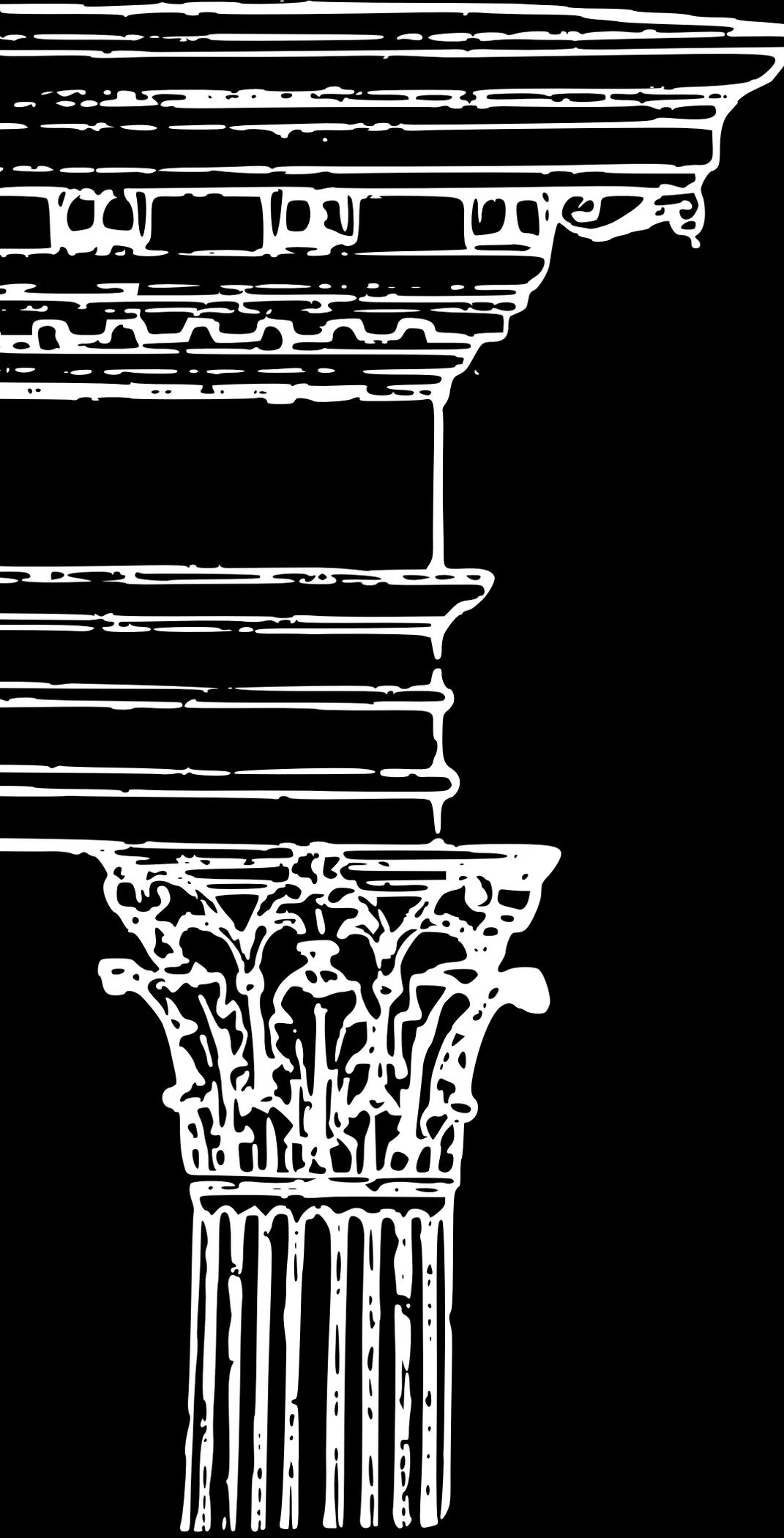


MONOGRAPH

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MONOGRAPH

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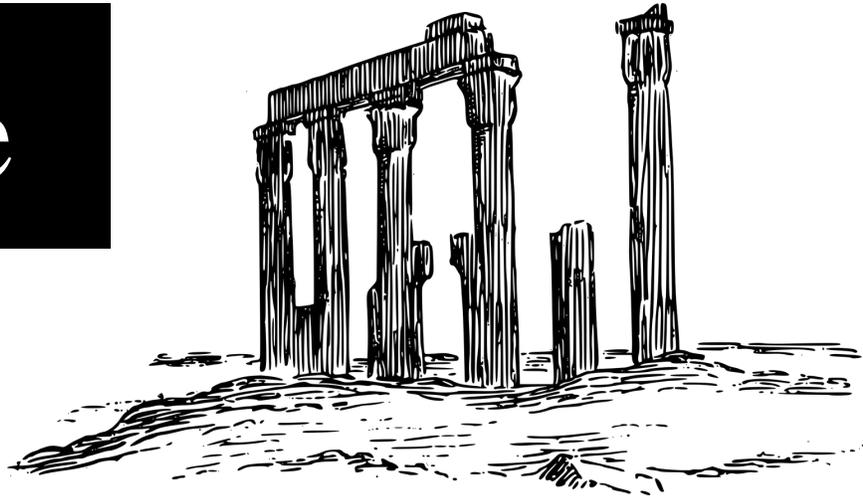
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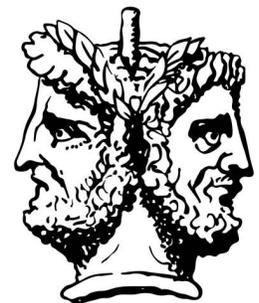
As Calcutta gears up for Pujo, Monograph completes its second year. The team has undergone some changes and we are working to provide our readers with the best experience. Due to these changes, the printing of the September and October issues have been delayed. Both issues will be sent out for print and delivered by Mid October. Thank you for supporting Monograph and we are extremely sorry for the trouble.

We wish you the very best pujo and we hope that you find comfort in the pages of Monograph.

Anuraag Das Sarma

Editor-in-Chief

Monograph



Editorial: Motherhood Penalty

Caiityya V. Pillai

Maria Meis explains the fundamental causes for the exploitation and oppression of women in her book, *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale*. The second chapter, social origins of the sexual division of labour, focuses on the seat of culmination of such biases and how they are perpetuated.

The many factors that are critical to the understanding of the grounds for this discrimination are heavily catalysed and justified by the concept of biological determinism. Biological determinism highlights how the ability of women to reproduce, somehow makes them more inclined towards nurturing roles as it is an innate feature attributed to their biological making and is the way of 'nature'. It assumes that men are drawn to and are more suited for other tasks, that can be labelled as 'productive'.





Nurturing is considered an innate aspect of a woman's being and so is childbirth. Childbirth and raising or nurturing the child is categorised as her 'nature' and thus is not viewed as productive. Whereas, in the case of men, their contributions to the social sphere are made through specific aspects of the body such as the hands and the head, which are considered the truly human parts. Whereas the breasts and womb in a woman are viewed as natural or purely animal parts. The distinction heavily stressed here is based on differentiating human beings from animals and 'natural' processes from 'productive' processes.

This distinction lies at the root of the problem as it fails to take into consideration that a woman's interaction with her 'animal' parts or her process of giving birth and nurturing the child, is not bestowed on her by nature but her interaction with nature the same way a man interacts with nature with producing with his hands and head. The consideration of his activities as work and her activity as an extension of her biology has led to the hierarchal and exploitative relations between the two sexes. The assumption that women have no control of these processes and their comparison with animal fertility roots in the patriarchal and capitalist division of labour. In this capitalist and patriarchal society, emphasis is placed on the production of surplus-value created by the productive work of men. The Production of milk and the process of giving birth is conscious social processes undertaken by women. The understanding of their bodily anatomy makes their whole body a vessel of production as compared to men who would not be men without the tools at their disposal, that are utilised by their hands and head.

Midwives, healers, and sorcerers were hunted during the witch hunt and studies show that before the hunt women in Europe had more information on contraceptives than we do today. This further highlights how far the process of human reproduction is from animal fertility.

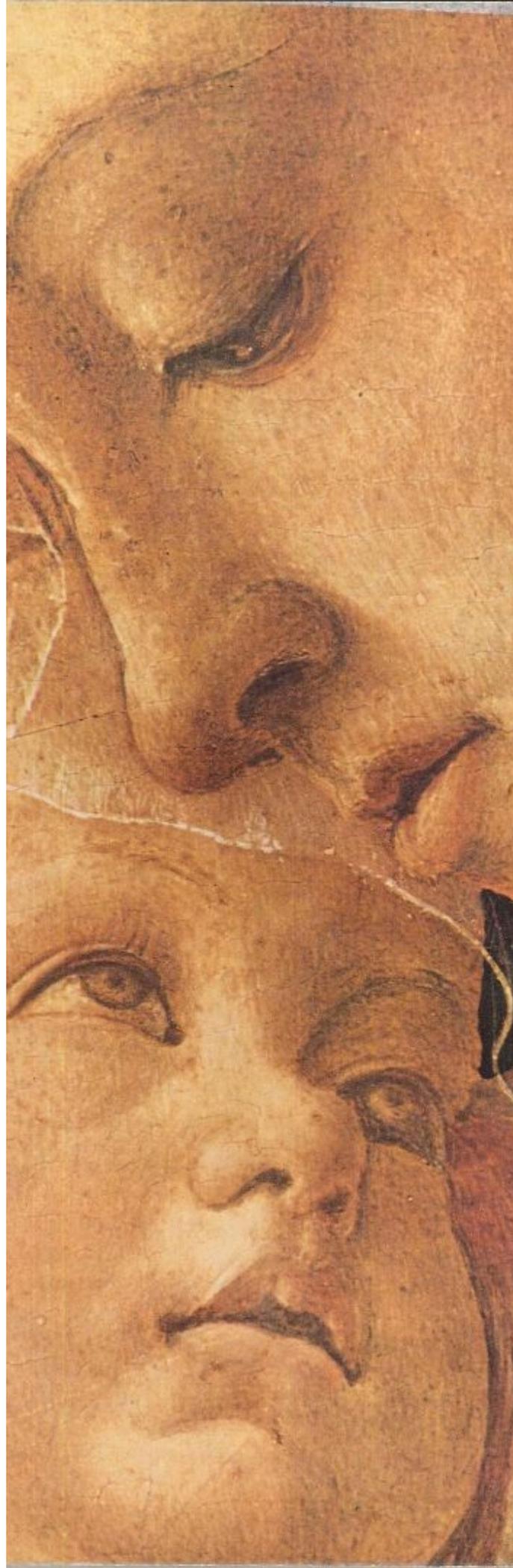


In *The second sex* by Simone De Beauvoir, in the chapter; *The Mother*, it is explained how the reproductive function has not been at the mercy of chance for over a century. The human species are never abandoned to the sole biological chance of nature but takes part in these processes and exerts control over them.

Her chapter, *The independent woman*, explains how women are economically independent in the constraints of the category of the economically oppressed as they are not relieved from extensive caregiving and household roles even if they are participants in the social and productive sphere.

In her chapter, through the Middle Ages to eighteenth-century France, she explains how women have an intricate balance to maintain between their role as a worker and their family or home life. The main caregiver to the children is still the woman irrespective of her working status, in most societies and households.

In most societies, these women are not given the same respect or compensation as men, irrespective of the labour they put in.



The chapter Since the French revolution describes a rare example of somewhat equal respect given to the women as seen in the peasant women in France. These women are usually married and have children and make up the largest part of the women in the productive labour and have the same responsibilities, interests, and property as the men.

This equality they seem to have in terms of respect is not based on equal labour, the French peasant woman has a much harder life than the man. She shares an equal load of hard labour such as ploughing, weeding etc. She also exclusively does all the household chores and bears the responsibility of childcare and childbirth. These women often are ridden with sickness due to the immense workload and are not assisted during pregnancy or after childbirth. They do not have the same leisure men can enjoy, like partaking in social events. They remain at home from day to night and work throughout their waking hours without any time for themselves. With the same respect as the men in this society, they are reduced to a 'beast of burden'.

The chapter Since the French revolution mentions that in 1924, the Comintern in plenary session proclaimed: 'The revolution is impotent as long as the notion of family and family relations continues to exist.'

This thought can be contested with the contemporary take on why the wage gap exists and how parental leave can reduce it considerably, it does not require the abolition of family and infringement on the choice of women to partake in family life and childbirth.

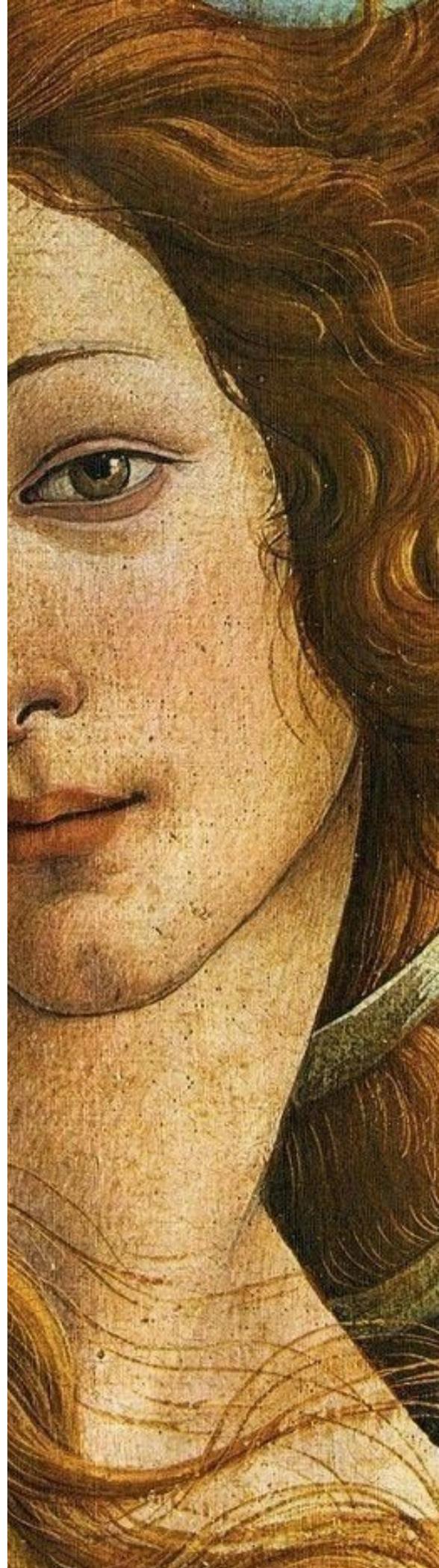
A common debate has been popularised since the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s on the wage gap and the reasons behind it. Before the movement the cause for this gap can be classified into four main points: lower education rates among women compared to men, discrimination against women based on sex being completely legal, a concentration of women in 'feminine jobs' and lower participation of women in the workforce in general.

The chapter Since the French revolution describes a rare example of somewhat Most women operated in the household sphere till the 1950's, especially white women, thus their participation was lower. The women that were in the workforce were holding menial job positions that were considered 'feminine' such as jobs in factory assembly lines and offices. They also had a lower education as compared to men, most had not finished college, had lower credentials than men and some of them had never attended college.

There were also several stereotypes driving this discrimination: women cannot be in positions of power, women are less intelligent than men, women should raise children and women should be homemakers.

After the women's liberation movement, there was a new wave of women in high ranking jobs and they became a larger part of the working force. Benazir Bhutto was appointed as the new prime minister of Pakistan, the first American woman went to space, the first woman was nominated to the supreme court etc.

After these huge strides were made one of the driving forces behind this exploitation and discrimination against women remained, 'women should raise children.' Even in progressive Scandinavian countries it still is the public opinion that women with young children should not have full-time jobs.



The US statistics on the matter show that only a fraction of the population believes that women should have full-time jobs if they have young children and the opinion is in opposition when it comes to men, 70% of people believe new dads should have full-time jobs.

The woman's role as the primary caregiver is still very much sewn into the fabric of society.

Even when women work as much as men in the workforce today, they on average spend nine hours more than men taking care of children, in one year this would mean three months of a full-time job. Hillary Clinton, the former secretary of state, says "The Gender Gap is between women with children and everybody else'.

This can be further explained, through the expectations of a man and a woman with the same credentials and education. They start at the same level but through the childbearing years, one parent has to attend to the child in times of need even if childcare is available.

These situations can be, sickness, doctor visits, school meetings etc. This role is usually expected to be filled by the mother. While she maintains a flexible working schedule, over eight to ten years the husband gets promotions, work trips, longer hours, dinners with clients etc.

Thus, he may have a partnership position in ten years and the career potential of the two progressively diverges.

A Danish study, Children and Gender Inequality: Evidence from Denmark by Hemik Kleven, Camille Landais and Jakob Elghot Sogard describes how childbirth affects earnings.

It shows that women's earning trajectory significantly dips after having a child whereas a woman without a child is almost on par with a man.

Anne-Marie Slaughter, an international lawyer, says, "Women who are not caregivers earn 96% of every dollar a man makes." This can be described as the motherhood penalty.

While gender discrimination is a cause of the wage gap, motherhood is heavily penalised in a capitalist society. If a woman does not mind the penalty and chooses to spend time with her children it is justified. Although, the concept of it being a penalty removes an unbiased choice that can be made by a woman and takes away from her freedom to have a child if she so chooses. It also places value on the families, children and women who do not choose to work.

Iceland which has almost closed its wage gap has done so through the implementation of certain policies that are causing actual beneficial cultural shifts. Katrin Jakobsdottir, the Prime Minister of Iceland says, the movement began in 1975 and the first policy change was providing mothers with 3 months of paid maternity leave, in 1981. This was changed to 6 months in 1988.



While this was a progressive policy for the time, it propagated cultural biases that placed the duty of being the primary caregiver and men working more than women. In 2000, they passed a new law giving men parental leave, making it a take-it-or-lose-it benefit to make them feel the pressure to take it. This has changed the culture among men in Iceland and young men in Iceland today are expected to take care of the children. It has also made employers feel that both men and women can be expected to take parental leave, thus women are employed without bias. In 2004 the wage gap in the U.S. and Iceland was the same at 81 cents made by women on a dollar made by men but today women make 90 cents on a dollar made by men, in Iceland.



The Bengal Famine of 1943: A Watershed Moment in the Shifting Consciousness of the Bengal Artist.

Adrija Dutta

Nature, spiritual communion, and bucolic pastoral landscapes dominate the paintings from Bengal over the late 19th century, grouped together under the Bengal School of Art. With Abanindranath Tagore, Sunyani Devi, Nanda Lal Bose and the like being the pioneers of this style, the art from this period concentrates upon the spiritual ideas of the East, in opposition to the materialism of the West. The paintings produced are myriad, but what ties them together is their umbrella genre, subjects and style. While nature and deities are common subjects, most of these also depict scenes from daily life, with women in their personal intimate spaces, men in communion with nature, and idyllic landscapes. Stylistically, these paintings boast a softness of colour, texture and mood; they appear soothing to the eyes owing to the use of clement shades, complete strokes and a warm colour palette. Frequented mostly with soothing hues of yellows and reds, they appeal to the viewer with an aesthetic magnetism.





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The early 20s saw the inception of very-many wartime uncertainties, along with several other factors including the Japanese bombing along the eastern coast of Bengal, the bombing of Chittagong, the uncontrolled influx of Burmese refugees etc. The social scene in Bengal was one of chaos and instability. This cacophonous attitude formed the heart of the artist's vision. With the onset of the famine in 1940, Art becomes harsher and more disturbing as it now champions the cause of the millions of the deprived and dying. Under the influence of the CPI, which tried to garner the cause for the common people, Art became a political weapon. The Bengal Famine soon became a recurrent theme of the paintings, the frustration of the people an oft-depicted subject: Art in Bengal left its inviting charm of allure that appealed to the Urban upper and Middle class; it now transitioned into a moment of realism, talking up the socio-political cause. The Famine, thus, marked an important culminating moment in Bengal's history of art as it saw a transition from romanticism to realism.





Anchoring on the tragedy of the famine and the fate of the victims, two very prominent artists from Bengal came to the forefront - Chittoprasad Bhattacharya and Zainul Abedin. These artists, in their own stylistic and thematic emphasis, thrust upon the plight of Bengal during the Famine months.

In 1945, there arrived a peculiar publication titled, *Hungry Bengal*, that caused immediate upheaval among the elite circles of Bengal. This was a collection of 22 sketches - black and white - paired with photographs and copious notes and observations, familiarising the famine in acute details, which so far had remained largely undocumented. The two artists behind this shaking, first-of-its-kind candid documentation of the event were the photographer, Sunil Janah and the artist, Chittoprasad Bhattacharya.

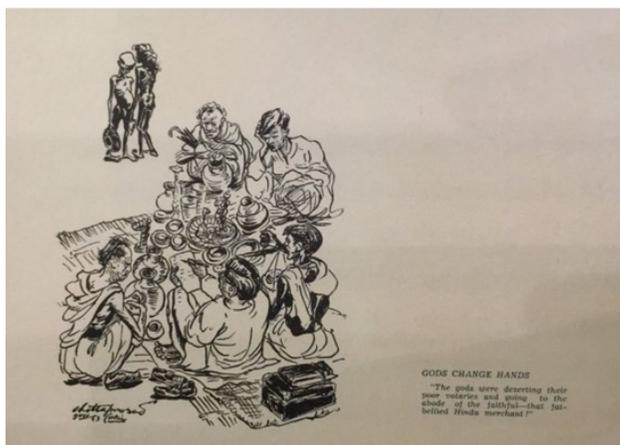
Born and raised in Chittagong, Chittoprasad was a self-taught Indian artist, whose earlier works concentrated mostly on traditional Indian artistic style and sculpting. The famine interpellated a certain strand in his art career, where his work served the larger political purpose of depicting Bengal in its truest sham, ridden with idealistic fervour. Working under the mentorship of P.C. Joshi, Chittoprasad was an active member of the Cultural Wing of the CPI, connected at the same time with IPTA. As an artist, he created pamphlets, on behalf of the people's government, in resistance to the Industrial capitalism regime of the British Raj. In the November of 1943, Chittoprasad along with Sunil Janah happened to travel by foot across the Midnapur district - severely famine-stricken and trodden down - of West Bengal, as they soaked in the true disaster of the calamity before depicting the same in their work.

Done with black ink upon cheap paper, Chittoprasad's sketches at this point depict the famine-inflicted indigenous people of Bengal - appearing as individuals in a frame, or in groups. Chittoprasad's figures are minimalist, monochromatic, lacking accuracy of intricate details; what stands out, however, are their frail, anatomical specificity and near-skeletal bodies. Such a baring portrayal of the victims was not only accurate but also a sheer cause of horror among the upper circles of the city, who were cut off completely from the truth of affairs. Despite *Hungry Bengal* being a journalistic endeavour, Chittoprasad's sketches rise above mere fact-based verbatim and embrace a gut-wrenching psychological element. Though disturbing, the hosts of these sketches were nothing but the truth.

Hungry Bengal opens with these lines :

"In the crowded railway compartment on my way to Midnapur, the daily scenes on Calcutta's pavements kept on coming back to my mind— the procession of famished, helpless living skeletons that once formed Bengal's village society— fishermen, boatmen, potters, weavers, peasants, whole families of them; the five corpses that I counted one morning in the short stretch of road between Amherst Street and Sealdah station; and all the other gruesome sights which had become a part of everyday life in the city."

In the illustration below, Chittoprasad ironically juxtaposes the figure of a rich, well-to-do individual, with neatly combed hair, fine attire, and domineering resources against the pot-bellied, bare-boned figures of the famine victims lurking in the background. Chittoprasad makes clever use of space to underscore the sense of deprivation, as well as social injustice rampant in the society at the time.



The Bengal Famine of 1943 earmarked Chittoprasad, thus, as a 'Political Artist' of sorts; his artworks couldn't be conceived and cannot be perceived independently in a vacuum, but are inextricably linked with social consciousness and political awareness. With the famine, Chittoprasad's art ventures upon a new avenue, whereby it becomes political weaponry in attacking the colonial exploitative forces in the country while standing in solidarity with the people belonging to the very grassroots. Of the political dimension in his art, Chittoprasad remarks: "I was forced by circumstances to turn my brush into as sharp a weapon as I could make it."

Yet another artist from East Bengal who championed the cause of the famine-stricken rural nativities was Zainul Abedin. The sudden shift in the Bengal Artist's consciousness is the most apparent in the works of Abedin. While his earlier paintings embrace the romantic natural landscapes of his hometown and revel in the impressionist picturesque beauty of nature, his later work becomes more gruesome as it attains a socio-political flavour, motivated by the famine.

Abedin's art style and thematic concentration are much in accordance with that of Chittoprasad's. Minimalist brushstrokes of black ink dominate his sketches; his subjects are very often the thin, depleted, undernourished figures of the famine victims; the desperation, helplessness and social abandonment of these people jump right out of his work. The colonial city of Calcutta also finds an extensive depiction, portraying how the ravages of the famine were not late in advancing into the urban landscapes as well.

With the wrath of famine losing bounds, communities of hunger-stricken individuals made their way into the cities in search of food. As the city became flocked with these groups of people, Abedin located in that chaos the subjects of his work. Various sketches of Abedin portray the sidewalks of Calcutta, the city centres frequented by these famished individuals, depleted, exhausted, and on the brink of their death, as they scour for food for themselves and their children.



A unique characteristic of Abedin's work includes the dominating Negative Space. His figures are resonantly brought into focus with the flattening of background details. The abundance of empty white spaces looming around his human subjects further imposes an idea of loss into his composition.

The illustration above by Abedin makes brilliant use of Negative space to focus on the famished body of an individual while contrasting it against the full body of the crow. The sketch is complete with rapid, rough strokes.

The figures of Abedin and Chittoprasad are distinct and at the same time bear an unnerving sense of likeness. While the depleted figures can be identified as human beings, men, women or children - their social standing, background, age or identity cannot be fathomed. What unites them together are their severe poverty-stricken, depleted conditions. The similarities in their appearances capture the viewer's attention, inciting awe at the same time, as they witness people being reduced to their bare minimum, holding onto a single thread of dear life. Their likeness robs these individuals of the flesh and blood of their identities, and their utmost humanity, as they are also seen inhabiting the same spaces alongside the scavenging beasts of crows and dogs.



The works of both Abedin and Chittoprasad have become pivotal in upholding the tragic year of 1943 in the history of Bengal. At the same time, they are testimonies to the shifting consciousness among the artists and audience of Bengal Art. Moinak Biswas argues how the “starving five million people to death within months, provided a new urgency to realist response – in painting, short stories, song, dance...” These works were rarely titled, numbered or signed - they were made for the commonest of common people, refusing to be memorialised in the confines of luxurious art galleries that were accessible only to the elites.

These cheaply made prints of sketches found their publication in various small-scale political publications of the time; they happened to also infuriate the colonial regime in power at the time. For the longest time, these moving works were suppressed and banned and destroyed almost immediately after surfacing. However, over so many years, as they have claimed an independent space for themselves, they remain authentic witnesses to a history that has otherwise been deliberately eliminated from the canon of the mainstream collective consciousness.

Access to the Piano and Privilege: Class Divide in *The Housemaid*

Abhijato Sensarma

Kim Ki-young's *The Housemaid* (1960) is a movie deeply embedded in the economic realities of its time. Often cited as one of the greatest South Korean films, it oscillates between being a critique of contemporary economic divisions and a surreal examination of the domestic realities that arose as a result of it.

The Housemaid follows Mr Dong-sik Kim, a middle-aged pianist employed as an accompanist to the extracurricular choir group at a factory populated by women workers. Such workplaces were prevalent during the movie's making, with many women sent away from home during a phase of economic strife to earn additional income for their families. They live in housing facilities at the factory itself. Alongside being the avenue for after-hours recreation in the presence of the "handsome" Mr Kim, this also allows him access to two women from a lower economic class infatuated with him – Miss Cho and Myung-Sook.





Mr Kim himself is not immune to the economic conditions he exists in. His shift into a new two-storied apartment along with his two children and wife necessitates him to seek out additional sources of revenue. He puts out an open call for personal piano lessons at his home, to help with the increased costs of his lifestyle.

Miss Cho takes him up on the offer. The two soon unite in the room where Mr Kim keeps his piano. As the two gain physical proximity to each other over the piano, the viewer can read into a dual symbolism at play: at once, Miss Cho is striving to get closer to the object of her affection (Mr Kim) and the object of his monetary worth (the piano). Her focus is primarily on the former, with the latter acting as an ‘excuse’ for her to be closer to him. But the introduction of the second worker to the story alters this dynamic.

Mr Kim’s pregnant wife, Mrs Kim, is soon unable to continue with the added burden of the increased household work. Mr Kim approaches Miss Cho for a suitable housemaid. This is when we are introduced to the titular character, Myung-Sook, who works as a cleaner at the factory. Already, the class difference that exists between her and the rest of the family is signified through the physical separation placed between them.

Myung-Sook inhabits the room next to the one where Mr Kim’s piano is stationed and Mr Kim gives lessons to Miss Cho. There is a wall in between the two rooms, acting as a barrier that physically separates the two classes she and the family belong to. When she is caught playing the piano in the adjacent room, Mr Kim’s verbal reproach possesses a violence of its own – she is explicitly forbidden from touching the piano.





To pick up on the same symbolism permeating throughout the story, she is being forbidden from accessing a source of income and opportunity to revel in artistic endeavours that a man of Mr Kim's economic class can. The latter's sense of ownership over the household resources is almost hypocritical considering how entrenched Myung-Sook will soon become in its upkeep. Yet, she will remain forbidden from accessing it in the same way as the rest of the family.

This dynamic – permeating contemporary South Korean society at large – is perverted by the introduction of the sexual desire Myung-Sook possesses towards Mr Kim. In a way much more pronounced than her counterpart Miss Cho, whose sexual advances are rejected by the pianist, she is able to seduce him.

She does so through a physical element present in the plot that reflects the permeability that exists invisible to those belonging to the higher class. There is a window present outside the piano room. It opens up to a shared balcony between itself and the living quarters of the housemaid. The lack of awareness about the possibility that the housemaid can peek in through the window during the scene of Miss Cho's confession of love for Mr Kim is eventually his downfall. The director's emphasis on the agency of the housemaid taking the steps to seduce Mr Kim resembles a reality where the thin separation between the classes is broken down.



Here, the cost of such a ‘transgression’ comes in the form of the housemaid’s impregnation. This forms a narrative parallel between the illegitimate child of the housemaid, a result of class and domestic boundaries being violated, and the legitimate child Mrs Kim herself is carrying, as the more acceptable life soon to be given birth within the household.

This impregnation results in pulsating drama. Once a guilt-wracked Mr Kim confesses about his actions to his wife, we see the housemaid being identified as the active transgressor. Even though Mr Kim faces some of his wife’s anger, she quickly redirects it to dealing with the unborn child the housemaid is carrying within her. This hints at the need to disproportionately punish the mistress of the lower class and erase any proof of her interaction with Mr Kim, despite both being equally responsible for her pregnancy. After an analysis of power dynamics, we can even call Mr Kim the more powerful person in the illicit relationship, considering his position of authority over the housemaid.

Mrs Kim forces the housemaid to fall down the stairs, then follow through with an abortion. This seemingly erases any proof of the crossing of class boundaries that have been achieved – while also emphasising the housemaid could not access even the physical resource of a man belonging to a higher economic class in pursuit of a romantic relationship.

But the film lingers on the aftermath of the abortion to ramp up the horror of this conflict, deeply entrenched in economic privilege. The legitimate child of Mr and Mrs Kim is given a luxurious crib to lay in after birth. At the same time, the housemaid cries out in visible agony, back within the confines of her living quarters. She is not allowed access to any of the same healthcare as Mrs Kim; she continues to bleed and agonise, as a living after effect of the violence inflicted upon her by the couple, despite the latter’s best attempts at erasing any proof of it.





In lieu of any physical evidence remains memories. And the housemaid rebels once again with its support, by threatening to expose Mr Kim if he does not follow her instructions. As the power dynamic of the household shifts, Myung-Sook now plays the piano often. She does so in a manner that would be tuneless according to ones who have had more access to the instrument. But for her, tapping the keys is a way of audibly declaring her possession of Mr Kim's property – alongside her claim to disrupting the marital bliss usually enjoyed by people belonging to a higher economic class, insulated to a large extent from the struggles of their hired domestic workers.

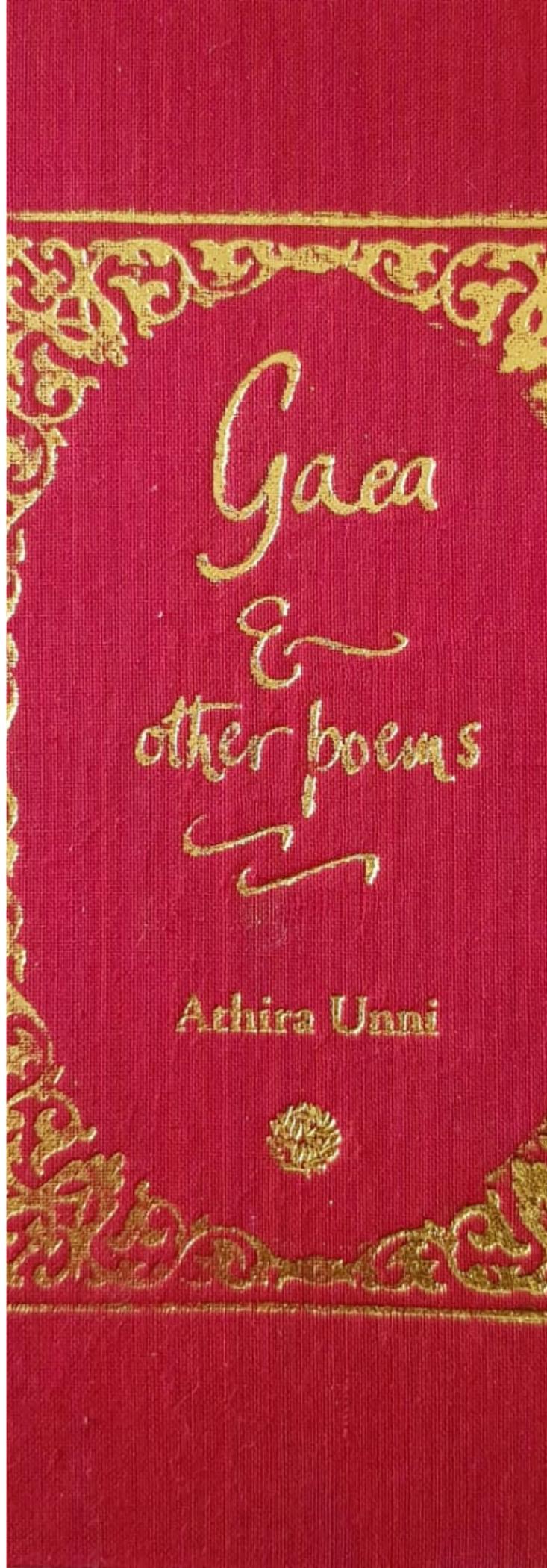
The movie ends with the housemaid and Mr Kim enacting a suicide pact, with the housemaid hoping to die by his side and claiming eternal ownership over him. But as a final reminder that the fight between economic divides remains uneven, Mr Kim successfully escapes to the room where his wife is, to confess his love for her with his dying breaths. Thus, even in death, satisfactory access to the higher class remains elusive for the housemaid. She still brings about the collapse of the household she was earlier an invisible part of.

Mrs Kim herself laments that it is her desire for material possession – and upward class mobility in society by moving into a new house and saving up to buy a new television, among other products – that contributes to the hiring of the maid and the unfolding of the entire tragedy. The film leaves an open question of whether this is a patriarchal displacement of guilt stemming from a male's sexual indiscretion, a critique of materialism leading to more class conflict, or both.

Book Review: Gaea And Other Poems

Aishi Saha

‘Gaea and Other Poems’ is Athira Unni’s debut collection of poetry which she describes as “an attempt to bridge contradictions.” What struck me first when I picked up the anthology was the Greek name ‘Gaea’ with which I was already familiar. Gaea, the Greek personification of mother earth – the mother deity of the Titans who came before the Olympian gods. Hesiod, in his ‘Theogony,’ records no parent figure of Gaea, as she is one of the primordial, most ancient figures – the mother of all creation. What is of note, however, is the way Athira Unni picks this character from the canon of western mythology and universalizes her as essentially a representative figure. ‘Gaea’ is the last poem of the anthology and as such, I will follow Unni’s order in my discussion.





All written in free verse, Unni's poetry is very significantly a product of its times. It is personal and intimate and at the same time, one cannot merge the poet with the poetic speaker. As is the case with a lot of modern and postmodern poetry, images are stark and seemingly unrelated without aggrandization or embellishment of language. The opening poem of the collection, 'The Ring,' is a good example of this. Though apparently varied in themes, in this poem too the poet deals with the universalization of personal experiences. It is also deeply Indian when she describes the ring as "the lucky stone of my mother's choosing." However, the ring soon transforms into a symbol of feminine outrage and disillusionment when the speaker compares it with "the ring of Sita," "the ring of Mordor" and dismisses her mother's belief in the "blue-skinned God." 'The Ring' becomes a tale of silent dissenting voices on the brink of an outcry.

Many of the poems are written in lowercase with unconventional punctuation. For the longest time, I have viewed lowercase poetry with skepticism and have only recently been able to overcome my prejudice of it. This happened mainly due to two factors: one, the realization that lowercase poetry being available in print is the natural transformation of its digital form, and two, the poetry of E. E. Cummings. Lowercase poetry was not, in fact, born out of Wattpad culture. This style is recognized with E. E. Cummings, one of the most prominent 20th century American poets. Unni employs another very interesting technique in her poetry. In many of them, she begins the first line of the poem as a continuation of the title. What it essentially does is add a fluid quality to the poems and treats the title as a part of the poem and not as a separate entity. In 'Truth' this style is especially significant as the first line – "flows, without respite" is a direct continuation of the title 'Truth' and it is as though the title literally flows into the body of the poem. It is a clever technique to emphasize the diction used.





‘Rusting, Purging, Remediating’ is an intimate catalogue of all things that constitute contemporary urban life. It bears a subtle Eliotian quality to it in the way it proclaims – “life is rusting.” The speaker in this poem is lonely in a modern sense. Conversations on dating apps are directly linked to the boosting of self-image, and comfort is found in often the most unlikely things.

In ‘The Depression Dragon,’ Unni assumes a more didactic voice. An existential anxiety plagues modern man but unlike the nihilistic approach of Camus or Sartre, Unni finds hope despite the darkness. She simply states: “face it” – face the lurking dragon within and instead of purging it, feed it. It is brave and empowering and urges the readers to be kinder to themselves. A somewhat similar sentiment is found in ‘Poetry Is’ where Unni ventures to find the true meaning of poetry. It explicitly reinstates an idea I talked about in respect to the first poem – “Poetry is Almost.” In ‘Exhale,’ too, she draws on the anxieties of modern man and shows a way to deal with them. Unni recalls the famous opening line of Langston Hughes’ ‘Harlem’ when she begins one of her poems saying, “You are my dream deferred.” She takes an iconic line and gives it a personal bend, transforming a voice of angry mutiny into something more tender.

Most of the poems in this collection are a retelling and a reclamation of all the things that make up our lives, observed from very close quarters and told in an unequivocal voice. However, one poem stood out to me purely due to its choice of content. In ‘Canada,’ the speaker talks about their friend who left for Canada in pursuit of professional growth. It is narrated in a somewhat sardonic tone and it is clear that the speaker is unapproving of their friend who left and of the general trend of Indians wanting to settle in the West. Apart from the fact that this poem differs in content and sentiment, it is also a poem that I personally thought lacked polish in terms of construction.





Finally, ‘Gaea’ is a poem divided into four sub-parts. Unni herself describes this poem as a “paean to the many women in my life who know the pain of birth.” In ‘Gaea,’ she revives a known tale of birth and the violence that accompanies creation. This poem is a very fascinating concoction of mythical and modern. On one hand, Unni recalls the Greek Gaea in her description of the phenomenon of birth and on the other, she uses expressions like “concrete-strewn cataclysm” to juxtapose it with a flavour of modernity. The process of birth is bloody, almost devastating before it takes the shape of life. ‘Gaea,’ in many ways, is an uncompromising take on the scars that the process of motherhood leaves on one’s body. It tells the tale using metaphors but it hides nothing. The violence is retained and so is the beauty. It is a strong and impactful conclusion to Unni’s series of poems, reinstating hope against the seeming drudgery of existence.



Book Review: Life and Political Reality

Aishi Saha

Shahidul Zahir's 'Life and Political Reality' has to be one of my most favourite recent reads. V. Ramaswamy and Shahroza Nahrin's translation has kept the flavour of the original Bengali intact by including some transliterated dialogues for readers who understand Bengali to get a touch of the original. 'Abu Ibrahim's Death' is a calmer-in-comparison companion piece, drawing on the everyday of the eponymous character until his very anti-climactic death.

The first novella can be seen as a treatise on the 1971 war for the independence of Bangladesh, analysed and viewed from extremely close quarters. Zahir, through this work, made sure that nobody forgets the nameless suffering of the people of Bangladesh during their muktijuddho, just like Abdul Mojid and his mother never forgot Momena. What I found specifically interesting about the narrative technique of this novella is the employment of the Woolfian stream-of-consciousness.

LIFE AND POLITICAL REALITY: TWO NOVELLAS

TRANSLATED FROM
THE BENGALI BY

V. RAMASWAMY &
SHAHROZA NAHRIN

SHAHIDUL ZAHIR LIFE AND POLITICAL REALITY:

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SHAHIDUL



The entire novella is one huge paragraph, which leaves an impression of one letting out a long-held breath. This becomes relevant when we take into account the content and context of the story. It begins with something seemingly very insignificant – the strap of Abdul Mojid’s sandal snapping with a ‘phot’ sound as he hears Abul Khayer thanking a crowd of people in what is essentially a political gathering. It shifts something deep inside our protagonist, Abdul Mojid, and the entire novella becomes an exploration of that.

Zahir also comfortably oscillates between multiple timelines in the same narrative. When Abdul Mojid hears Abul Khayer addressing a crowd, he is violently wrung back to March of 1971. The narrative hereon freely shifts from the present timeline of 1985 to an intimate glance at the atrocities of 1971. This constant shift may be confusing to the reader initially, but once used to it, it adds to the experience of the story overall.

The moholla of Lakshmi Bazar’s Shyama Prasad Chowdhury Lane serves as a microcosm for something bigger. Herein, Zahir creates a world which is affected by the world beyond but the latter is kept elusive for most part of it. Though not fictional, it can be compared to the town of Macondo, in Marquez’s ‘One Hundred Years of Solitude.’ There is a fundamental sense of alienation in both creations, a theme often found in postcolonial literary works. Zahir himself has been vocal about his admiration for the Colombian author and employs a similar style of magical realism in his work, too. I understand magical realism as weaving subtly extraordinary elements in the presentation of reality. A good example is V. S. Naipaul’s ‘Miguel Street’ where each character is a touch eccentric and have something about them that cannot be put together in words. In ‘Life and Political Reality,’ there is the description of how Moulana Bodu fed the crows pieces of human flesh. There is alienation in Mojid’s character, too, in how the entire narrative becomes his journey of finally leaving the neighbourhood where he had spent such a significant part of his life.





What this novella does, and it does this remarkably, is tell a tale of a country on the brink of birth – and a bloody birth, at that. It also satirizes religious fanaticism by bringing it down to its absolute fatuous bones. There is an incident where Moulana Bodu and the other razakars are very offended by Tulsi plants as they are sacred to Hindus. However, they later come to realise that the plant is useful and palatable irrespective and outside the bounds of one's identity as a Hindu or a Muslim. Zahir's subtlety is where his genius lies. After the violent incidents of 25th March, doves are seen to settle in the moholla. It is a brilliant juxtaposition of a conventional symbol of peace against the backdrop of mindless slaughter and bloodshed. However, the masterpiece of ironic imagery is reached possibly when Momena hides under a grave to evade the persisting and searching eyes of the razakars. The sheer brilliance lies in the irony of the situation – that a grave is safer than the outside world. In fact, this point is repeated significantly over the course of the novella – that the people of the neighbourhood have no means of escaping the violence. This sense of entrapment is exactly what Zahir intends us, as readers, to understand and feel and thus, when he liberates Abdul Mojid – when in the end, he leaves Lakshmi Bazaar, we let out a long-drawn breath.

‘Abu Ibrahim’s Death’ recounts the story of the titular character as he falls from grace. It is relatively mundane in comparison, deals with more everyday concerns until it reaches its peak – Abu Ibrahim’s death. Abu Ibrahim is an idealist and the entire story is a journey as that idealism breaks and crumbles.

Shelley wrote ‘Adonais’ to immortalise Keats when he died, but who will remember the death of Abu Ibrahim, a life lost in the pursuit of simple dreams? What is interesting, however, is that the whole story is narrated in retrospect, so Abu Ibrahim is actually alive for most part of it even though the title of the story places an obvious emphasis on his death. Zahir makes a comparison of Abu Ibrahim with protagonists of Greek tragedies who bear the weight of their fate all their lives. And truly, much of what we feel as we read the story can be summed up in two words that are associated closely to tragedy – pity and fear. His interactions with Khaled Jamil determine the course of his fall and even though he is blind to it, we as readers see it clearly. Just as readers connect the dots of doom before the truth is revealed before Oedipus, Zahir’s Abu Ibrahim evokes a similar recognition. Thus, shaped like a Greek tragic hero, his fall seems inevitable and yet it has none of the poignancy and despair with which we read about Oedipus gouging out his eyes. This is deliberate. Zahir creates a parallel with something grand only to reverse the expectation in an anticlimactic moment.

Our professor always says that there are certain authors, like Virginia Woolf, whose works cannot be read over a cup of tea or as relaxation before going to bed. I personally think these two texts fall under this category. Zahir constantly presents uncomfortably real imagery and raises difficult questions which demand our full attention.

Spinning Plates, Losing Wars

Jeremy Szuder

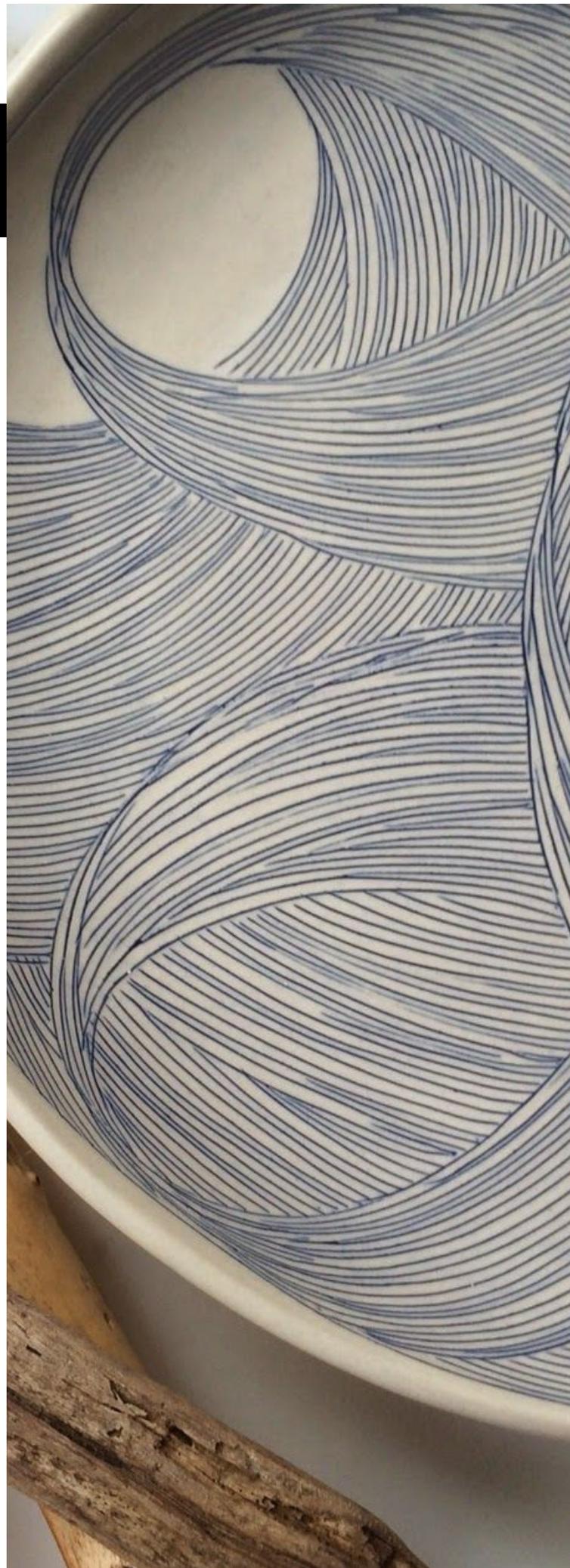
I was spinning plates with
the others in this room,
the cold, hardened salty dogs us all.

And we entered with the burns
from fires spat by the significant
women in our lives.

And we stood there, in that kitchen.
No one said a word for hours.
It seemed to make no sense,

this early onslaught of silence
in our normally rambunctious rituals
with the knives, the pans, and all

the other blistering heat sources,
somehow all dampened,
made lukewarm.



But we persevered.
We locked our simple smiles
into place, and we spun those plates
cool and calm-like.
Deep down under skin,
shifting fragments of bone,

our lives went on and on,
each with a different rhythm,
each, a different pulsing.

We walk in and out of rooms
like that, carrying the dust on
our shoulders, the shards and smolder

of those wild women fires endured
inside each of our very own homes.
What war out there in those fields

of day to day life
are really finalized by the last shot,
or by the last foot soldier who finally

got up after falling over again
on his tired ass?
We walked in the opposite direction





of those senseless battles.
We all walked back into this fire
of our family gathered bones

with our plates, and our parachutes
all waiting for our return.
There is no battle to be won

other than the one
that threatens to disconnect
the fires from the Sun.

....



Finding Home in Metaphors

Mehaq Khurshied

I collect the traces of my being
A forgotten memory on a glossy paper
Doe-eyed angel
Born mid- laughter
In the mother's gleeful naivete
A paper slides
Through the bottom of the door
A room of unwanted nostalgia
Dust waltzes
On the paper I hold
A confused testimony
Of a tween forgotten- mid cry
A familiar face passes
By the window in the room
Then another, and another
And another one again
I absorb the indifference
And the inchoate settlement of a teen
Who could not tell
What was meant to feel right
A voice of wisdom calls
Had I been a fool all along?





Open the door,' it says
The world awaits another story
I try to speak but am interrupted mid-sentence
The crevices below my eyes
Open up like roads
Into a city of disappointments
I read the address on the paper
And hear my mother's laugh
In a second-
I am a child again;

scared to go home
And not knowing where else to be.

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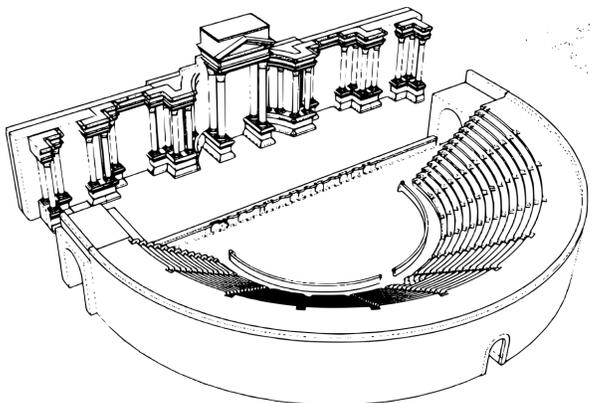
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