا۔

(The number of hours we have together is actually not so large. Please linger near the door uncomfortably instead of just leaving. Please forget your scarf in my life and come back later for it.)

LEXICON 2025

LEXICON REPORT

Hiba Muneer

English Literary Association (ELA), Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, organised the annual fest 'Lexicon '25' on the 23rd & 24th of April, 2025. The theme for the year was 'Voicing the Untold'; a call to listen to unheard voices from the margins and to restructure existing epistemic orders. The theme came with a task of visibilising the subaltern voices and bringing forth the unheard narratives of the oppressed—individuals and communities pushed to the peripheries of power, history and language. In celebrating over a century of Jamia Millia Islamia's dedication to justice, inclusivity, and education, this year's fest is a timely examination of how language can be harnessed to reclaim both identity and history.

The Chief Guest, Mr. Ranjit Hoskote, delivered the inaugural address, dwelling upon our task as writers, readers and translators in the present world where exists an urgent need for a radical reorientation of ethics. He asserted that the ascendencies we thought were done away with, are making a toxic revival. The address ended with an investigation into how translation can be a mode of voicing the untold; how there is a need to dismantle the default terminologies within the field. Head of Department Prof. Mukesh Ranjan welcomed the chief guest and inaugurated the fest.

The address was followed by a Panel Discussion on "Reclaiming Muslim Narratives in Contemporary Indian Literatures", with Ghazala Wahab, Parvati Sharma, Zeyad Masroor Khan and Mujibur Rahman. The panel was moderated by Dr. Mohammed Afzal (Assistant Professor, Department of English). The discussion primarily focused upon authorial choices in Muslim narratives, the politics of nomenclature, the access to the publishing industry and public reception. The panel demonstrated the importance of personal experiences in historiography and how writing becomes an act of powerful reclamation.

The Slam Poetry competition, judged by Dr. Saba Mahamood Bashir, provided a space for young poets across universities to perform their pieces on language, identity, alternate histories and resistance. Day 1 concluded with a literary talk, "From Footnotes to Front Pages: Elevating Invisible Lives Through Fiction," by Mridula Koshy, who was in conversation with Ammar Ahmad and Baadesaba Usmani. The session revolved around the importance

of reading and how it aids more than writing in the development of a nuanced worldview amongst young adults. According to Koshy, literature is created by all of us together, not just by people who write it. It is created by the faculty and how they teach it. She also remarked that it is created by administrators in terms of what they allow, and it is created by readers in terms of the meaning they make out of it.

Day 2 started off with a Lit Quiz, an inter-university quiz competition that saw quizzers racking their brains over literature and popular culture references. The second event for the day was an Open Mic, a platform for expression through any form of art: dance, music, poetry, and other performative arts. The event was judged by Dr. Sanobar Hussaini and Dr. Saba Mahamood Bashir. A true reminder that art can be found in every corner, in known and unknown forms, even in times that seem like a nightmare.

The penultimate event of Day 2 was a literary talk by Ajay Navaria, who was in conversation with Vinay Rajoria on "Shabd, Sangharsh & Samvedna: His Literature, Dalit Discourse & Caste Consciousness". The renowned author talked about how the existence of postcolonial India cannot be fully accounted for without taking recourse to caste. He criticised the glaring lack of Dalit literature in curricula across universities in the country and how this is a tendency to look past the ways in which experiences take shape on the basis of caste identity. The conversation also delved into the definitions of Dalit literature; about who can write about Dalit experiences, and what the relationship is between caste and the English language.

The event concluded with the Valedictory Address of Lexicon '25, delivered by Githa Hariharan, where she discussed the need to adopt and accept new perspectives and to hear storytellers from the peripheries. She argued against the notion of a singular perspective we tend to adopt about everything that surrounds us, and this can only happen if we have more narratives coming in, to create new knowledge systems.

The ceremony transitioned into the prize distribution segment for the winners of all offline and online competitions held as a part of the fest. The event concluded with Dr. Shuby Abidi, ELA Advisor, delivering the Vote of Thanks to all guests, judges, participants and organisers that made Lexicon'25 a success.

The success of Lexicon '25 is due to the steadfast commitment of the English Literary Association, headed by Prof. Mukesh Ranjan, along with our ELA Advisor, Dr. Shuby Abidi, and the hard-working volunteers from the English Department, whose relentless contributions guaranteed the event's successful execution.

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