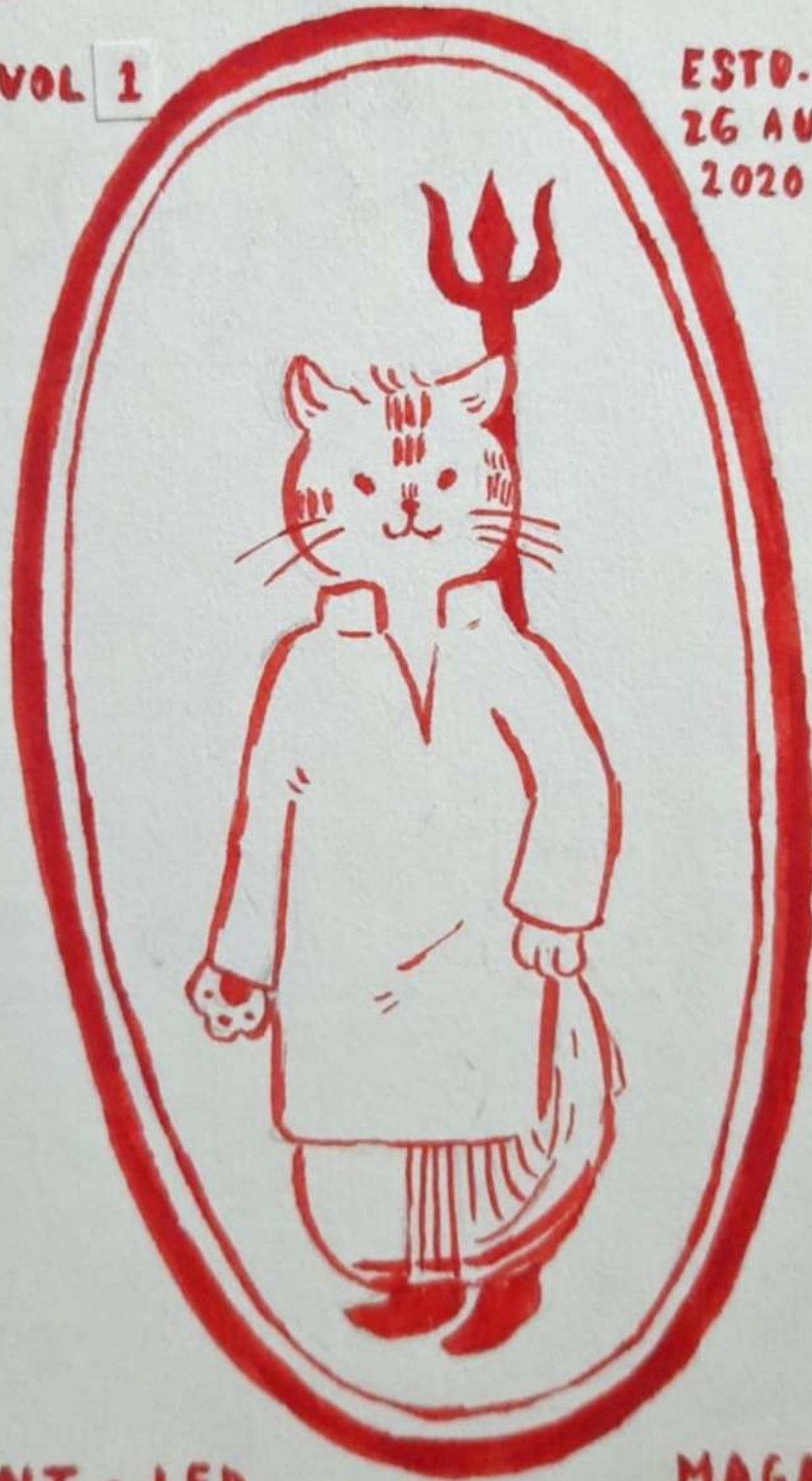


MONOGRAPH

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STUDENT - LED

MAGAZINE

★ ONE YEAR ANNIVERSARY ★

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Editor's Note

Anuraag Das Sarma

It is with great pleasure that we present to you Monograph Year II Vol. I. Over the past year Monograph has grown into a loving community of artists, writers and poets and we honestly cannot thank you enough. As editors, and more importantly curators, our job has us go through many many submissions- sifting through amazingly written texts and visually enticing art pieces. These submissions have in many ways not only influenced and helped us grow as artists but it has also helped us understand this bustling scene of young writers. We didn't start Monograph with a certain goal, it was and still can be defined as "art for art's sake." You cannot trace this magazine's origins to lofty ideals of art for and by students. Though it has, over time, taken that sort of a stance.

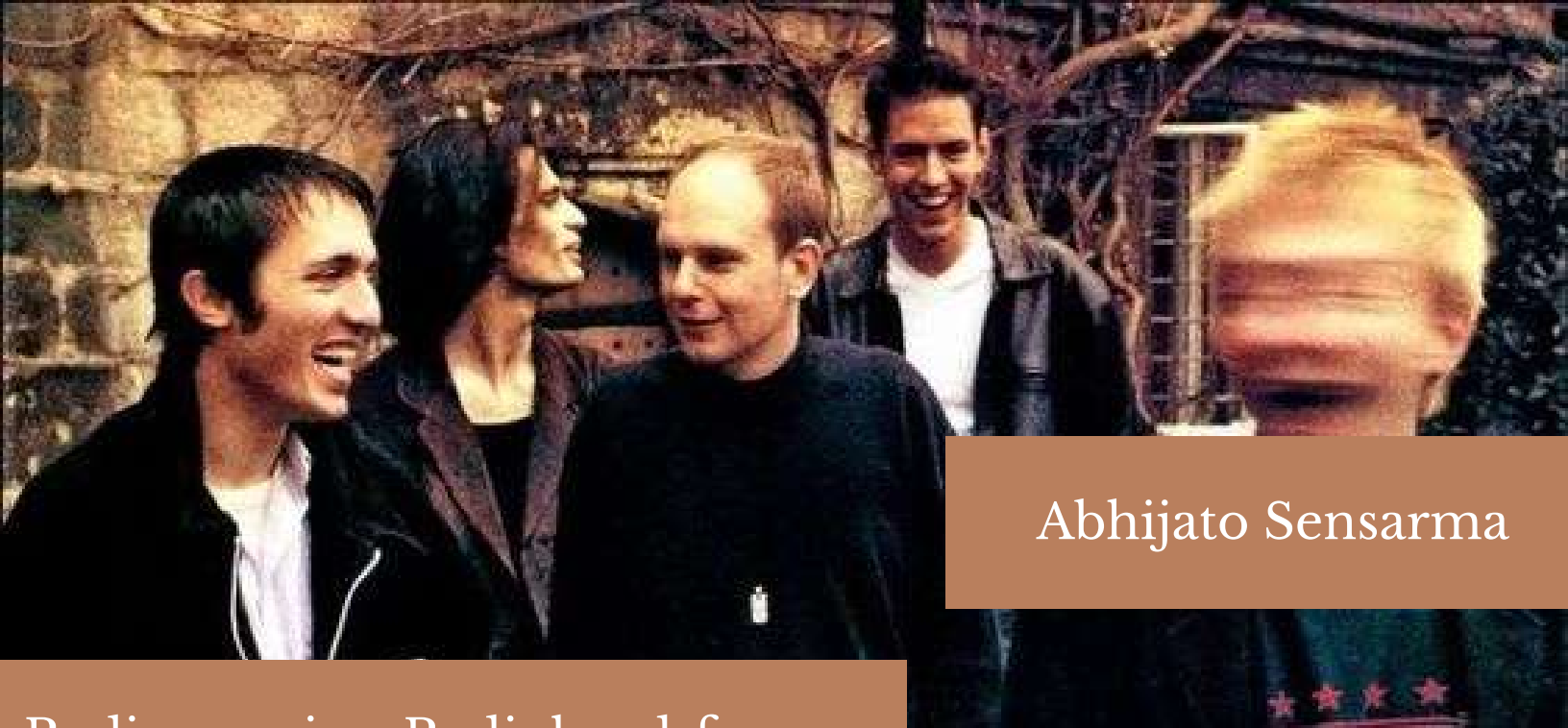




I remember a friend of mine, who shall remain unnamed, once asked me, “Why are you doing this, what is the point of it all?” Angered by this person’s idiotic question, I simply replied, complete with a fake sense of superiority, “To bring about the second Bengal Renaissance”. I did mean this as a joke. I’m not suitable for this job-bringing around a renaissance in Bengali Popular Art and what have you, that’s not for me. That’s a job for you, the few who read the magazine, and the even fewer who will actually read this little note.

Let Monograph be your canvas and me your ardent admirer.





Abhijato Sensarma

Rediscovering Radiohead from a room in Joka

If all art is propaganda, one's ought to consume the most convincing doctrine.

My entry into the world of 'high art' has been via pop culture rather than any left-of-field hardcover my mother placed in my hands while I was an infant. Thus, I've read Stephen King, heard One Direction, and watched *The Mentalist* for most of my childhood before moving on to what people consider to be the 'classics'.

The latter genre is all-encompassing, bringing together anything under the sun as long as it fulfils the parameters of popular academia – it must be prominent, elegant, and innovative while dealing with universal themes. But the difficulty of these works often renders them inaccessible to the idler minds.

One might even argue that great art is meant to stimulate the intellectual depths of a reader's mind rather than allowing the work's deceptively simplistic style to linger around its edges.



Either way, the true worth of a story is understood through its universality as it somehow survives past the ages. As the layers of immediate social contexts are shed from the story, they become even more relevant to our current circumstances.

One of the most famous examples of this phenomenon is Franz Kafka – a published author who remained unappreciated for as long as he was alive. It was only with the increase in the alienation of the modern worker within capitalist structures that his works were posthumously regarded to be so influential that their tone and themes were awarded their own sub-genre: that which is ‘Kafkaesque’.

If one can resonate with the same themes of alienation through their music, you wouldn’t expect them to be especially prominent in the mainstream. After all, pop music has often been associated with providing glamour to all things consisting of life – be it about the durability of love, as a source of extending nationalism in the public conscience or relaying the beauty of life as we know it.



It is only fitting then that ‘rock’s last great band’ – to quote a significant handful of music critics – has a song called “The National Anthem” that seems to be straight out of a dystopian movie. Even as various films have indeed incorporated Radiohead’s friendlier tunes into their soundtracks, they remain the most paradoxical mainstream act of the 21st century.

I first discovered them in middle school on VH1, a channel that didn’t always broadcast the most appropriate visuals for the viewing of an Indian kid my age, and thus had to be viewed only when my mother was away from home. I once stumbled upon a documentary that was airing a music video central to its premise. The song was called “Lotus Flower”. Within it, an unassuming man put on an idiosyncratic dance performance while adhering to no aesthetics other than his own song’s.

While I couldn’t be sure the man himself was capable of producing such a dreamy tune –I had never heard anything of this sort in my life – the connection between him and the rhythms he danced to indicate a bond that transcended the screen of the viewer, the definition of genres, and the expectations one would have about profit-making music in the era of streaming services.





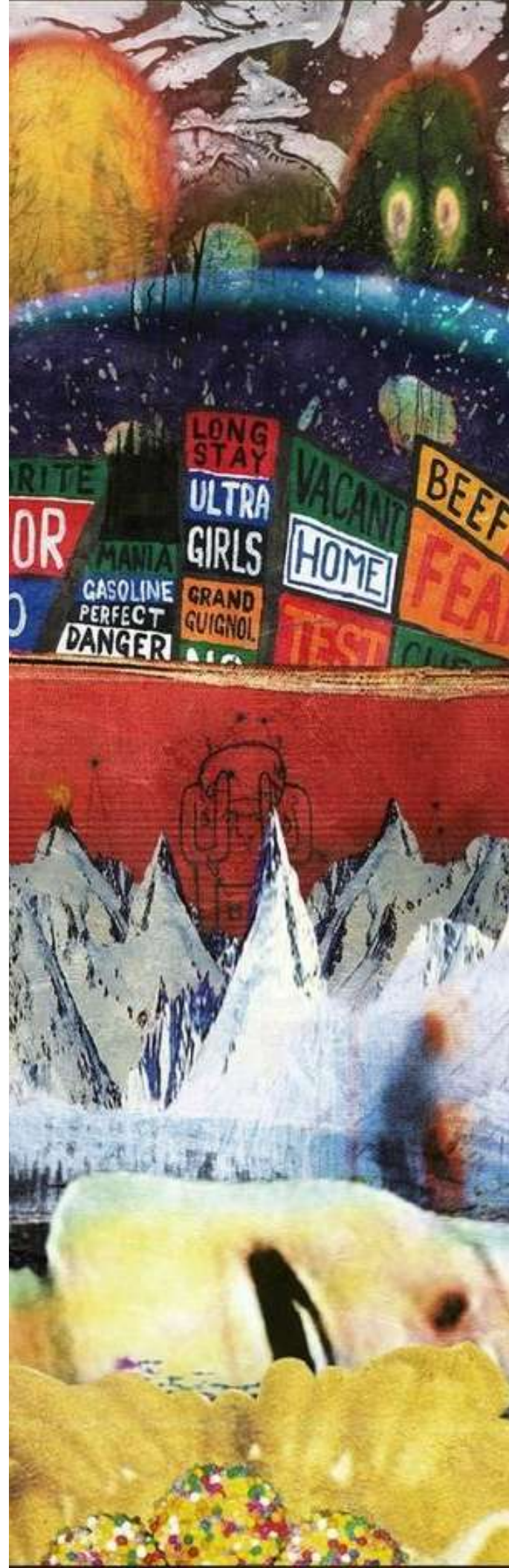
I would get to know in the days to come that the man with the sprawling hair and a drooping right eyebrow was none other than the frontman of Radiohead, Thom Yorke. I was captivated enough by the music to sit through the rest of the documentary. When an interviewee in the piece claimed the band's early records had been a massive influence on Coldplay, which was slowly turning out to be my favourite musical act around that time, I had to look up Radiohead's music on my PC as well.

It would take a few more years for the latter band to supersede the latter into the same reputation in my eyes. Listening to them always felt like reading a 'classic'. I enjoyed what little I understood of it at my young age, but my evolving taste made me fully appreciate the nuance of a band like theirs much later. Till then, I had been stuck inside the reliable four-chord progressions that filled the popscape of that era.

By most accounts, Radiohead remains the most well-regarded rock band in contemporary history. Yet, they preach a form of 'high art' they have been afforded the luxury of exploring in greater depth than most other musicians because of their success with the third album, *OK Computer*, which was released in 1997 and instantly hailed as a prescient masterpiece about the anxieties experienced by the first truly global 'digital era'.

It also launched them into stardom that would have lasted a lifetime had they continued to tread down the same path with songs following a similar template to their previous effort. Instead, they stashed themselves into reclusiveness as a direct consequence of Thom Yorke's own anxiety arising from the pressures of stardom and touring. What they came out with next would be described across quarters to be the most polarising record of the year, titled Kid A. It featured almost no guitars in its tracks, despite the instrument laying the foundations for the OK Computer's best moments, which was claimed to have 'saved rock music' just a few years prior.

Kia A remains the most significant release in their discography. Borrowing from electronica, jazz, and classical music, this ten-track record altered the path rock musicians would undertake once more. When I first listened to the full album on YouTube before the days of the platform's strictest copyright restrictions, I had no idea about the context behind the album. I simply knew them to be the band headed by the crazy dancing vocalist.





But I did not experience any of the puzzlement even the most empathetic critics did when they first listened to the record back in the days when physical copies were the only way to undertake an elaborate exercise like listening to unreleased music.

The songs were familiar and alien to me at the first time when I first listened to them. The idiosyncratic moves Yorke performed to turn into an Internet meme closer to the time of my teenage years had sowed its initial presence in the public conscience with these flairs of instrumentations with no precedence in mainstream rock at the turn of the millennia. Radiohead defied musical structure when they came up with Kid A. It was revolutionary enough to simultaneously set them into place for other bands to develop over the next few years as well.

While the album tends to be too lost in its ideas at certain times, its influence on both me and listeners around the world is what sets it into place as perhaps the most important piece of “high art” in modern history. It also made me realise something equally significant – no line can be practically drawn between sophisticated works of genius and a poorly executed jumble of ideas thrown into a mess of a track. After all, Kid A can seem to be both based on one’s pre-existing tastes and preferences.

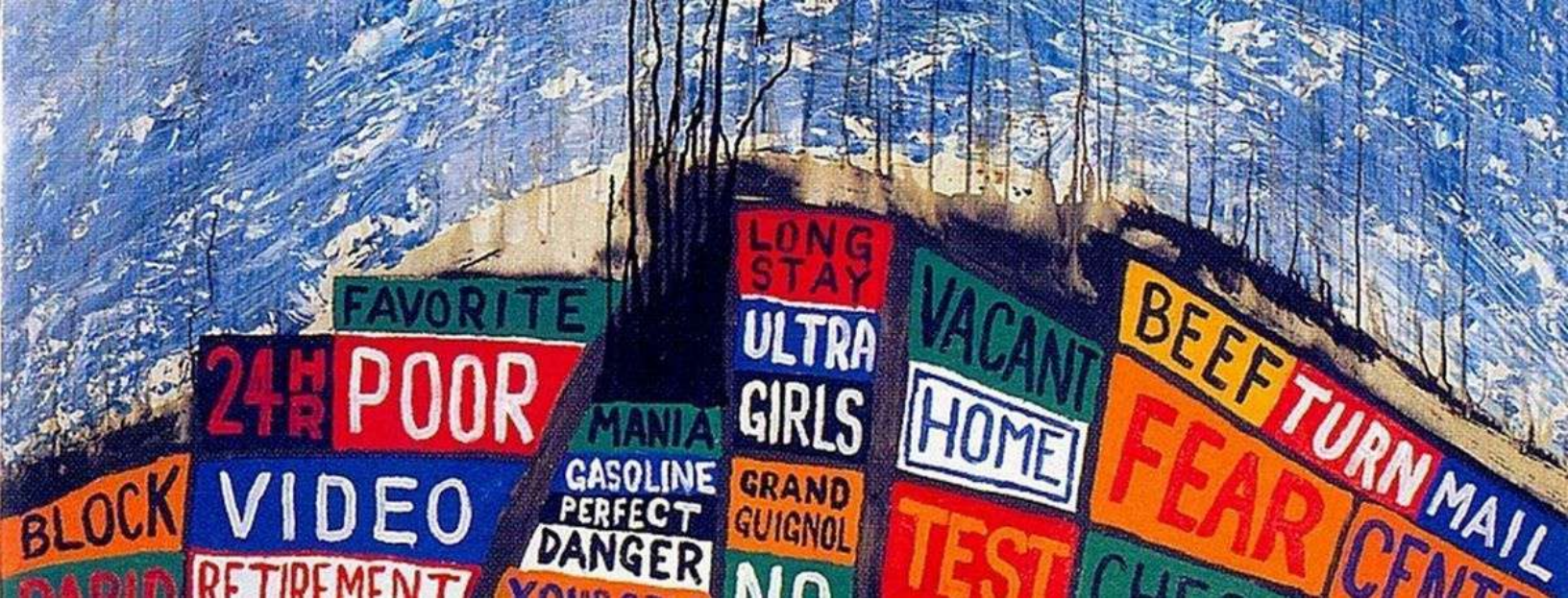
The “non-meaning” of its lyrics is another reason why the album confounds listeners while also endearing itself to them at the same time. In the aftermath of the panic attacks and creative drought that left Thom Yorke feeling at an all-time low, he intentionally veered away from using meaningful lyrics in his tracks. This did not detract from the experience. It simply added to the intended alienation of its tracks, allowing the idle listener to simply be bewildered by it, and enabling the more dedicated ones to weave their context around the songs’ narratives.



Radiohead's other works have often been deeply political at times. Their sixth record *Hail to the Thief* is a delayed reaction to the Bush era and the "War on Terror". It endears through the ages with a universal appeal in its musicality that Yorke himself has admitted must counter the ageing of protest lyrics themselves. Even if one doesn't understand the referential phrases included in the song to act as a critique of the times, it operates similar to *Kid A*'s architecture. There is something for everyone, and enough for even the most unwitting listener to fall in love with the band if it is one they are willing to fall in love with.

Radiohead famously shied away from the spotlight that had been granted to them by their fame and record label by being so experimental their bosses were afraid to release the finished product to the public. Almost as a natural progression of events, they are now an independent act that has shunned the responsibility of being mainstream artists multiple times, most notably when they self-released their seventh studio album *In Rainbows* via a "pay-as-you-please" release structure.





Perhaps, it's more prudent to direct the uninitiated towards the 'easier' records they have made to allow them to experience the beauty of the band's discography in the least confounding way.

But one must wonder whether this remains a plausible goal for the fans of a band that has continuously redefined what it wants to be so that it can remain its best possible version every time they release new music.

Their latest effort, *A Moon Shaped Pool*, is their ninth addition to their studio album discography. It is hauntingly beautiful, with its lyrics and arrangements so conventionally orchestral that it allows us to remember the band can be magical realists when they want to. Yorke wrote this album against the backdrop of his separation from his long-time partner.

Its themes consequently deal with the effects of loss and haunting beauty it can often inscribe onto our worldview in the aftermath of such an incident.

Six years on since its release, it acts as an antidote to the isolation induced in most people by the COVID-19 pandemic, similar to how every album of theirs since *OK Computer* has stood the test of time by having something meaningful to say about the different eras of globalisation.



Thom Yorke is an older man now and his music is wiser for it. But as fate would have it, I all but forgot about Radiohead for most of the lockdown period as I sifted through my twelfth grade's curriculum with much less enthusiasm than the peak of my adolescent naivety.

I instead turned my attention to expanding my preferred genres of music. The likes of Ali Sethi and Billie Eilish to occupy different spots on the same Spotify playlist. My quest for diversity allowed me to explore different, unexplored horizons that brought more meaning to my life at a time when my preconceived notions about the stability of life were being sucked away by an invisible virus.

It is also fitting that as I have shifted to a new place of residence in Joka and started my first semester at college through an online medium, the tabs I kept open in the background to accompany the research for my assignments have led me down a familiar path in my search for comfort through music.

The YouTube algorithm decided it was time for me to listen to Kid A once more a few weeks ago. So, I did.





Nothing about the tracks' unique flourishes (or the lack thereof) has changed over the years. The upcoming triple album release on Kid A's 20th anniversary is sure to delight me furthermore, not in the least because it is slated to include twelve previously unreleased tracks from their recording sessions of the era. But the personal context I added to their existing creations as I sifted through their entire discography once more over the past weeks reminded me how 'classic' works of art are ought to be – beautiful, challenging, yet endearingly universal to the charitable listener.

And that is where Radiohead tugs at your heartstrings with greater agility than any other rock band of this era. Every time you listen to them with all of your soul, they awaken a part of it you didn't even know existed.

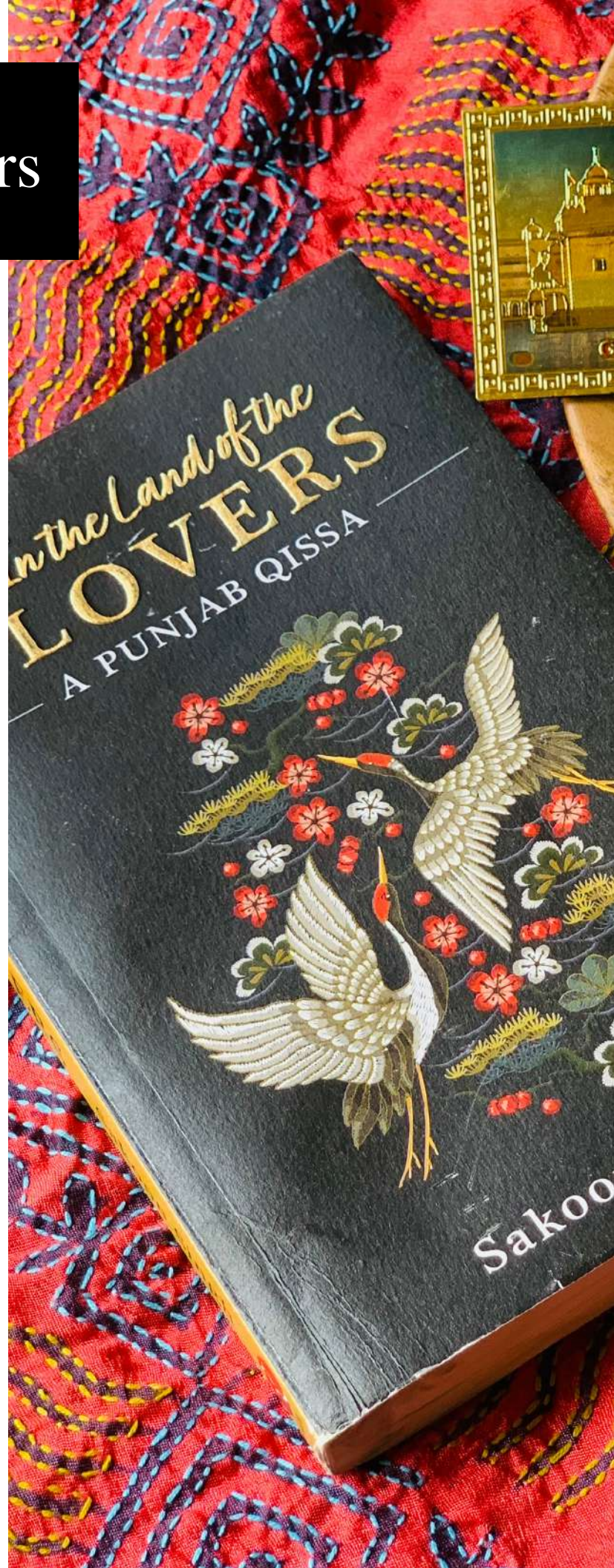


In The Land Of Lovers

Kinjal Chandra

Bebe Nanaki, the often-unappreciated sister of the glorious holy leader of Sikhism – Guru Nanak, is the one who Nanaki, the protagonist of ‘In the Land of the Lovers’ is named after. Orphaned at a tender age, Nanaki grows with her maternal grandparents in an old world, mossbacked neighbourhood of Chandigarh, a city consistently filling the fissures of the past with the contemporary.

Nanaki is free-spirited, imaginative, and lovelorn. She carries the baggage of an inconceivable childhood trauma alongside a toxic teenage relationship yet is exceptional in her career as an art professor at a renowned Chandigarh institution. Her family was unfortunate enough to bear the devastating brunt of the Partition of 1947, an event so horrifying that it continues to make her Beeji shudder.





Sakoon Singh deserves all the credit for being splendidly loyal to her milieu. The book is unabashedly Punjabi, with frequent Punjabi phrases, mentions of Phulkari, Gurudwaras, Paths, Langars and the inevitable Lassi. It was really refreshing to read a bona fide Punjabi tale for the first time, an ethnicity I was totally unacquainted with.

‘In the Land of the Lovers’ starts off slow but picks up pace as soon as it starts unravelling the underlying issues it raises commentary on. It doesn’t shy away from addressing burning subjects of female infanticide, drug abuse, nepotism, and plagiarism. The last few chapters lighten the gravity of the narrative with a blossoming, well executed romance.

The only chink its armour is the lack of conversations between the characters in the book. Characters make a lasting impact with their conversations, seldom from tedious descriptions. The circumlocutory writing style does hamper the impact of this well-reasoned, coherent narrative. That aside, it is a fascinating amalgamation of intersecting anecdotes that encompass love, longing and loss.

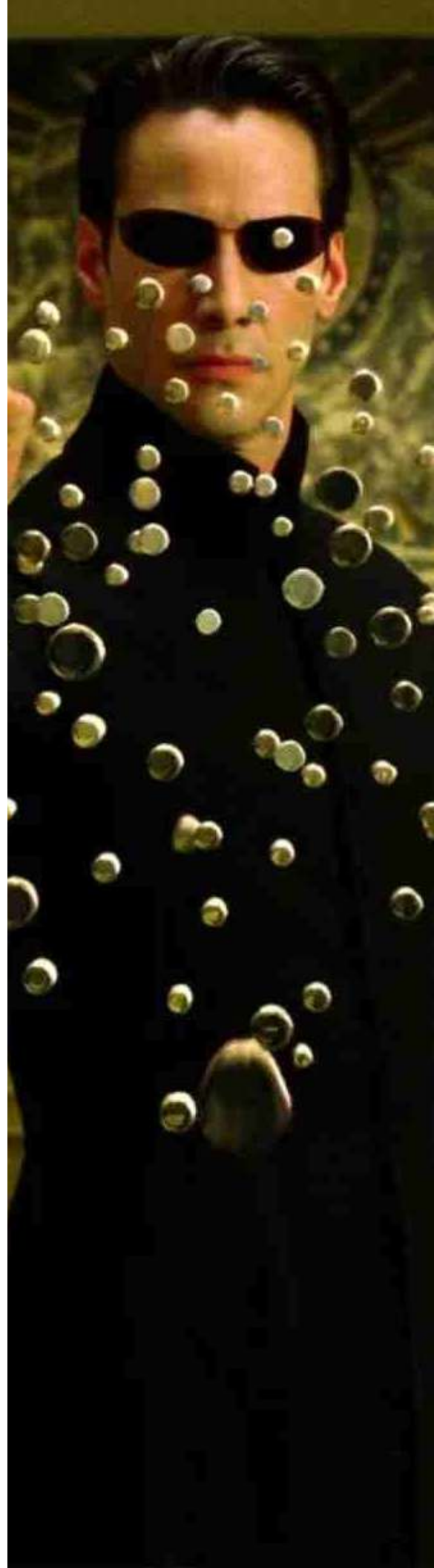


The Matrix Saga in 2021

Subhankar Banerjee

Directed by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski, The Matrix is the first movie in the franchise released in 1999. To say that it was monumental for the film industry would be undermining its worth. It paved the path for ground-breaking action, sci-fi worlds and the Keanu Reeves era. But what does it mean in 2021?

After the release of the trailer of Matrix Resurrections, I was finally intrigued enough to watch the trilogy. In the past, I had watched snippets of it and have heard a little about the idea but had never actually watched it. Realising all its celebrated glory, I decided to not watch the trailer before I have watched the trilogy, so I dove in to the The Matrix experience for the very first time.





The Matrix follows the life of Neo (A.K.A Thomas Anderson), who is supposed to be an employee at a software company but is also a hacker by night. But soon we find out that his reality, his life, is nothing but a programmed lie. With the help of Trinity and Morpheus, two dubious characters, Neo finds out that everything he knew about the world was a lie. He isn't living in 20th century but is right now in a pod, surviving far into the future, acting as an energy source to machines like several other humans. With the help of Morpheus, and by choosing the Red pill instead of the Blue one, Neo faces the reality and is unplugged from this simulation created by the machines. The first film in the franchise follows his self-discovery as the One, a messiah who will help end the war between the machines and the awake humans. He discovers his powers inside the Matrix and how with his help, the surviving human resistance of Zion, can end the war between humans and machines.

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Today, the question does present itself, in a world where people have all the information they need, what are they actually doing with it. Are we serving any purpose with all these data at our finger's reach?

The Matrix may also serve as the allegory to the creation of fictitious self or the real self on the internet. A place where your imagination is the limit if you take the Red pill and realise that everything around you is fake (like Neo), a simulation, no matter how real it may seem. This liberation of the self is synonymous to internet now. We all login to this large platform, which is a world in itself and turn into ourselves without any filter often. This brings out the bad in most people rather than the good. We often encounter abuse, hatred and all the other moral vices of the society in the form of comments.



We face the reality of absurd opinions (according to us) people possess ranging from eating habits like pineapple on pizza to their general outlook on the social stratum like the justifications of the prevailing caste system in the country or misogyny.

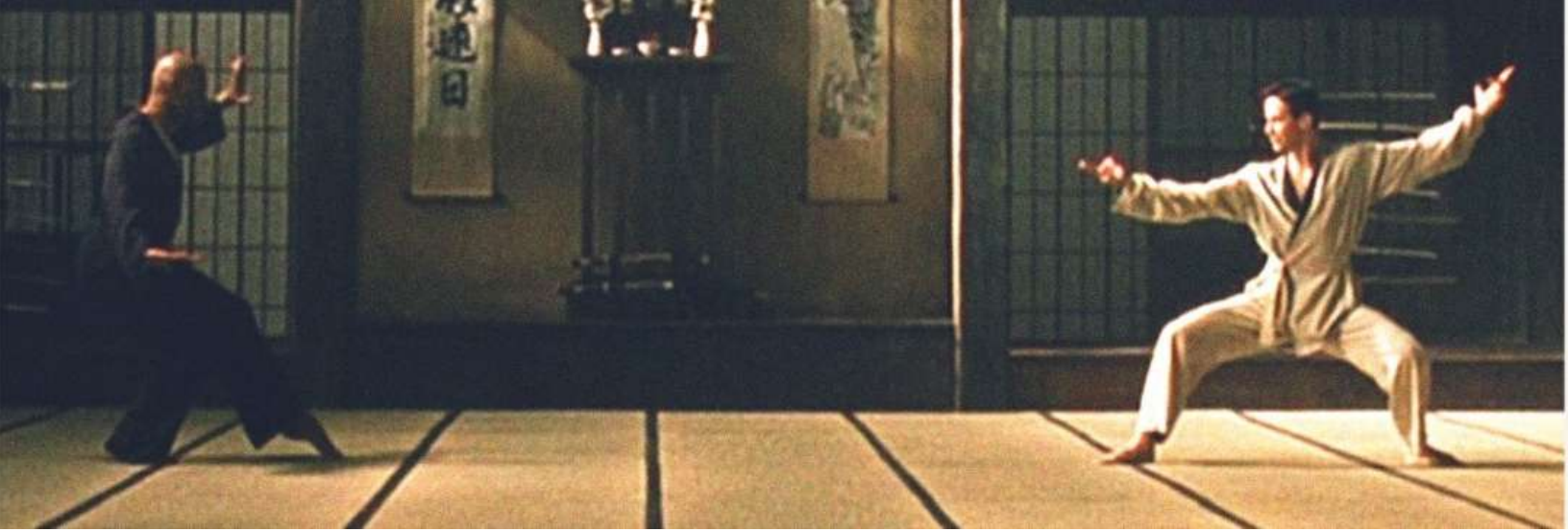
Or you could go on ignoring these problematic signs and go on living, being numb in both the realities by taking the Blue pill. You won't think about these people and be ignorant to their existence and live your life as normal as you can. How beautiful would that be? To live in a world where evil in your opinion, doesn't exist. But that cannot be any further from the truth because no matter in how many ways we censor the 'bad' from the matrix, it will still thrive because of our ignorance. This truth is sought after by the horrific scene where Neo wakes up and sees the life he has actually been living. Inside a pod, submerged in amniotic fluid (like that as portrayed in Neon Genesis Evangelion, as the fluid in which the pilots of the EVA submerge themselves while driving it) like a foetus, coddled and submissive to the 'mother'. He struggles to stand the first time in his life, looks at the horrific reality of the world, with dark skies and rumbling of countless machines around him.

It is interesting how the humans in the real world are vague reflections of what they are in the matrix. They wear ragged clothes instead of leather jackets and pants, they move anxiously and cautiously and always have a scared, existential-crisis permeating mood.

Whereas in the matrix, they are confident, carefree, death-defying heroes who behave nothing short of superheroes. The truth about the Matrix being a simulation sets them free of concern even though it does have real world consequences. Because if you die in the Matrix you will die in the real world as your mind will convince your body of its death. Much like the internet where if we make a fool of ourselves, our peers don't forget to remind it to us in the real world at every chance they get. The beauty of The Matrix is in the endless allegories it has to the relationship between humans and technology.

We live in the simulated world quite often now. From open world video games like Grand Theft Auto, to multiplayer action games like Call of Duty, we incessantly engage ourselves assuming a different name (username) and persona in games, being violent and courageous beyond measure because, well it's a simulation. And on social media platforms, there are countless number of individuals who assume a different name just to scam and trouble people by abuses and threats. For which we have a whole new field of law, Cyber crime which came into existence in the last decade. The Matrix quite accurately portrayed what it means to realise the truth about living in simulations and the freedom it gives to us to shed our social skins.





People act different on the internet than in the real life and day by day it is getting harder to bridge these two personalities. The violent gamer who abuses a lot on voice chat can easily be the most quiet and obedient person in the classroom.

Although, in the third film of the franchise, Matrix Revolutions, we see Neo bridging that gap by controlling the Sentinels by his own might in the real world and being closer to his superhero persona in the Matrix. Which brings up the question, if being in the simulated reality helps us realise our true potential by letting off our fear of failure and being judged. Today, when we log in to Facebook or Instagram, we are faced with people presenting a curated version of their lives. Their outings, events and relationships, everything seems to be documented on the Matrix but only the good part often. What we see is quite literally what they want us to see and perceive. Then again there are anomalies who show the bad part of their life to actually work through it. These people often inspire and motivate us to see that other people are also suffering and they are also getting through their waves of life. But the nagging question always persists, is it real? As just like the Matrix, everything on the internet is questionable.



Choice, is yet another important part of Matrix. Through the movies, for countless times we are reminded by different characters that choice is the most important part of our lives as they quite literally dictate our future. The choice between the pills might just be the zeitgeist allegory of 21st century. To wake up and face the harsh world or to slumber in submission and enjoy the delight through sensations will be the most consistent idea in the years to come. In the first movie, Cypher was a character who regretted taking the Blue pill and betrayed his peers siding with the machines to go back to the machine city. He preferred to be subdued and be a battery for the machine but enjoy a good life in his dream instead of living the ruthless reality. He quite literally says, if the sensations are as real as it could be then what difference does its material existence make? If it exists in your mind, it exists for you. Which is a common phenomena in the Japanese society where we see youngsters who prefer to spend their lives on their computers in their apartments instead of facing the real world. They feel more alive in the Matrix than they do in the physical world.

The dystopia presents the character of Architect, who is supposed to be the mastermind A. I. behind the Matrix. He explains how Neo has been there before, to free the mankind and end the war as this has happened as many as five times before.



He is a practical individual who believes in the supremacy of the logic and thus evades common minded humans by his mathematical supremacy. In the end though, even he is helpless in the face of the choices made by humans (and Programs like Smith and Oracle). Which shows, it doesn't matter who controls our internet, our choices can still make a difference in whichever reality we exist.

In conclusion, all there is to say is that The Matrix Saga was ahead of its time and paved the way for New Age Cinema. From Japanese animation to Bollywood movies, everywhere we see its influence may it be the action sequences or the idea itself. To say the least, it will be watched for many decades to come by many more generations. The release of Matrix Resurrections is not far away and I cannot wait like many others, to see how it has evolved in today's world according to the creators.

And as always, the choice is always yours.

"You take the Blue Pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the Red Pill - you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the Rabbit Hole goes."

- Morpheus, The Matrix (1999)



Achebe on Conrad

Nuzhat Khan

Reflecting on Chinua Achebe's Critique of the Cult Classic Heart of Darkness

Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" is a searing essay combining elements from literary criticism and scholarship that examines Europe's discovery and representation of Africa. The creative input of Achebe's essay lies in its profundity of analyzing layers of Conrad's novella, Heart of Darkness. He advanced new and highly influential propositions about Conrad's method of thinking whilst reformulating the entire debate around the novella. Only because Conrad's novel now falls into the section of "permanent literature", Achebe argues, does not mean we should abstain from questioning it closely or criticizing the author.

An esteemed Nigerian novelist and professor, Chinua Achebe looked with a fresh perspective at a venerated classic set in Africa but where Africans feature merely as onlookers or worse, as indistinct "savages". Repudiating the prevalent portrayal of Joseph Conrad as a celebrated liberal hero, protected from vital criticism due to his anti-imperialist views, Achebe redefined the Polish-English writer as a "thoroughgoing racist" in such a reasoned and persuasive analysis that it entirely changed the manner in which his discipline approached Conrad and all the works set in places of racial conflict.



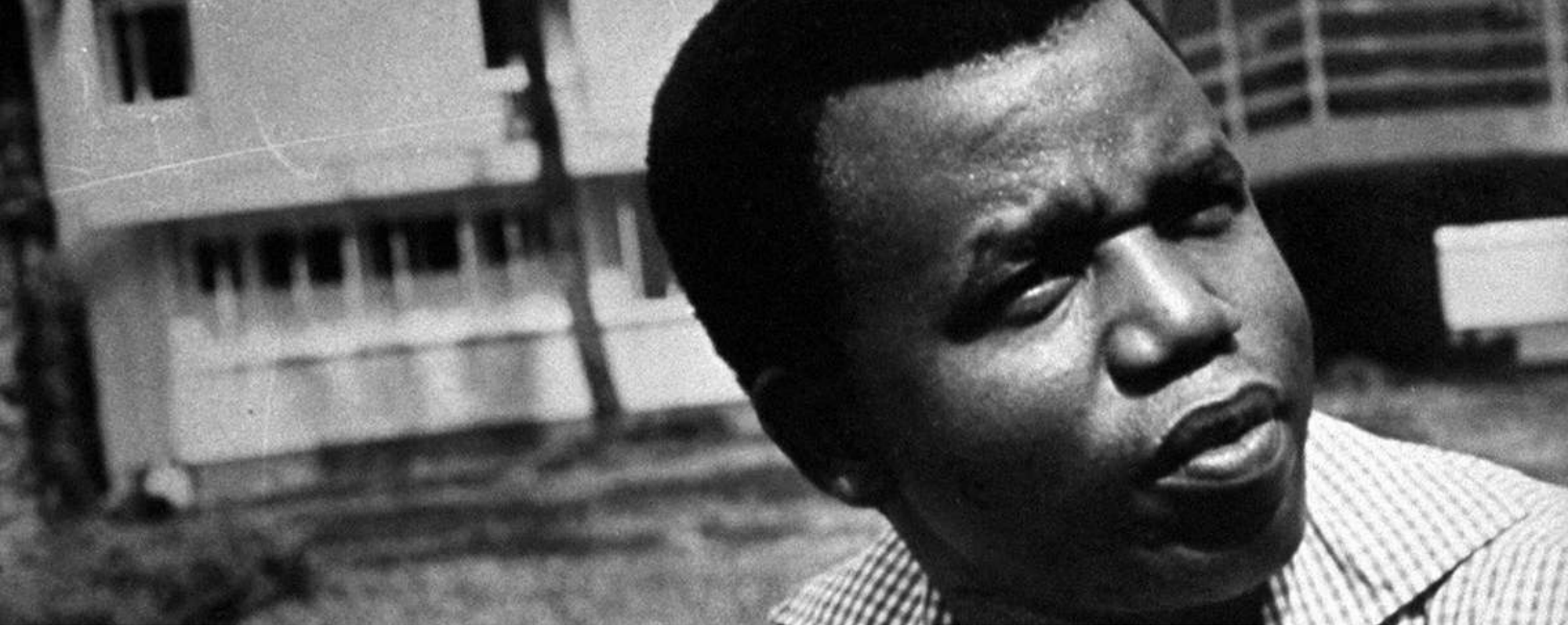
Heart of Darkness is considered one of the greatest works of English Literature. The novella was lauded during the early years of its release, and was, contrary to Achebe's views, established as the foundational text on colonialism.

However, Achebe's essay criticizing it for being racist drastically changed that in the year 1977. In his critique, Achebe contends the celebration of Conrad's Heart of Darkness. He iterates that a novel which "depersonalizes a portion of human race" cannot be called a great work of art.

Achebe's opinion reflects in this quote from the essay: "... white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked."

Once being told by a Conrad student in Scotland that Africa is only a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz, Achebe responds, "Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?"





Achebe steadily decodes the concept of White hegemony over the colonized. Conrad's picture of Africa riddled with a "white man's burden" proliferated the racist, xenophobic Western ideas of any land which is not White – a textbook example of Western arrogance. Achebe notes that Conrad is obsessed with skin color as he writes about a brief description given by Conrad of a Black man: A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms...

The age long western cultural hegemony as elaborated in Edward W. Said's monumental work "Orientalism" is not only a political phenomenon, but also a part of popular culture and literature.

The primary focus of Achebe's criticism is how "Conrad thinks everything should be in their right place and how tragedy happens when fine Europeans travel into the heart of darkness. Cannibals are fine people when they are in their place. Africans are described as savages with wild eyes using an unrefined language consisting of grunts and short phrases sounding like a violent babble. Africa is shown as the other world with bestiality contrasting the intelligence and refinement of Europe."

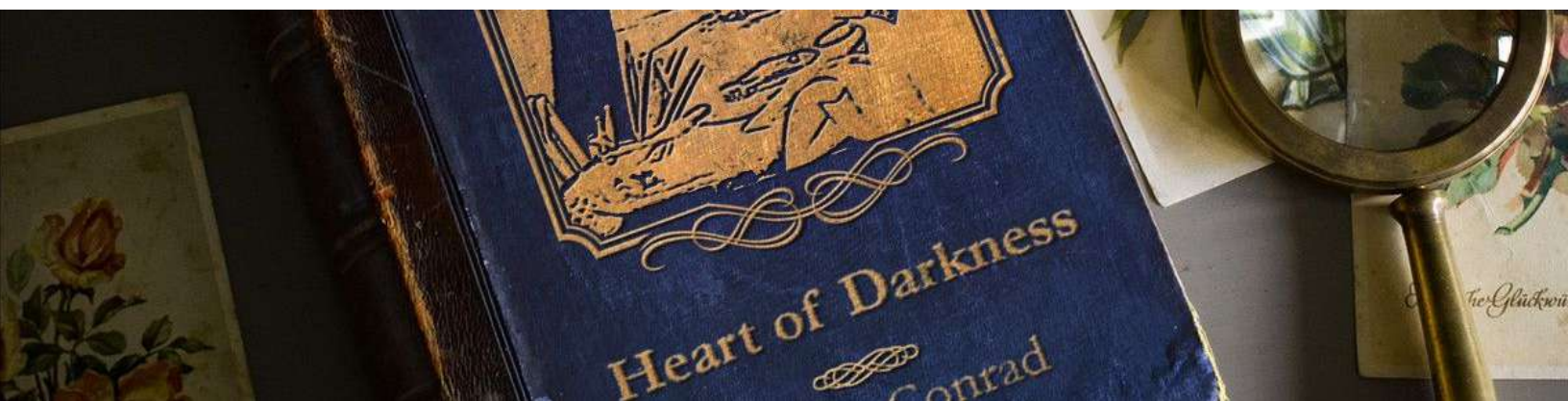


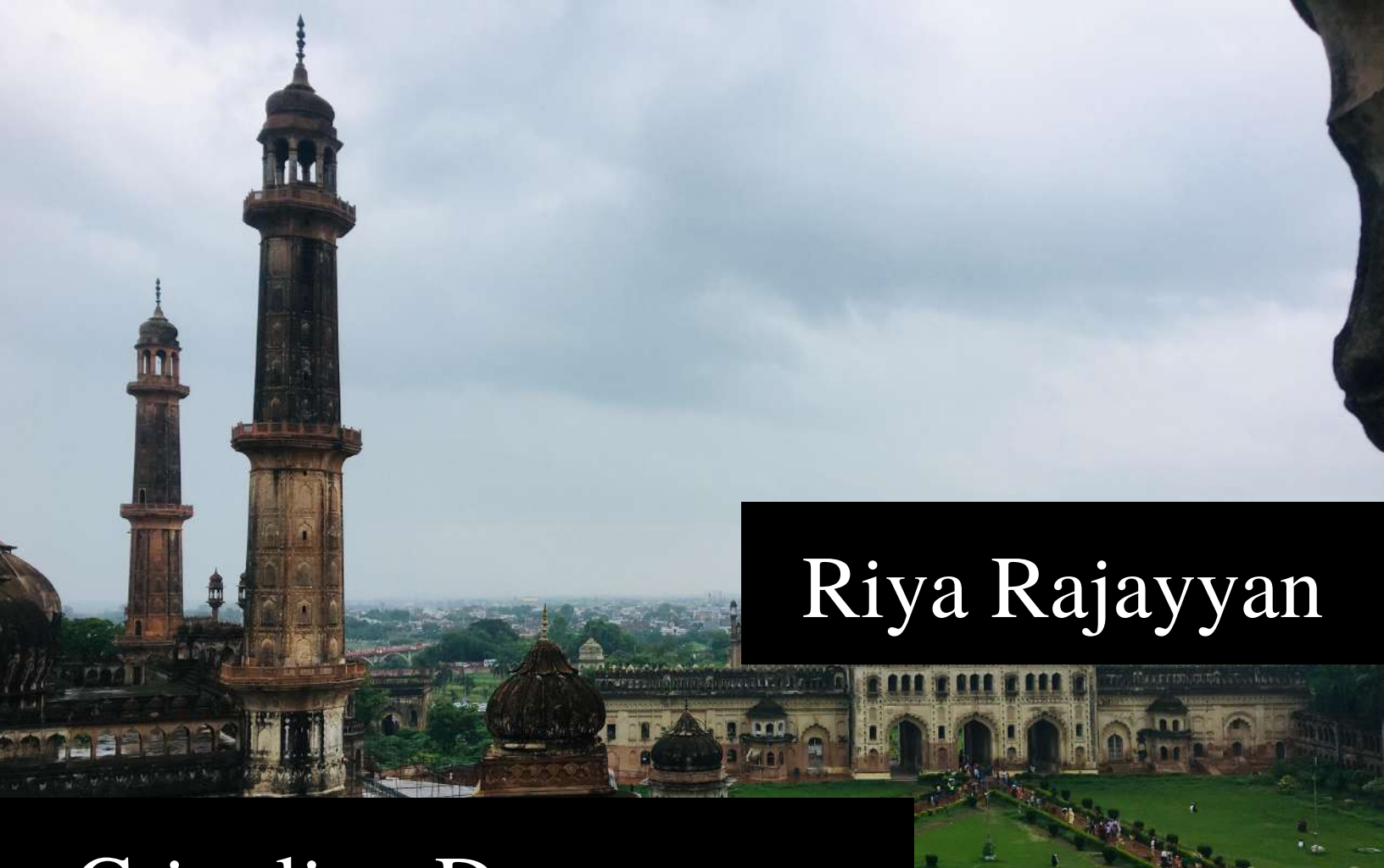
Achebe wants the Western psychology which has “set Africa up as a foil to Europe” to be changed. As a writer, he considers his responsibility to liberate African identity from imperial ambitions, which will be constricted when texts like *Heart of Darkness* continue to be studied as a benevolence done by a European writer on the “savage” race.

Achebe wants to create a formidable, true, strong African identity, which he is unable to see in Conrad’s work. He says that Conrad portrays Africa as ‘the other world’, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization”, which Achebe relates to Conrad’s “residue of antipathy to black people”.

Chinua Achebe claims that the book is certainly not just an expression of its time or the elaboration of a fictional setup, in which “a white man’s fear of entering the unknown” is truthfully represented, but it is only a normalized, and massively accepted slander against Africans. This shows the patronizing western attitude, where the “other” cannot have so much as a benefit of doubt that they can think, speak and understand for themselves, and most importantly are capable of ruling themselves. Achebe is rightfully concerned; Africans have constantly struggled to free themselves as a mute subject from the prison of colonial discourse.

For Achebe, reading Conrad meant reentering the prison. *Heart of Darkness* is a novel in which Europeans consistently supervise all aspects of African society, overtly or covertly emphasizing on the importance of West’s “civilizing mission.”





Riya Rajayyan

Crippling Democracy

India speaks of heritage draped in *chikankari* fabrics with pearls and rubies adorning her skin, her eyes sparkle and yet are drowning in a sea of finding what she truly is, but she has a voice and is independent.

One morning she wears a मांग टीका of democracy as someone reciting Kamala Das is faintly heard in the background. India stops to listen to what is being recited, she gets lost in a daze and this time is draped in blue *Kanchipuram*. She adjusts the मांग टीका before another distraction awaits.

In the afternoon she hums *Yeh Kya Hua* and her voice is as poignant as the sun shining upon her caramel skin.

The sound of her पायल synchronizes with her singing and she reads a newspaper with a headline, 'An incessant war between freedom and literature.' Are the artists, journalists, writers dying? Do we hear their screams loud enough, or are we selectively deaf? But India adores her art, her cinnamon eyes falling upon the *Bandhani* dupatta she wore.

The evening is important, a महफ़िल is to take place. India is in her bedroom of golden yellow lights and she stands in front of a mirror trying to put on her कमर बन्ध, she ties her hair and adds a गजरा to it, the scent immediately travelling across her room. Works of *Gulbadan Begum* and *Mehr-un-Nisa* are to be heard today and India smiles to herself. She remembers to carry her *Pashmina* shawl before leaving.

But people are talking about deaths, the reality of secularism, femicides, and heinous crimes her ears cannot bear listening to.





India's morals taught her that everyone is equal, and she knows that everyone is to be seen beyond their gender, caste and religion. But why is this still happening? Her hands hurriedly rush towards her forehead, where is the मांग टीका ? It lies under her feet, crippling. The jewels scattered on the floor, almost like the lives of people who are tormented for the same reasons she cannot fathom or bear listening to.

Tears fall down her eyes, she knows what it means. She also knows that this was what she never wished for, and if there is any hope left it is still in her people. She wraps the fallen jewels in the Pashmina shawl just like the people who made the silk, their voices suffocating and in despair. She walks back towards her room, her door shut and her sobs heard far and beyond.





Nimrat Kaur Chahal

Room

You sit down and make a list. There is you, your hands and the quill. There is the 350gsm paper you purchased from itsy bitsy. A miniature hourglass with black sand in the far left corner, a *peace on earth* Snow Globe in the far right. Beneath it are papers describing the time earth was least peaceful. If you drop your quill right this instant and it falls at a hundred and thirty five degrees forward, it would land in the milk saucer for you black Cheshire Cat.

If you sweep your left hand outward in frustration over your poor typography skills, the statue of your white Cheshire cat will fall. It will not break.

But perhaps, if the gravitational forces and velocities and other such things irrelevant to art come into play, your black Cheshire cat might break its spine. If you divide your table into 9 sections like a board of tic-tac-toe, the left and right blocks of the center row remain empty, so your lover can leave over and whisper that they burned the lasagna, so you can go out for dimsums in your pajamas.

Be careful now, the pyjamas have blue boxes of three shades. The dimsum place has seats with blue boxes in three shades. You do not want to disappear. Perhaps you go to the Thai place instead, for larb and sticky rice pudding. But back to the room.

Your laughter can ring out across the room as you spin around in your chair. And as it goes faster you can see more clearly the armchair by the window piled high with yesterday's clean sheets.





You have been sleeping on a bare mattress. If you straighten out your legs, the tips of your toes stretch out like a ballet dancer, there is no hope for the tall lamp shade so delicately painted. It would come crashing down like the goddess of rage, burning everything in its path.

The fireplace is cold. A mere architectural attraction than a source for heat and light. But if you reach your hand up there and grope around in the dark, you will come across a treasure of trinkets. Be careful now, the spiders have a home there too. Delicate webs to rest in and feisty insects to feed on. Charms of bats and witches' brooms with glass beads hanging on to a silver chain. Then attached to a bronze choker are charms of a boot, a timepiece, a question mark, a milkshake and a stapler.



They are silver, but you can't tell because they are tarnished. There is a single drop earring, shaped like a snake coiled around a staff. Tangled up are three bracelets on black chords with each a pineapple, a pair of sunglasses and a beach umbrella. You do not know how to end this now. The walls are bare and the objects listed. Perhaps you will go take a walk.

Yes, you will take a walk.





Durjoy Choudhury

956, 5th Ave. Pt. 2

Mar. 25, 2020. 11:52pm (IST)

Nafeez,

Haven't heard from you, for quite long. How have you been? I have been hearing dreadful things from my friends in New York. Most of them are doctors and are exposed to a lot more panic than the rest of the city. But I believe that the situation out there is very precarious.

Our government has recently called for a national lockdown and there was this episode of banging of utensils, for the doctors. It's getting weirder here with all the tomfoolery. Plus, there is a lot of panic that is being spread, along with a lot of misinformation. You know the media out here; they are literally creating a circus out of each and everything.

How have you been? Have you written anything, lately? Do send it to me, if you feel like it,

Stay safe.

Oishi.

Mar. 25, 2020. 02:35 pm (EST)

Oishi,

Nice to hear from you. I thought, I had crossed some lines that I shouldn't have crossed. But now, it feels alright.

The situation here is very bad. There are already, over fifty thousand cases, in the US. Over a thousand deaths. My building has been sealed off. They are treating it as a containment zone. There are over twenty cases, from my building alone. My supplies would last for a couple of days, at the most and I do not know what I'll do after that. I have almost run out of smokes and alcohol, so that is a pretty depressing issue as well. I spoke to my parents, in the morning. They have wired me some money, but the situation is that, money cannot rescue me from this hell-hole. I regret not going back to Calcutta. Even, Abbu accepted the faux pas. But this is the situation that I must carry on in, hoping that I won't get infected.

I haven't really written anything, lately. It's just that I don't feel like it. Keep me updated, about the situation there.

Stay safe.

Nafeez.

P.S. – I hope you guys have proper PPEs, by now. It's very dangerous otherwise.

Mar. 29, 2020. 10:25pm (IST)

Nafeez,

I know, it's not as serious as it is in New York, but things are getting hot, in here, especially due to the lack of protective gears. We are working twelve-thirteen hours straight, with hardly any rest or food. And on top of that, some of my juniors were given raincoats, to save themselves from the contamination. They have literally made a joke out of this pandemic situation. Every day seems like a suicide mission, that I am going to. I had to move into the hostel of our medical college. The neighbours created a ruckus, at my place, with me staying there. It is strange how people, here, are treating doctors, nurses and other medical staff as probable threats. But it's okay, I guess. I have chosen this profession with all the baggage that it brings along.

I was seeing this short clip, a little while ago, made by this doctor from New York. She was all terrified and distressed. I hope you are well stocked-up. Things will turn, more difficult, in the near future, it seems.

Will be waiting for your reply.

Stay safe.

Oishi.



Mar. 29, 2020. 01:30 pm (EST)

Oishi,

A couple of days back, a full medical team came into our building and tested everyone. Got the report, today morning and guess what? I am the only negative case, in the whole building. There are fourteen floors with over twenty-five apartments with at least a hundred people, out here, and I am the only negative case. It's fortunate as well as outrightly unfortunate, to be in such a situation. The active cases and the deaths are skyrocketing here, in New York.

The bright side of it is that, my janitor helped me with a bag and a very long rope. So, every time I need something, I just give him a call and pay him an extra fifty dollars to buy me, the stuff that I need. He puts it all, in the bag, and I pull it up. Today, he got me a couple of pouches of rolling tobacco along with some filter and rolling paper, instead of the cigarettes that I asked him to buy. In reply, he said that this will last longer. He also got me a bottle of Tennessee whiskey and some cheese and chocolates.

Let's just hope that the curve flattens, soon enough. In Calcutta and in New York. I heard about the 'thali' incident. It is really sad, how these leaders have turned this pandemic into a circus. It just proves that they do not have the minimum respect towards the lives of their citizens. I don't know, when people would understand the graveness of the situation.

Take care of yourself.

Stay safe.

Nafeez.

P.S. – I wrote a new song. I wouldn't send it to you, however. It would make you, more depressed



Mar. 30, 2020. 12:15 am (IST)

Nafeez,

I would love to hear it. If you don't want to send me the song, at least, send me the lyrics. I want to read it.

Please.

Oishi.

Mar. 29, 2020. 02:51 pm (EST)

Oishi,

“Look right through me, do you know the man you see?

The noise, the violence, the little child.

My shadow's burning, my skies are bloody red

My rocket-ship, and the innocence.

Look right through me, through the dark obscurity
The pain, the medicine, the lunatic
My skin's corroding, or is it just inside my head?
My secret curse, the dissonance.

And step by step, it creeps in through the dark
My scarlet screams through my veins
The loneliness and the chaos in my head
I should leave, I should leave my past behind.

Look right through me, through the long and winding maze
The lights, the vanity, the desolate
Through faded visions, through dreams of broken walls
My sugar-coat and my arrogance.”

Goodnight.

Nafeez.

Mar. 30, 2020. 12:27 am (IST)

Nafeez,

I don't know whether I can comprehend the pain that you're going through, but all I can understand is that, it is a lot of pain that you are housing within yourself, and that you have a gift.

There will be brighter days, for you.

Love.

Oishi.

Mar. 31, 2020. 01:15 am (EST)

Oishi,

I have been spending my days, mostly in the balcony. There are so many things that I can see from up here. I have been seeing some birds that I didn't know existed in New York. They keep flocking into Central Park. The streets are mostly empty, except the passing ambulances and the police vehicles. There has been a couple of deaths, in my building. It apparently happened a couple of days back. Willian, the janitor's son, told me today. He got me some supplies, in the morning. He's putting in, for his father's absence. I guess, staying home is not an option, for everyone. Things are getting weirder, with every passing moment. I keep thinking of so many things.

There was this weird feeling that I had, in the evening. I was standing in the balcony, watching over the New York skyline, and it suddenly happened to me that I just wanted to take a jump. Like a leap of faith. Now, don't get me wrong, I am not suicidal. I know that I would die and it would be a very painful death and I do not want to do that. But I just felt like, you know. I think they have a term for it. I tried googling it but maybe I was getting the keywords wrong. But yeah, these things are playing in my head and I am not enjoying it anymore.

I just want this pandemic to end, now. Only, if I had the power to control it, somehow.



But yes, the night over New York is so beautiful, with the setting crescent. There is an uncanny peace, over the city, and it is dreadful. I fear, the worst is yet to come, and we are not prepared to face it.

The whiskey has gotten me all sleepy. I think I'll hit the sack.

Peace.

Nafeez.

Mar. 31, 2020. 11:45 pm. (IST)

Nafeez,

I just came back to my room. It was a long and hectic day, for me. A lot of fresh patients were brought in, all positive cases. And to make things worse, the administration has been absolutely uncooperative. I am regretting every moment of it, my decision to become a doctor and everything around me. I am losing my temper, more often and it's eating me, from inside. I just hope that it stops, somehow.

The lockdown here has been extended for a couple of more weeks. But for us, it is getting busier, by the day.

Hope you're not taking any rash decisions. It is very important to stay strong, in this crisis. Why don't you write a song about it? About how you feel.

I was thinking about this, while walking back to my hostel. Like, our conversations. It's like those old days, when people used to have pen-friends, who never met each other, from distant lands. They had nothing to expect out of one another, no commitments, no baggage. I guess, it must have been beautiful – the bond that they shared with one another.

Stay safe,

Oishi.

Apr. 03, 2020. 07:09 pm (EST)

Oishi,

I had been trying to get my thoughts together, the last few days, but it was terrible. I wish I had not listened to my father. I am just locked in my room and have been devoid of any human touch, for more than a couple of weeks now. Everything is wearing me down, the silence, the loneliness. I just want to go home.

They have set up a field hospital in Central Park, where most of the medical staff are either social workers or are still students, with a very few supervising doctors. And the ambulances keep on blaring through the streets, all night long. I can't sleep at night. I keep staring outside the window, in a dark room with passing ambulances, on the street. I count them every night, till I fall asleep. Yesterday. I counted till 53 and the day before, it was 58. It's like a dead city now. I just want to get out of it.

But I am feeling much better today. I woke up to a video call from my band members. I guess, they figured that I have been lonely, all along. Then, I made myself a fancy breakfast. There was someone playing the piano, across the street or in my building. It sounded heavenly. I sat there, at the balcony, for a very long time, even after the piano stopped. I wish, I had a piano in my apartment.





When I was a kid, I inherited my father's stamp collection. He had a lot of pen-friends, from the States, from Soviet Russia, from Australia and a lot of other countries. And he had a lot of stamps. These friends, of his, used to send him small mementos and postcards and other things, at times. He learnt elementary French from a guy in Paris, over these letters, and I guess he taught him a little Urdu and Bangla, in return. I remember, when we went to Moscow, in 1998, he met up with his pen-friend from there. They talked for hours and he invited us, to his place, for dinner. It was like, they had known each other, for ages. I was very fascinated, by the whole concept. To me, it was like talking into the mirror where you do not have any inhibitions to speak what's in your mind. Because the chances of you meeting that person is minimal. To some extent, we have a similar case, but I would say, it is very different as well, because we have already met before, in school, and there is an image of you, in my head and vice versa.

In the afternoon, as I was sitting in the balcony and listening to the piano, I saw a strange sight. There were three vultures flying over Manhattan. And they kept on circling, for a very long time and then they suddenly flew away. I thought to myself, what if they were the three witches from Macbeth?

Take care of yourself. These are ominous times.

Nafeez.

Apr. 07, 2020. 05:16 pm (IST)

Nafeez,

Finally, I took a day off. It is becoming very taxing, for me, out here. It is indeed a very ominous time to live in, but let us not get into that.

I have been reading through the whole thread of mails that we have been sending one another. Now, it just crossed my mind that even though I have never set foot on New York, I think I know a little bit about it now. So, every time I read your mail, it is so refreshing to visualize your side of the story, after the long and tiring day, with all the patients and their family members, the medicine, the groaning, the crying, the deaths, the frustrations. I am getting sick of it now. But I shouldn't complain, these are professional hazards that I will have to deal with. On the other hand, all that you can see through my mails are the insides of a hospital ward.

It's getting too dark.

Stay safe and hold on, a little longer.

Oishi.

Apr. 10, 2020. 08:32 pm (EST)

Oishi,

I have been seeing those vultures every day. Each day, they stay a little longer. Today, they stayed till sunset, circling over the Manhattan, before flying off. And there are just three of them. I was a bit curious and searched about it on the internet. They usually travel in a group of ten to twenty, together. You know what a group of vultures is called? Committee. It's like a 'committee of vultures.' Sounds classy. I think, I am obsessing over this whole vulture thing.

You know, in my religion, they believe that there are several things or events which are ominous. I had heard some of them from my grandmother, when she was alive. I don't know, it's very confusing. What if, there are some basis to these things that have changed versions to become modern day superstitions? What if, those three vultures, who circle the Manhattan, every afternoon, is there for a reason? What if, it is actually a warning call? I get so confused, these days, that I have started questioning my elementary belief system.

Please excuse me. I am just trying to put everything that's there in my head.

Believe me, you guys are the warriors of this era, you are the shield between the disease and the human race.

Stay strong,

Nafeez

Apr. 15, 2020. 10:41 pm (EST)

Oishi,

Haven't heard from you, in a while. The vultures are still circling over the Manhattan, everyday from noon to sunset. There are over thirty thousand people dead, in the US. I think, this is how it ends.

I have been trying to put my thoughts in writing, off late, but I guess, my anxiety is resisting me.

Stay safe,

Nafeez

Apr. 21, 2020. 03:45 am (EST)

Oishi,

“America, see what you have turned yourself into.
Your skies are screaming the death of reason,
Your war machines, your money trails and your scent of paradise
Has been grounded, crushed and obliterated
Into small pieces
That floats unendingly
Through your gutters of disease.

America, your voice reels
With the cries of the hundred million children that you’ve killed
In Afghanistan and in Iraq and in Syria
And all those wars and proxy-wars and the military coups
For your Silicon Valley pimps and your Wall Street stooges.

America, your clocks are ticking your final hour.
Your empty streets with all your majestic stallions
Dead by the sidewalks, reeking of oil.
Your Manhattan skyline, with your setting sun,

Engulfed under the snare of the three ominous vultures.
America, would you repeat the same mistake?
And listen to the oracle of the three witches,
Kill your brothers, maim your friends
And burn your country?

America, you know how it ends.
Listen carefully.
The sound of the celebration of death,
In the silence of early spring.
Listen to the wind,
It whispers your epitaph.
'All the waters of the Atlantic
Cannot cleanse your guilt.
All the perfumes of Arabia
Cannot sweeten your blood-soaked hands'."

I just hope this ends soon.

Peace,

Nafeez

P.S. – The vultures are still there.



Apr. 23, 2020. 09:42 am (IST)

Nafeez,

Apologies for missing all your emails. I read all of them, but I didn't have the opportunity or the energy to send in a reply. I hope you are keeping strong. Trust me, this has to end soon.

Stay safe and keep writing.

Peace.

Oishi.

P.S. – I could feel the love, the anger, the sorrow, in the poem.

Apr. 24, 2020. 03:45 am (EST)

Oishi,

It's three in the morning and the piano is still playing, outside. I wrote something for you.

“The piano spoke softly, through the window by the stairs
The night was drunk on whiskey, you can feel it in the air
The riddles will unfold and the stories shall be told
For you, just for you, my love.

And by the cold moonlight, where the mountains kiss the sky
We shall dance on to the music, of the wind and of the night
The riddles will unfold and the stories shall be told
For you, just for you, my love.



In between the lines of fancy and illusions left behind
Our songs will crossover and they'll slowly intertwine
The riddles will unfold and our stories shall be told
For you, just for you, my love.”

Nafeez

May 01, 2020.11:30 pm (IST)

Nafeez,

Sorry for the late reply. I am flattered. You are really gifted. Things are very difficult, out here.

I'll keep it short.

Hope to hear from you soon.

Love.

Oishi

May 10, 2020. 00:06 am. (IST)

Nafeez,

I hope you're alright. Haven't heard from you, in a while. Do write back.

Take care.

Oishi.

May 15, 2020. 11:34 pm (IST)

Nafeez,

I went through all our mails to check whether I said something that might have offended you. I do not know, why you are not replying. Whatever, stay strong.

Will be waiting for your reply.

Oishi.

May 24, 2020. 09:10 am (IST)

Nafeez,

So, this is how it ends?

Oishi.



Faded



Sneha Baidya

Mornings are extremely pathetic. Wake up, make breakfast, make tiffin for Souvik and his father, plus my additional chores of daily life. I literally have to work at the speed of a bullet train. After Souvik leaves for school, and Souvik's baba leaves for the office, finally, I can catch my breath and relax a bit with my cup of tea.

Today was no different, after they left, I prepared my tea, and headed towards the balcony with the cup of tea. "Uff!" I released a small sigh realizing I had forgotten to pour sugar into my tea. The tea is tasteless today, though I decided not to go back to the kitchen and add some sugar. Sugar isn't good for health, my father passed away due to diabetes. What if he transferred some of his not-so-good genes into me, and I am heading towards diabetes myself? No need to dig my own grave, better please my organs, rather than pleasing a few inches of my tongue.



I leaned forward on my balcony, to see a bunch of college girls heading towards college. All of them chuckling on some joke, I suppose. I couldn't see their faces properly, it's quite difficult from the third floor. Or maybe my eye power has increased, Souvik's baba told me to see an Ophthalmologist last month, but I declined by saying, my eyes were perfectly fine. This time he will definitely be offended, as he gets every time, on my smallest of mistake, demand, or caprice. Seeping my tea, I tried to eavesdrop on them, though it was for no good, as they kept walking away. I took the last sip of my tea, and watch those girls walked away into oblivion.

I returned back to the kitchen, dumped my cup into the sink, sat down on the sofa, and reached for the phone to call Ma. This is the best part of my day, talking to my mother. She has numerous stories to tell, starting with how their neighbor Mr. Chatterjee's daughter is having an affair, to the new recipe of Aloo ka paratha she learned from her friend, to finally bitching about her daughter-in-law (my brother's wife). My mother is the most extroverted person one can ever meet in their entire life. Though the call lasts for around 30 minutes, it feels like hours.

After the call, I did a quick mental scan of all the leftover work I needed to do. Laundry is done, paying the television bill is done, arranging the cupboard, umm, yes! I need to arrange the cupboard today. I headed towards Souvik's bedroom to find his cupboard perfectly clean. maybe he cleaned his own room. My little boy, has grown up, and why won't he, he's already 17 now. It feels like yesterday he came running towards me in teary eyes when he thought he lost his favorite dinosaur toy. Look at my silly little boy now, cleaning his own room, taking care of his own stuff, stacking his books like done in libraries.





Souvik's baba aspires to send him to foreign lands, for higher studies. Though I rejected the idea first, after seeing his own interest, and talent, it would be a waste to not enhance his caliber. Souvik is indeed meticulous, just like his mom used to be. A faint smile flashed across my face, but I didn't let the thought sink in. I erased the 'just like his mom used to be' part and hurried into my bedroom.

I always hate the dull blue walls of my bedroom. Souvik's baba and I had a terrible fight while deciding the colors of the wall. I told him that blue or any other dark gloomy color isn't correct for the bedroom according to Vastu sastra but in vain. He finally persuaded me into painting the walls blue. Who listens to me? No one.

Lately, all that I and Souvik's baba share are sour memories. My mother always used to complain, about my father being cranky all the time. Little did I know that this is the ultimate fate of every marriage. Little did I understand, that all those flowery romance novels I read during my college years, were nothing but a writer's imagination. I tried to paint my sky pink with fantasies, but I nearly forgot, that the sky will always be blue.



Life was so happening back when I was in college. I went to Bethune College, one of the very prestigious girl's colleges in Kolkata. My love for literature drove me to pursue English. It seemed as if I am living my dream life, I loved my subject so much. Even I used to love the long block periods of poetry class, while Rimi, Akhansha, and Mita used to call it "overly dramatic". I loved digging into Emily Dickinson, Virginia Wolf, and Robert Frost. College was so much fun, with my girl's gang by my side, those long hours of college were compensated by our trip to Hatibagan via tram. Oh my, I nearly forgot how much I love tram rides, trams bring out the retro flavor of Kolkata, an exquisite experience. Finally summed up by the Fuchka treat at the end of the trip.

I stormed into the disordered pile of clothes, which I had dumped a few days back after the Laundry boy delivered it to me. All these haphazard sarees and salwar were giving me a headache already. From my childhood itself, I never liked cleaning. After my last maid, Malati was caught red-handed while stealing one of my jamdani sarees, Souvik's baba prohibited the maids from touching the cupboards. This is the only reason I have to do all these myself. Moreover, I am from a wealthy Bengali family, we had several housemaids. Even the housemaids took leaves sometimes, in that case, my mother used to clean my room.

"If the heavens permit, I would live enough to see you married one day, then I will see, who does all these works for you!" my mother used to complain. "Ma, I would marry a very rich family, so rich that I will have more maids than you! I will rule like a queen." I used to giggle while answering. God heard me though, I was married to a much wealthier family than my own. But the wealth was to be measured in penny, not by intricacies of heart.



I was in my final year when Souvik's baba's family came to our house. After returning from college one day, my baba came to me and offered Rosogolla, a famous Bengali dessert. I knew he was bribing me into something because due to my father's diabetes, desserts weren't allowed at my house. Baba might really get to have a reason to celebrate. "You know Mr. Sen? His colleague's friend's brother-in-law's sister's son is in town, they will come tomorrow to meet you." Firstly, it took me a few seconds to establish the family tree, and secondly "Why does someone unknown's son want to meet me?" I said out loud. "Dear, they are searching for a suitable bride..." "No, baba! I don't want to get married now!" I protested to cling on to my dear life. "I know, I know, dear. But what's the harm in meeting them, if you don't like them then we will decline, simple."

Lost in my own thoughts, I pulled out all the sarees from every corner of the cupboard. "If I have to do this, let me complete it totally, so I don't need to clean the cupboard again for the next two months," I said out loud. I started folding the sarees first. My hand worked mechanically folding the sarees precisely and my mind drifted back into my thoughts.





The next day Mr. Sen's colleague's friend's brother-in-law's sister's son, aka Souvik's baba, came to see me. Total four people came to see me, Souvik's baba, my mother-in-law, my father-in-law, and his brother. I was annoyed from the very start, I didn't want to get married so young. I baited myself to get ready in order to eat the delicious food prepared for the guests. After the typical 'wedding conversation', my mother-in-law looked at me and said, "Dear, do you like our son? I don't want to force a marriage on you without your willingness." All the furiousness evaporated by these polite words, I couldn't answer anything. Rest is all history.

Unintentionally, I dropped a yellow packet on the floor while my hands were still busy folding the sarees. The packet seemed alien to me, I couldn't recall what was inside it. I tried to scan through the faded yellow polythene bag, but couldn't really guess what was inside. I opened the packet, and to my amusement, it was my wedding saree.

Beautiful red banarasi saree, with golden embroidery around its border. I still remember the first day I saw it, a perfect rose-red color, with beautifully embroidered elegant elephants on its blouse. I fell in love with this same saree, 20 years ago. Though reluctant about its expensiveness at first, I finally decided to buy it, because you only marry once, at least in Bengalis. I started touching the saree with slow tender strokes, it's amazing how even after 20 years, it's as bright as new. Maybe because I only wore it for once, after the corner of my pallu got torn, marking a bad omen, on my wedding day.





I carried the saree and took it in front of the mirror, and wrapped it around my head like a veil. “Oh, ma! Arijit’s wife is so gorgeous!”, I said out loud, mocking one of the elderly ladies at my wedding ceremony that day. I bit my tongue and frowned at the thought of calling out my husband’s name out loud. But I couldn’t help but remember, every praise I received that day, all were addressed to “Arijit’s wife” and not to me, none were for Aparajita. For a long time, ‘Arijit’ has been ‘Souvik’s baba’ for me, as I don’t call him by his name. I don’t exactly remember what I used to call him before Souvik was born.

I opened up the saree and kept the blouse aside. I wrapped the saree untidily across my waist and tucked the pallu sidewise. I turned to my right and checked out myself. This is the second time I am wearing this saree. I searched across the pallu to find the torn portion. The first time I saw it, I was in tears, all the elderly women in the family kept on repeating that it will bring bad luck. The cut was small enough to escape Souvik’s baba’s family’s people. Though it brought me a sense of anxiety, I maintained my all-smiles face during the wedding. This time the torn portion doesn’t even bother me. I don’t understand why I was crying as if someone died, on this small cut.

I reached over to the blouse and touched the elephant-shaped embroidery. So many details, so many intricacies, the embroidery is flawless. I decided to change my outfit completely and wear my wedding saree for the second time.



Oh my! the blouse is too tight! I somehow adjusted my saree into my body, and again faced the mirror. I reached over the vermillion and added some more to my forehead, and dropped a bit of vermillion on my nose too.

“See the bride has vermillion on her nose too, she will be deeply loved by her husband” someone in the background chanted these old beliefs during my wedding ceremony. I remember how I blushed, with the thought of being loved deeply, and widely.

I still remember our first date, a few days after Arijit’s family came to see me. We went to Maidan, in central Kolkata. I remember the tension between us, as we spoke nearly nothing to each other. As we headed towards Victoria Memorial, a group of roadside kids offered Arijit to buy some roses for me. We exchanged a quick glance, and he bought a few roses. He looked straight into my eyes and said-“Where whenas death shall all the world subdue...”

“...Our love shall live, and later life renew” I completed the last lines of my favorite sonnet.

I twirled like a little girl and faced the mirror again. I touched my cheeks and tried to remind myself how Arijit touched them. For me, being with someone who recited my favorite sonnet on our first date was just like a dream, little did I know that mother has provided these details, of what’s my favorite to him. “You look beautiful today Aparajita”, I reminded myself of the first sentence Souvik’s baba said after marriage to me.

But, is the Arijit I waved away to the office today morning, the same one I fell for 20 years ago? The Arijit who used to ask how my day was, will now go an extra mile to avoid conversation with me during dinner.





The Arijit who went to college street every Saturday, to bring me my favorite magazine, now avoids buying me a new novel, until and unless it's on discount on Amazon. I know people change, but to this extent, I never knew.

Just like onions, people come in layers, and peeling each layer can be scary and teary, as well. Maybe Arijit's layers were too cavernous for me to understand. Maybe his love for me faded, after my pregnancy-related bodily changes. I moved up the side of the saree's pallu, to reach my stretch marks. Maybe it was in my third trimester when I started developing these stretch marks when Arijit lost interest in me. Or maybe due to aging, or maybe due to the oil burn I received while frying fish, or maybe due to my weight gain, and the list goes on, as if endless.

But whatever might be the reason, the 'Arijit' that I fell for, and the 'Arijit' I know now, are two different persons. Souvik is the joining bridge between me and Arijit now.

The doorbell rang. It might be Asha, my maid. I almost forgot that I was wearing a wedding saree and opened the door. "My god! Didi, you look so beautiful, this looks like a wedding saree, doesn't it?" Asha asked.



“Yes, it is my wedding saree, how do I look?” I asked.

Asha replied, “Didi you look like an actress, the saree is gorgeous.”

I blushed and told her to come in.

“This might have cost you a fortune back then. The saree looks costly” Asha continued.

To this I didn’t reply back, the saree was indeed extremely costly. “Didi, don’t change the saree, when dada comes back home, surprise him.” Nice idea though, Souvik has a coaching class after school, so Arijit will be coming home first, I can surprise him.

I didn’t change the saree, I had my lunch wearing the saree itself, it felt weirdly satisfying. I took a few selfies and eagerly waited for Arijit to come back home. While in my neighborhood, the mike testing has started, Durga puja is just 15 days away, Maa Durga is about to bless us. “Hello! hello! mike testing!” I could hear the mike clearly. Just for checking they played a song, one of my favorite songs, “ Ami chini go chini tomare, ogo bideshini” (O, the lady from abroad, you are known to me, by Tagore).

I hummed faintly with the song and went to the kitchen and started preparing lemonade. This time in Durga puja, I will not only pray for the well-being of all my family members and good results of Souvik but also pray for the well-being of my and Arijit’s married life, which seems to be fading away, day by day.

Midlife crises have thunderstruck our lives. We no longer exchange those meaningful conversations, at least meaningful to me. Arijit doesn’t even remember my birthday, neither does he give me anything. There is no love, only obligation left between us.





Just like two puppets, we keep performing our duties, but most importantly, there are no strings attached between us. There were never any violent fights between us, it was more like a silent maneuver. Neither I know what exactly happened to us, nor do I expect him to know. Everything just felt to be dimmed and dissolved with time.

The doorbell rang, I knew immediately it was Arijit. I stood up immediately and rearranged my saree pleated to give it a fresh look. I opened the door, and Arijit looked at me. “Why are you dressed up? Is there something special?” Arijit asked with a blank look.

“No, nothing special” I giggled.

He opened his shoes and without offering a second glance stepped inside. “Today was a hectic day, can you please give me some lemonade?” he said while searching for his towel.

I got puzzled by this ‘no reaction’ reaction. “Yes, I already prepared it,” I said.

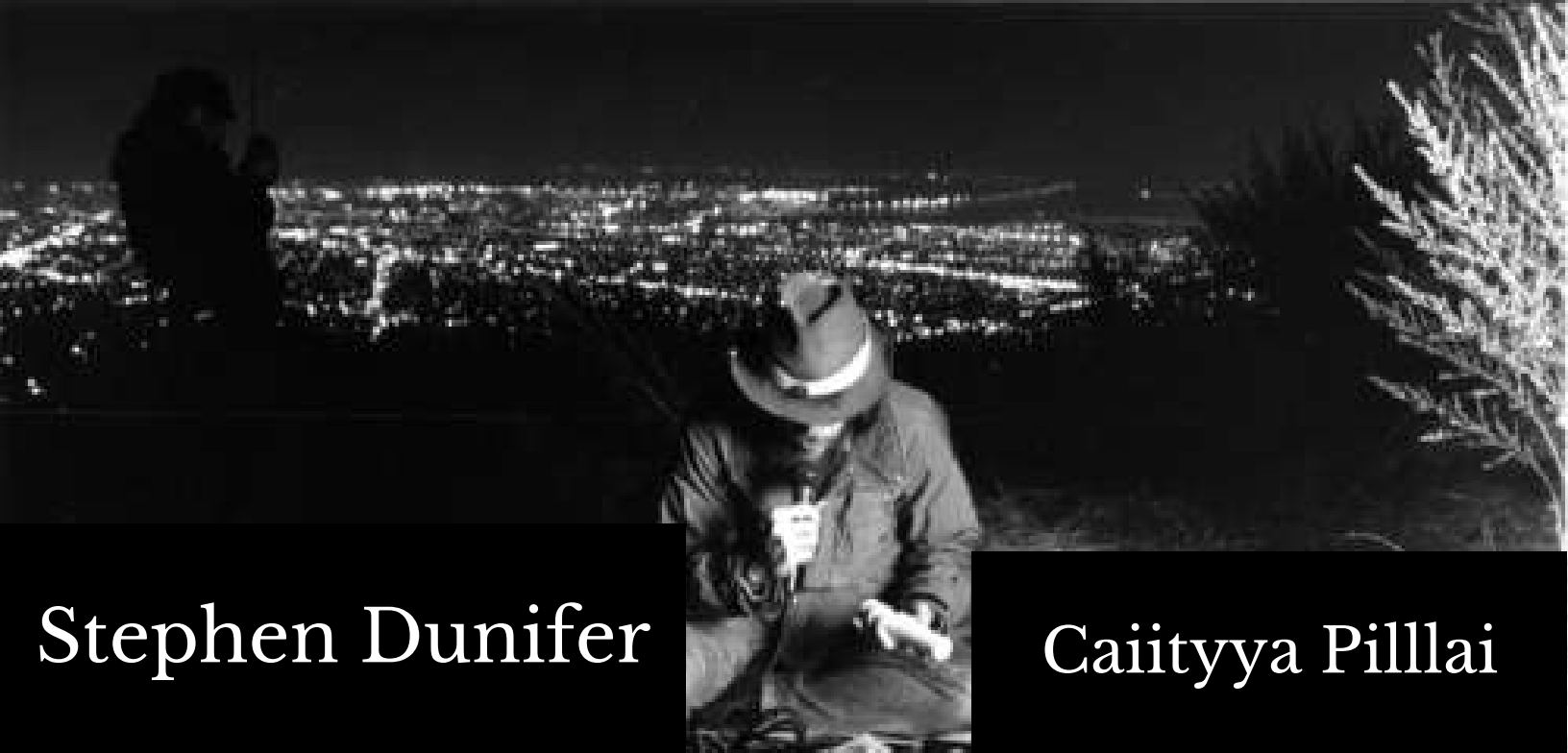
“Okay then, I will have it after freshening up” Arijit didn’t offer me a second glance.

“Don’t you have anything else to say?” My heart ached, and I was on the verge of bursting into tears. How could he forget my wedding saree?

Was I a fool to be thinking that I am traveling the world, while all I was doing was to revolve around Arijit?

He frowned, and said, “Where’s my towel?”





Stephen Dunifer

Caiityya Pillai

"This is Free Radio Berkeley, 104.1 on your FM dial. This is Acting Globally, Revolting Locally."

Radio, nothing less than a revolution, shifted the power dynamic from exclusively the elite to a sense of inclusivity, that gave the common man a voice. Stephen Dunifer, often referred to as the Johnny apple seed of pirate radio, played a pivotal role in this process of electronic civil disobedience that made radio what it is today.

At the young age of 11, Stephen Dunifer, learned of his interest in electronics. At 17 he earned his first-class radiotelephone licence. He then went on to become the founder of Free Radio Berkeley and propagated his fight against the regulation of airwaves and promotion of free speech.

He remained at odds with the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) while advocating for his 50-watt operation and still is. Labelled "anarcho-syndicalist", Dunifer doesn't mind the title as he brazenly questions the consensus among the elites and their active contribution to disempowering and alienating the masses from each other.



Free Radio Berkeley now called “Micropower Council of War”, Dunifer's brainchild, was a 50-watt operation. It started as a surreptitious operation, on a tarp on the hills of Berkeley, at night. He targeted disinformation and community ignorance. He transformed this operation involving a portable transmitter on a hill, to the milestone it is recognised as today. He not only sowed ideas of community and free speech in reference to radio but also helped regions experiencing liberation struggles.

He mentions in an interview that he sent transmitters to the Zapatistas in black Atom jungles in Mexico, other liberation struggles in Haiti and in East Timor. He transported Transmitters to Haiti disguised in Karaoke boxes.

The lowest minimum wattage a licensed FM radio station, in the United States, may have is 100 watts. The FCC argues that unlicensed 50-watt operations, would interfere with the signals of legitimate stations in times of crisis or emergencies and cause general chaos.

The FCC's concerns cannot be termed technological or in interest of the public as Free Radio Berkeley, actively avoided interfering with the signals of main radio stations. Their objections are purely legal. They refuse to grant licensing to low-power stations as well as prohibiting unlicensed ones.

Padmini Parthasarathy, a student at UC Berkeley journalism school, interviews Stephen Dunifer and Debra Hensley. Debra is a businesswoman operating two radio stations, she explains the gatekeeping involved in the licensing of stations. “How much did it cost? I don't even want to begin to tell you”, she says as she explains that it took her 4 years and 2000 dollars to set up her English and Spanish stations.





Louis Hiken, Dunifer's attorney, in an interview talks about the implications of the monopolisation of media on the voice of the Americans. When talking about free speech he says, “You can say whatever you want in your living room.”, furthering highlighting how the notion of free speech only exists with the limitations of commercial filters.

Dunifer elaborates on his idea of freedom of speech when asked about hate groups buying his transmitters, “That's OK with me. It's a free speech issue. The only cure for free speech is more free speech.”

Without Dunifer's contributions radio would not be the ever-growing mass media it is today.



The Fruit

Anindya Sundar Mirza

[The dimly lit basement of an almost decrepit saltbox house. A particularly gray Boston afternoon]

ED: Windshield glass, bad perfume, bluest skies, darkest gray, a universe away-

BROTHER: That Celtic symbol on your desk - How long has it been there? Why does it look like rust?

(walks over to the frame)

Is that blood? Ah, you still have that baseball bat.

ED: Well, I am depressed in summer, brother dear.

And less so in the rains

I am happy in the fall

And happiest in the snow.

It's been a year since you were last here.

BROTHER: Ah, fall. Fall still has a tinge of spring The sweet aftertaste of seasoned merlot.





ED: Do you even drink?

(phasing out) I think I scream a lot. Do you hear it too?

(pauses)

(to BROTHER) This is awkward. You shouldn't even be here!

(turns to the audience)

Is he gone? I don't think he is supposed to be here.

(looks at the old Hitler poster with his eyes gouged)

Yeah, check me out. What? Can't see? Hah!

This is awkward. A bit of a cliché. We'd taken care of the thrift shop together since forever. It was our mother's idea of keeping two fatherless children busy. He had got all of their good bits.

The thought of it makes my blood curl. Or it's the bits of his brain on the bat behind my bed {?} Lucky bastard.

(looks out the window)

ED: There you are!

BROTHER: *(seated on the sidewalk)* YOU'RE SCREAMING! AGAIN!

(tries to pat a fly away from his mangled face, fails)

ED: So are you, you moron!

(comes down and sits beside the unmarked grave with the lily growing on it)

BROTHER: Why don't you like me? *(grimaces)*





BROTHER: Why don't you like me?
(*grimaces*)

ED: I don't think we ever like people who remind us of ourselves.

I'll look at you, I'll envy you, I'll envy the thousand ideas that make you look like a better version of myself.

I'll stare with a foolish gaze because I have no idea about how to be you.

I'll try to gauge the depth of your taste-
How we're such similar people and how, you're still a thousand light years ahead. I don't really like you because you're not just like me, you're better than me.

BROTHER: And here I thought you and your narcissistic arse just liked moaning your own name.

ED: And the idea of kissing myself. Well, something that looks like me.

BROTHER: Well, you did more than just that.

ED: And you liked it as much as I did. Did it kill you to admit it though?

BROTHER: Didn't it?



Tiny Protests

1.

a man with pistol
in his hand ran to destroy
the masjid as he thought
it promotes violence
and he must bring peace

2.

crows flew like a tornado
head
swirling in the sky
on the ground
a thousand bodies lied
hit by bullets and bombs
as the lab-rats celebrated
the potency of their
inventions



Sutputra Radheye

Why The Banshees Scream

Semanti Debray

At ten years old, I
was sure I would never be like mother
angry, irrational, jealous, screeching mother
of demons

I loved her dearly

And yet I would be different

my dark mother who never grew up
greedy as a child

whose voice was made of thousand
cries of banshees, mourning their own death

I felt different, like father –
rational, calm, polite, quiet.

fair godly father made me his confidante
because I could be rational, just like him –
little, grown baby girl

as I grew older, my skin darkened,

I grew ugly like mother

rageful like her

mad murderous rage

crisped my skin

screaming, flailing, flaming anger

ugly, screeching, wailing anger

anger is womanhood

womanhood is anger



Monograph Interviews: Raiko & Rizvi

1. Raiko & Rizvi broke into the scene in December 2019 with the single "Couldn't You See?". How did this duo come into existence?

Our first single was in December 2019, it was "Couldn't You See", but I wrote "Couldn't You See" in July 2019, and I didn't know what to do after that — I wrote it but I didn't know what to do after that. Aamir and I were in the same class together in school, and I approached him with the song, and yeah, that's essentially how this duo came into existence. I wrote a song, I took it to him, and asked him if he'd sing on it. He said he would. Three days later, we created an Instagram account, uploaded a few covers. We always knew we wanted to release our own music. "Couldn't You See" came out in 2019 in December, "Same Old Stories" came out four days after the lockdown started, 24th of March 2020, and that is how we started.



RAIKO & RIZVI



2. What difficulties, if any, did you face when the band started out and how has the journey been so far?

The difficulties faced were definitely more technical than personal. We didn't complement each other before like we do now, so it's been huge progress in the last few years. Going into a proper recording studio and feeling the atmosphere was a little scary in the beginning maybe but it's all worth it in the end.

3. Who would you say are your biggest influences, especially with respect to Raiko & Rizvi?

Well, we said this the last time — both of us come from very different musical backgrounds, which helps insanely, because when we work together we come from very different influences, we have very different perspectives. So together it makes us different people musically, and together we can make something even better, you know? So Aamir is a self-taught musician, and he's wonderful at it, but he used to play a lot of John Mayer, The Smiths... well, he also had an indie phase and he was just listening to Prateek Kuhad all day, and Raghav Meattle, Parekh and Singh. So if you listen to our sound, it's a very soft, indie sound. It's raw of course, but it's not very loud, it's not very in-your-face. We like to keep it soft, we like to keep it a little... contained, if you know what I mean. We let the music speak for itself.



I take a lot of pains in song-writing because I write all the songs. My biggest influences are definitely Paul Simon, when it comes to song-writing. I grew up listening to a lot of Beatles of course, George Harrison. Of late, my favourite band obviously has been Radiohead, for Amir, it's much of the same. I play Western classical music, that of course has a large impact on my playing and the both of us, we both really like jazz. So you know, old classics and standards — Dave Brubeck, Chet Baker, and Bill Evans in particular for me. For him it's of course Bill Evans, Frank Sinatra and all of that. It's just a lot of things coming together at the same place — Hindi, English, Eastern, Western, classical, jazz, and so that's how it's been.

4. With the Pandemic digging well into its second year, how has it affected R&R?

The Pandemic has been quite neutral. We wrote a lot of tunes in the last two years, scrapped them off, wrote them again and were finally satisfied with the songs. It made us realize that it's important to be honest and unfiltered in a musical partnership.



5. What does the future hold for the duo? When's the next album coming?

The next album should be out by the end of this year, we're hoping for a December or January release. The last few shows we've done, we've performed completely original sets because we've got a lot of songs ready, and the album is going to be a full-length album — not an EP or a short album or anything, each ten songs. We're very excited about it. For the immediate future, it's getting the album out, it's been in the works for almost two years now, and we're just very happy we get to produce it, we get to make it. It should be out by the end of this year.

6. Is there anything you'd like to tell our readers who might be dreaming of a career in music?

If you're dreaming of being a musician, stop dreaming and start working. The only way you can get into this everlasting and ruthless industry is to be the best at your craft. Work on yourself, not only your musical skills but also your attitude, your lifestyle. Support the local scene and the local scene will eventually support you.



*Artists
In
Focus:*



Karrie Potter '21

Karrie Potter



Anindya Sunder Mirza



Jaspreet Singh Gill

Our Staff.

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