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MÉLANGE

***A Fortnight
on Earth***

Pg. 40

***Payal Kapadia:
“Either we censor ourselves
or the authorities censor us.”***

Pg. 16



Preface



Welcome to *Mélange*, a literary magazine crafted by the students of the Department of Mass Media, Kishinchand Chellaram College, Mumbai. *Mélange* stands as a home ground for storytellers, a place where diverse voices come together to share their unique narratives. Our mission is to create a platform that unites and elevates a spectrum of ideas, stories, and perspectives, providing a rich tapestry of editorial penmanship and visually captivating designs.

In an age where every story matters, *Mélange* is dedicated to offering an inclusive space where both emerging and established voices can put forth their thought process. We believe in the power of storytelling to bridge gaps, foster understanding, and spark conversations that inform, educate and inspire people. Each edition of *Mélange* is carefully curated to reflect the vibrant and multifaceted nature of human experience, ensuring that every voice finds its place within our pages.

At the heart of *Mélange* is a commitment to nurture creativity and give out the freedom of expression. We invite you to explore the myriad of narratives presented here, to be moved by the artistry and authenticity of our contributors, and to join us in celebrating the boundless potential of storytelling. Let *Mélange* be your gateway to discovering newer ideas and exploring unheard tales of this wide and vivid world.

The views and opinions here do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial board, college, or affiliated organisations. They are those of their respective contributors to *Mélange*. These perspectives are put forth with the intention to encourage discussion and do not represent any official statement or advice.

In this endeavour, we are eternally grateful to Prof. (Dr.) Hemlata K. Bagla [Vice-Chancellor HSNC University], Prof. (Dr.) Tejashree Shanbhag [Principal K. C. College], Prof. (Dr.) Shalini Sinha [Vice Principal & Head of the Mass Media Department] and Surya Gune [Convenor of Knot]. Thank you for providing your endless support and empowering our every pursuit!

Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the fifth edition of *Mélange*!

In the tug-of-war between past and future, the eyes often overlook the tussling present in the centre that is pulled, dragged, and sometimes left broken. The constant back-and-forth leaves no space to pause and trace the changing nature of the contemporary world. Either we are reconciling with the fading past or gazing at the steep imagery of the coming future. This frailty made us introspect and bring forth diverse perspectives regarding where the world stands today with our theme, 'The Contemporary Landscape.'

There is a sense of urgency and immediacy in the word 'contemporary' that demands attention. It hums a tensing pulse of the ongoing waves that strike the shore and fall back. However, the landscape we speak of here is not merely the physical form but a portrait of the cultural terrains, social shifts, intimate maps of individual minds, and collective identities that bind and breathe life into our society. What transpired in this expedition is an eye-opening interplay of contradictions and collisions that bridge the gap between existing truth and newer findings and incite possible alterations, completing the wide circle.

From the silent struggle faced by men scuffled under their own system of patriarchy to the rising regional turmoil that India might face from the surrounding countries, we have tried to extract and put together a range of themes that tower us. Whether it is the flask of social media making us blind to reality, the desperate hope of a better life forcing people to migrate to bigger cities, or the lack of purpose most feel being drenched in capitalism, there has been a careful attempt to forefront these tales creatively to ensure it does not just comment but also communicate and resonate deeply.

For this edition, we had the amazing opportunity to interview Payal Kapadia and discuss in length her journey as a writer, her creative process while writing fiction and non-fiction books, and the evolving literary landscape that seems filled with shortcomings and opportunities. It was truly an honour to know her insights on the dynamic intersection between humans and literature in the current walk of life.

As we present to you this edition, I am reminded of this Ghazal by Sahir Ludhianvi that foreshadows the relentless cycle of life:

“संसार की हर शय का इतना ही फसाना है
इक धुँद से आना है, इक धुँद में जाना है

ये राह कहाँ से है ये राह कहाँ तक है
ये राज़ कोई राही समझा है न जाना है

इक पल की पलक पर है ठहरी हुई ये दुनिया
इक पल के झपकने तक हर खेल सुहाना है

क्या जाने कोई किस पर किस मोड़ पे क्या बीते
इस राह में ऐ राही हर मोड़ बहाना है

हम लोग खिलौना हैं इक ऐसे खिलाड़ी का
जिसको अभी सदियों तक ये खेल रचाना है”

So, while we all continue to walk in the closed tunnel, I hope we will spare a second to look around us and be in the moment.

Warm Regards,
Raj Darji
Editor-in-chief, *Mélange*.

Front Cover
Designed by Raj Darji

01 Article

- 06 Love thy Neighbour- The Indian Dilemma In The Context of Contemporary Regional Turmoil
By Iklavya Dev
- 08 The Hidden Cost of Patriarchy: Gender-Based Issues Facing Men
By Anushka Chavan
- 10 The Social Media Mask
By Twisha Vora
- 12 1%
By Gargi Paralkar
- 14 तुम कब जाओगे अतिथि?
By Yashvi Jain

02 Interview

- 16 The Payal Kapadia Interview: "Either we censor ourselves or the authorities censor us."

03 Photography & Illustration

- 22 लम्बा इंतजार?
By Janmesh Vaishnav
- 24 जिंदगी लहरों सी
By Aishwary Patil
- 26 The Iconic Dome
By Joy Sharma
- 28 बोल
By Raj Darji
- 30 गुब्बारे
By Tejas Binalwar
- 31 जिंदगी
By Tejas Binalwar

04 Short Story

- 32 Parents Playing The Reverse Card
By Samriddhi Mehta
- 34 A Choice: Beyond The Hills
By Sapna Dodmani

05 Letter

- 38 Dear Miss Austen
By Jineeta Jain
- 40 A Fortnight on Earth
By Mrunmayee Ghadge
- 42 Love, Honey Badger
By Arshita Peshen

06 Poetry

- 44 आजकल
By Jaswant Singh
- 45 Crisis of Purpose
By Mrunmayee Ghadge

Sites & Citations

Meet Our Team

Back Cover
Visuals by Janmesh Vaishnav

Love Thy Neighbour

The Indian Dilemma in the context of contemporary regional turmoil

By Iklavya Dev

The foreign policy of India has been one that attempts to ensure a peaceful South Asia, and in the past few decades, the Gujral Doctrine, Act East Policy, and the Neighbourhood First Policy are testaments to the same. Great emphasis has been laid on improving ties with our neighbours, at least the ones who understand the importance of regional cooperation for mutual benefit and realising development goals. However, in contemporary times, turmoil plagues the Indian Subcontinent, with India surrounded by countries that have been experiencing political and economic instability and bearing general ill-will towards it. With simmering tensions not just in the Indian Subcontinent but also in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) overall, New Delhi must look at the bigger picture, take a step back, and contemplate its role in the region.

To the north, Nepal is sinking into an economic crisis that makes it more vulnerable to Chinese debt diplomacy. Kathmandu’s key industries, such as hospitality, cement, agriculture, and more, are facing massive losses. The youth and business owners choose to migrate to countries like India, burdening Indian infrastructure and leaving Nepal with an unsteady future at the same time. Pinpointing the ideological identity of KP Sharma Oli’s political ideology and undeterred support of the One-China Policy, India is not expected to receive any brownie points in comparison to China. Not only is the government trying to leverage Nepal’s geopolitical status as a landlocked, buffer state to chart a way forward to shed its economic woes by seeking aid from China, India, Russia, and the U.S.A., but also keeping the past as a guide, the ‘Big Brother’ attitude of the Indian state has only impacted the Nepali domestic population in a negative capacity, considering their unfriendly perspective of the Indo-Nepali Peace and Friendship Treaty, 1950, and especially the 2015 blockade. India will have to decide on a plan of action to ensure Kathmandu’s fraternity with Delhi. This might include capitalising on the Nepali population in India and the intimate and shared cultural roots of the two nations. Nepal’s geographic location on a convergent plate boundary and multiple fault lines make it prone to earthquakes, and India’s open-hand humanitarian assistance can only aid the Indian interests in the country.

To the south, Sri Lanka is still trying to recuperate from the worst economic crisis it has experienced since its independence. The election of a Marxist government with a historical animosity with India is not something that the incumbent can overlook. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) opposed the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord of 1987, and despite PM Anura Kumara Disanayake’s public statements about not wanting to be “sandwiched between India and China” and maintaining close ties with both, considering the ideological identity of the Sri Lankan regime, yet again,

India might not be the priority when Colombo has to choose. Beijing, China has already sunk its talons deep with various infrastructure projects; the leasing of the Hambantota Port for 99 years and its 85% stake ownership by the Chinese Merchants Port Company is a thorn in India’s side. The Adani Group’s project to build wind farms in Mannar and Pooneryn has also been opposed by the JVP. India has to use diplomatic channels to ensure that the Indian interests in Sri Lanka remain shielded from Chinese fangs. Investments with greater benefits to the Lankans and ensuring economic and humanitarian support to a nation that has been going through an economic crisis can prove to be detrimental to the Chinese anti-India agenda, considering Disanayake’s reputation as a pragmatic statesman.

To the East, Indian soft power faces the daunting challenge of ensuring that the last relatively strong and arguable regional ally’s support does not drop below the Deadpool. The attacks on Hindu houses and temples, including the ISKCON temples, have also garnered anti-Bangladeshi sentiments in Indians, with calls for boycotting sporting events between the two nations. From the Bangladeshi end, the majority population already bears ill will towards New Delhi for sheltering Sheikh Hasina, a perceived dictator who capitalised on Indian support to stay in power. The ‘India Out’ campaign, similar to the one in the Maldives, called for boycotting Indian products like sarees and spices in Bangladesh. According to various media houses, the primary reason for this hostility arises from the Bangladeshi perspective of being dominated. Indian politicians labelling Bangladeshi immigrants as ‘intruders’ and ‘termites’ are bound to have negative repercussions on the bilateral relations between the two nations. The government has to ensure that in future table sittings, the Bangladeshi population perceives the arrangements to be mutually beneficial and respectful. The perception of the masses of being insulted and inferior would only lead to exponentially growing anti-Indian sentiments, which is an opening that opportunistic Bejieng would not miss.

India has two belligerent neighbours that have deep-seated rancour towards the country. Chronic territorial disputes, harbouring terrorists, violations of sovereignty, economic competition, and now contests to establish themselves as the superior regional and global powers are traits of the antagonistic relations that India shares with these neighbours. Notwithstanding the undiplomatic and hostile Pakistan, the future of the Indo-Sino soft power competition in South Asia seems to tilt in favour of China, considering the recent developments in the region. New Delhi has to establish strategies on a case-to-case basis not only to ensure insulation from the fire that runs rampant in South Asia but also to put out fires in the region to ensure a peaceful Global South with Indian interests in mind.



The Hidden Cost of Patriarchy: Gender-Based Issues Facing Men

By Anushka Chavan

The system of patriarchy has always been criticised for its problematic impact on the lives of women. In recent times, however, the same system of patriarchy has confronted men with a myriad of gender-based issues. With great societal privilege comes considerable expectation—cost under patriarchy, and the same has become unbearable for many. Men are socialised into understanding ideals of strength, emotional stoicism, and financial responsibility, which often end in mental health suffering, isolation, and even tragedy. In this article, I want to pay attention to the many ways men suffer under patriarchy, particularly in the areas of emotional repression, career pressure, and societal expectations.

The Burden of Responsibilities Imposed by Patriarchy

Patriarchy often casts men as primary breadwinners, pressuring them into the archaic role of “man of the house.” Expected to shoulder financial responsibilities and make mature decisions for the family’s future, many men feel an overwhelming burden to perform flawlessly. This expectation leaves little room for their personal needs or emotional well-being, and their contributions often go unrecognised. When they fail, they are scorned by family members and friends. This may make them feel inferior as well as emotionally exhausted.

While patriarchy is perceived to favour men, it places a heavy load of obligations—most of which are societal expectations and not personal choices. It expects them to excel at work, lead in the family, and support everybody financially with no allowance for vulnerability. This “superhero” role denies them space to admit struggles or seek help and instead creates a cycle of silent endurance.

The scars of false accusations

Another significant criticism men endure is false accusations, particularly about sexual harassment or assault cases.

It is very crucial to believe and support such victims of crimes; however, most men falsely accused never find anyone believing in them or trying to help them. Society condemns them on the spot, even if they are later proven to be innocent, and an accusation placed upon their heads cannot be erased from their lives; it may damage personal and professional relationships.

False accusers don’t just harm the individual men; they also sully the cause of justice for true victims. Every false claim sows some doubt into the system, which only makes it harder for real survivors to be believed. The delicate balance between addressing sexual misconduct and remaining fair to the accused is a fine line that society must tread carefully over.

The Problem of Legal Acknowledgement in Rape Legislation

Another disturbing issue on gender lines for men is the lack of legal protection in rape cases. Known to society that many legal systems of the world do not classify rape of men or transgender people as a crime, nor do they classify killing an animal as a crime. That is an alarming legal gap that depicts that men cannot be victims of sexual violence.

This legal blind spot solidifies the toxic notion of men being perpetrators and never victims, further silencing male survivors of sexual assault. Men who suffer rape or sexual violence are simultaneously not afforded recourse in such a scenario; they are left to face their trauma in total silence. Such grave injustice that legal protection has proven is equally testifying to how much patriarchal constructs hurt and harm men in not offering them the same recognition of victimhood that their counterparts—women—would garner.

Unrealistic Projection of Men by Media

Media indeed adds much to the expectations that society

derives from men. Along with action movies and heroes who are invincible to every kind of attack, we have advertisements bringing masculinity into stoicism and dominance. All of it forms an unreal standard. Men are constantly told they must be great both physically and emotionally, and any vulnerable nature reflects their low value in the scales of manhood.

This image of the “superman” is not only impossible but also pernicious. Men often internalise these portrayals and strive to meet impossible standards, which inevitably breeds self-doubt and insecurity as they fall short. Worse still, these images continuously feed into the notion of male supremacy over women, fuelling patriarchal structures. In itself, the poisonous cycle of media expectations further loads pressure on men and is a destructive force perpetuating damaging stereotypes between genders, which promotes inequality.

The Hidden Epidemic: Suicide Rates Among Men

One of the most tragic consequences of these societal pressures is the high rate of male suicide. From global statistics given by the Philadelphia Mental Health Center and CDC, some evidence very clearly reveals that men are a lot more likely to commit suicide than women. This has been attributed to emotional isolation, career stress, and all those expectations in society that define a man. Men are unable to seek help, burdened by the belief that they must be strong enough to handle their problems alone. This epidemic further becomes a result of the missing mental health support tailored specifically toward men. Society needs to realise that male mental health issues are real, and breaking the stigma of male vulnerability may save so many lives.

The Weight of Emotional Repression

Perhaps the biggest problem men suffer from is emotional repression. Boys receive early life encouragement to

“toughen up” and “stop crying.” Such social conditioning follows them well into adulthood when vulnerable expressions are deemed a weakness, not by the world at large but by themselves as men. The result is that they must always be in control, unemotional, and stoic. This emotional repression can lead to extreme isolation. Men generally cannot look to their friends, family, or even their partner for support as they fear being judged or rejected. And in that climate, the pressure to perform in every arena of life may begin—from careers to relationships to being good fathers.

They find their freedom to express their feelings hindered and suppressed as if someone has bottled up those emotions and left them to sail in the dispersed ocean. As this dichotomy breathes underneath the shadows, its detrimental effects often escape the naked eye. Data from organisations like WHO and Samaritans highlights how men are far more likely to commit suicide than women because societal norms fail to provide men with a way to express their emotions. The tendency for men to underreport symptoms of mental illness, such as depression, also plays a role. Studies reveal that men may resort to maladaptive coping mechanisms, like substance use, rather than seeking professional help, often due to social expectations of self-reliance and emotional resilience.

While patriarchy does undoubtedly oppress women, it also takes its heavy toll on men. Expectations placed upon men to be apathetic, financially sound, and incapable of vulnerability are mere myths and impossible to sustain. The movement forward of society does not just involve challenging patriarchy for women; it also brings down the bad roles imposed on men. Let there be space to feel, seek help, and define their paths without the burden of patriarchal expectations.

The Social Media Mask



By Twisha Vora

I always wonder about various things due to my tendency to overthink, which has led me to also think about my relationships and dependencies on various things. One thing that always seems relevant and relatable to everyone in today's day and age is how we 'relax.' I am sure it has been a long time since we relaxed for a few seconds and listened to what our souls needed, felt, and wanted to say. As we enter adolescence, we begin to explore the world and what it has to offer.

School, friends, hobbies, social media, and much more take up all our attention, leaving no room for ourselves and our individualism to grow and expand into something. Often, we are caught keeping up with all the fun with our friends, attending all the concerts and events we are offered, unwillingly completing all of the college work, thinking about our future as if it is a mere project, making sure we look the best on social media even if we are exhausted in life, staying updated about news and trends that make no difference in our lives, and doing all the things that appear necessary. What stands out the most these days has been our obsession with social media!

Our morning starts with checking what we have missed on social media while sleeping, and then we spend the whole day glued to the very same screen. Since we are so obsessed with it, it surely affects us, from mundane things like fashion, food suggestions, and inspirations to topics like ideological inclination, views on life and the world and even self-image. It makes me question:

What will happen when everything we do is dictated by social media?

Well, it is happening right now as we speak. We follow all the latest trending fashion advice, visit popular places, and follow all famous people. Doesn't it get overwhelming to be the person that social media wants us to be rather than the person we truly feel real in?

I ponder if we are being constrained to be someone who is green-lit by society or if we are becoming obsessed with pursuing the tag of being popular, relatable, or normal.

Do we ever find time to relax or get to know ourselves on an introspective level when eating our favourite meal? Is there a place where we can be unfiltered, uncensored, and unrelated to anyone while focusing on our own mental and emotional needs? Are we conscious of our surroundings, or do we become lost in the fictional lands and barriers we create when we put on those headphones?

Do we evolve into something unique to us, or do we chase the high of being fit in a certain aesthetic to guard our insecurity? Do we ever keep aside our thoughtfully curated posts and even think about showing our vulnerable side to our close ones despite being concerned about their judgements? Do we ever consider the underlying source of our worry, which has been ingrained in us since adolescence, while we are distracted by social media?

Personal Identity and Teenage Years

The stage of teenagehood is a sensitive phase in anyone's life. One incident can change us a lot. This was also noted by various psychologists who learnt about the influence of social media from a psychological point of view. They observed that social media has made surveillance a part of our lives.

Under surveillance, our engagement in social media also reflects changes in how we look at our sense of self. Today, we have learnt how to present ourselves on social media, reshaping and re-expressing ourselves in this digital space. The

practice of self-monitoring triggered by external surveillance has big implications for the way people choose to express themselves. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory states that adolescence is the critical juncture for Forging. This phase brings forth the psychosocial conflict of 'identity versus role' confusion, wherein individuals explore different roles and strive to cultivate a steadfast sense of identity.

Further, Marcia's Identity Status expanded on this topic by stating that adolescents go through numerous stages, such as diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. When they are going through this lifetime experience, the studies show that the influence of social media leads them to negative self-perception, feelings of inadequacy, and fear of missing out (FOMO).

If we were to know a little about our 'identity,' we could also shed some light on our personalities. Personalities are made up of our thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, and they serve as a stepping stone for our identities because they are both connected concepts of our development. Our personality is what we show others about ourselves. This means that all the popular personality tests like MBTI and DISC might help us figure out self-identities other than using it to check if our vibe matches with other people to make them our friends.

Sometimes I wonder why social media has moulded us into the same 'aesthetics,' in which we don't fit. It has led us to have low self-esteem and deranged self-awareness, sucking us into a wonderland away from reality despite everyone collectively wanting a breath of fresh air. We do deserve some time to sort out our emotions, absorb what is going on in our hectic lives, and recover our brains from the overprocessing that computers require to prevent overheating.

Have people who swear by practising journaling been able to convey their emotions? Or has it become a race of all those curated shallow spreads that help people more than themselves? Answering all these questions would take a person some courage and deep introspection. I hope one day there will be at least a few times when we get to sit and realise where we are heading and make sure it's not too late to repair the damage inflicted.

Although this is something that cannot be done in a short period, the thought of it is enough to start a conversation about an individual's mental health that is 24/7 attacked by social media these days.



10%

By Gargi Paralkar

It's 2024. Information is everywhere. ChatGPT is our teacher, and Instagram is our friend. Answers to any questions or doubts are one simple search away. Technology has streamlined processes that once took days, if not weeks, to complete. Things have changed.

Today, wisdom is found in rather odd places, not in a dreadful 500-page book but in every alternate 15-second reel. So, with everything served to us on a silver platter, the path to success should be sweet and simple, perhaps even easier than it has been at any point in history. Yet, it's not, is it?

Information, information, and some more information

Earlier, if you wanted to learn something new, it meant going to the library and skimming through pages for hours or taking classes. Information was scarce; those who sought it made full use of it. However, today, there is a plethora of knowledge available quite easily. This choice of options might seem good, but it also makes it difficult to distinguish between what is useful and what is irrelevant.

While it is excellent for those who take full advantage of everything that the Internet has to offer, there is also a flip side. The Internet is highly addictive and distracting (of course). Like a box of candy, it is open for you to have just one bite.

Moreover, people often spend more time sifting through resources than actually doing any work. Browsing through such vast amounts of data creates a false sense of productivity. Sadly, more often than not, we spend more time watching TED talks than actually doing what they say.

The boring and honest answer to it is discipline: the ability to focus on what truly matters. To stick to the path without giving in to the colourfulness of the internet. But the accessibility has made it easier to dream of cosy success but still harder to navigate the path.

Hustle and competition

More information means more businesses means more opportunities. This sounds great, wonderful even. More people from diverse backgrounds can now take part in this feast. However, this also leads to increased competition across virtually every field.

The barrier to entry has lowered significantly. Platforms like Etsy or Shoplift make it easier to start an online store. Fiverr and Upwork provide opportunities for people to market their work. However, because it is easier to start, people are doing so, making the market saturated and, therefore, making it harder to stand out. Increased competition means simply being good at what you do is no longer enough. Success requires you to distinguish yourself from the rest of the market and place your work innovatively. Skill alone won't work; there has to be a touch of creativity.

All a façade

It's an illusion that success is more accessible today. We watch a couple of podcasts of entrepreneurs and think this is it; this is what it takes to make it. But they show a very naive or unrealistic outlook, a very simplistic route without delving deep into other factors. This has led to unrealistic expectations, especially among younger generations, hungry for quick success. But it's not an overnight thing, nor can it be achieved in weeks or months. It takes years.

Ironically, the visibility of success has created a distorted sense of reality, making people feel as though they are constantly falling behind even if they are on the right track. Social comparison, a phenomenon amplified by social media, is the cherry on top.

There is pressure in our minds to go out there and work 24/7 like a madman. It sounds cool, but only in theory. More often than not, we dream the dream rather than actually chase the dream. So when we don't end up doing what we set out to do, this leads to cognitive dissonance, aka 'anxiety.'

But what is even success?

The meaning of success has evolved over the years; it can't be only categorised by a stable job, a house, and a family. Today, success is more fluid, including factors such as – personal fulfilment, work-life balance, and social impact.

The pressure to 'have it all' can be overwhelming. There is a need to succeed in multiple areas of life simultaneously, professionally, personally, and mentally, where excelling in one domain often means falling short in another. This broad look of success, where family and career must be juggled perfectly, has raised the stakes.

To add more, in today's time, the traditional way of doing 9 to 5 is not considered enough; entrepreneurial success is a must. While it can certainly be rewarding, it also comes bearing gifts of risks and uncertainty.

For those wishing to follow a traditional path, this social shift can leave them feeling a sense of inadequacy, as though working a 9-to-5 job is no longer valued or respected.

Success in the current era is both easier and harder than ever. Yes, opportunities and options are plenty, but so is the competition, it's not as black and white; it's a lot more complex and nuanced, requiring us to navigate through some tough dilemmas. To thrive in this landscape, mere knowledge and skills won't suffice. Resilience, self-awareness, and the ability to filter out the noise are much needed. Success, after all, maybe within reach, but reaching it requires a new level of focus, discipline, and mental fortitude that can be difficult to cultivate in the face of modern challenges.



तुम कब आओगे अतिथि?

जाओगे

By Yashvi Jain

सामने पड़ा ये कैलेंडर देख, बस एक ही प्रश्न बार- बार दिमाग में घूमता है – तुम कब जाओगे अतिथि?

मेहमान-नवाजी ने अपने आप में एक नया रूप ले लिया है। जो पहले परंपरा थी, आज एक पेशा बन चुका है। ऐसा पेशा जो परिवारों में लुप्त और आबादी के बीच में बढ़ गया है। जिसका फायदा परदेसी ज़्यादा और देसी के मन से जा चुका है। तात्पर्य यह कि इंडिया के ‘कल्चर टूरिज्म’ ने पर्यटक के बीच में एक स्थल की संस्कृति जानने का अवसर दिया है। खातिरदारी अब सेवा कम और विलासिता ज्यादा बन चुकी है और बस व्यापार और विलुप्ति के बीच, मेरा इसी बात पर मंथन है कि आखिर तुम कब जाओगे अतिथि?

-एक, दो, तीन...

दिन तो वो थे जब घर पर शादी की रस्म निभाने के लिए पूरा परिवार एक छत के नीचे आ जाता था। किस लिए? अरे भाई, मेहमानों के पुरस्कार के लिए। पकवानों की तो जैसे बाढ़ आ जाती थी। आलू की सब्ज़ी, पुरियाँ, खीर, पापड़, चटनी – इतना कुछ कि खाना कम और मेला ज़्यादा लगने लगता था। ऐसा लगता था मानो अतिथि के साथ पूरी बस्ती का खाना आ गया हो।

पर आजकल? आजकल हम सब “सावधान” हो गए हैं। अब चार लोग घर में हों, तो चार रोटियाँ ही बनेंगी, बिल्कुल नाप-तौल कर। अतिथि तो दूर की बात, खुद के लिए ही ऐसा लगता है कि कहीं कुछ बच न जाए, कूड़ा-करकट न हो। दिन तो वो थे जब ‘और लीजिए ना,’ ‘आपके लिए ही बनाया है,’ ‘अरे एक से क्या होगा,’ जैसे एक से एक वाक्य बोलकर हम मेहमान की प्लेट पर एक कचौरी ज्यादा परोस ही लेते थे। और बस इसी अनुरोध का सटीक शब्द मारवाड़ी भाषा में है – मनवार।

नए दौर के इस नए तरीके को मैं समझती हूँ ‘प्रैक्टिकल’। अब वक्त और भोजन दोनों का हिसाब-किताब करना आ गया है। कितना सही है, कितना नहीं, यह तो कोई नहीं बता सकता। अब भला ४ लोगों के परिवार में ४-६ रोटी बनाना गलत कैसा?

-कठपुतली हैं हम किसके?

मुझे आज भी याद है बड़े ताऊजी का अक्सर ३-४ महीनों में मेरे घर आना। जब आते थे, कुछ हँसकर पापा को ताना मारते थे, खट्टी-मीठी नोक-झोंक करते थे और बस मुझे बुलाकर ‘ट्रिकल ट्रिकल लिटिल स्टार’ बोलने को कहते थे। शर्म आ जाए तो नाटक में सीता बनकर जो डायलॉग स्कूल में बोला

था, वही फिर से दोहराते थे।

इंकार करने का तो सवाल ही नहीं उठता! बस हाँ में हाँ भरना ही रास्ता था। बचपन में बस इतनी आज्ञादी थी कि यह चुन पाऊँ किस पर हाँ कहना है। डोर बुजुर्गों के पास थी और मैं ठहरी एक कठपुतली जिसे प्यार से वो बुलाते थे ‘गुड़िया’।

पर अब? बदलाव तो आया है। पहले मेहमान के आगमन पर, मानो मन झूम सा उठता था। अब तो, मेहमान ने दस्तक दी नहीं, और हम जैसे युवा खुद को कमरे में बंद कर लेते हैं। कोई हाल-चाल पूछे तो पढ़ाई का बहाना दे देते हैं। पहले दादी की बात सुनते थे, तो अब मम्मी को कुछ उल्टा सुना देते हैं। किसी का किसी पर नियंत्रण ही नहीं है। बदलाव तो आया, लेकिन हालातों की कठपुतली आज भी हैं। पीयर प्रेशर, सोशल मीडिया, आदि-आदि हालात, आज धूमिल कर रहे हैं रिश्ते के रिश्तों मोल को।

- गरीबी में आटा गीला

गरीबी में आटा गीला होना यानि क्या? समस्या पर समस्या, कमी में और कमी, तंगी पर तंगी – बस इसे ही कहते हैं गरीबी में आटा गीला। दादी को अजीब सा शौक था – सबके शादी की पत्रिका संभालने का। जब पूछा तो दो कारण बताती। पहला ये कि किसने शादी में न्योता दिया है उसका रिकॉर्ड बना रहे। दूसरे ये कि पत्रिका में आए पीले चावल को संभालकर रखे – उनका निजी शौक। माँ को हमेशा से आपत्ति थी पत्रिका के बढ़ते ढेर को हर दीवाली साफ करने की। अब बताओ भई, ठहरे आखिर ‘मिडिल क्लास,’ अलमारी पर पत्रिका रखोगे तो कपड़े कहाँ जाएँगे? पर चूँकि ये बात दादी ने न कभी समझी, घर पर हर दीवाली कलेश होते रहे।

पर कुछ सालों से दादी के रिश्तों के संग्रह कुछ ठंडे पड़ चुके हैं। कारण? अब पत्रिकाएँ आती हैं तो व्हाट्सएप पर। और पोस्ट ऑफिस की द्वारा देहलीज़ दे भी दे तो सहपरिवार की जगह ‘मिस्टर एंड मिसेज’ लिख देते। अब शादियाँ हैं “इनवाइट ऑनली”। ‘मैनेजमेंट’ और ‘बजट’ का मोल-भाव रिश्ते से ज्यादा है। पहले गरीबी में आटा गीला होता था, पर अब गरीबी में रिश्ते ही गीले हो गए हैं। तंगी तो है, बजट की और कहीं न कहीं रिश्तों की। हाँ, मेहमाननवाजी अब भी होती है, पर उसमें वो पुरानी बात कहाँ? मेहमाननवाजी में वह खुलापन नहीं है।

अब वो “अतिथि देवो भवः” वाली बात इतिहास बन चुकी है। अब मेहमान आएँ तो अच्छा है कि बस फोन पर ही निपट जाएँ – “हैलो-हाय” करो, गुड मॉर्निंग मेसज व्हाट्सएप ग्रुप पर भेजो और फिर सब अपना-अपना फोन बंद कर दो। घर में आकर चाय-पानी कराना? हाय! वो दिन तो गए जब मेहमानों का आना त्योहार जैसा लगता था। अब तो लगता है, मेहमान के आते ही मन में सवाल उठता है – तुम कब जाओगे, अतिथि? अगर मेहमान भूले-चुके आए तो आँखें उस कैलेंडर को ढूँढ़ कर उनके जाने के दिन गिनती हैं। आजकल अतिथि का स्वागत सिर्फ उस बटन से होता है, जिससे कॉल काटी जाती है!



“Either
we censor
ourselves
or the
authorities
censor us.”

The Payal Kapadia Interview

Payal Kapadia is a celebrated voice in contemporary Indian literature, known for her insightful exploration of themes that resonate deeply with readers of all ages. Her writing, spanning genres from children’s literature to adult fiction, brings a unique blend of empathy, wit, and nuance to storytelling that has garnered both national and international acclaim. She won the Crossword Book Award for Children’s Writing for her debut book, *Wisha Wozzariter*, in 2013. Further, her works, such as *Maidless in Mumbai* and *Horrid High*, have struck a chord with readers across the globe for their imaginative narratives and heartfelt characters. Her latest book, *Woebegone’s Warehouse of Words* (Hachette), is a testament to her prowess as a writer and one for all ages, available in paperback and limited hardcover editions at bookstores and on Amazon.

We are thankful to Payal Kapadia for this opportunity to interview her. It was a sheer privilege to hear insights into her journey, creative process, evolving literary landscape, and the inspirations that fuel her storytelling.

As someone deeply immersed in the world of books, what are you currently reading? Are there specific books on your list that you’re eager to finish before this year wraps up?

I almost always have three or four books half-read at the same time because there are too many things I want to read, and I like to toggle between books that catch my fancy. I read on Kindle, as it allows me to hold onto several books.

I’ve just finished a wonderful book by George Saunders called *Lincoln in the Bardo*. It is a beautiful blend of history and inventive fantasy. I am also reading *The Garden Against Time* by Olivia Laing, an exquisitely written, non-fiction account of the joys and challenges of growing a garden. This is also a deep philosophical reflection on the nature of life and beauty. Then, there’s *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang, and I’m so enjoying its scathing and satirical commentary on the writing community. Being part of the same community, the biting humour of this book quite resonates with me.

The book I would like to finish before this year ends would be *War and Peace*. I have started reading it multiple times but have never managed to complete it. It’s just been on my bucket list for a long time.

Looking back to your early years, what are some of the first books or authors that left a lasting impression on you as a child?

It’s so important and formative to read when you are young, and I read a lot. However, I didn’t read books because it was important or good for me to do so. I would like to emphasise this point because I believe we spend too much time telling young kids to read because it’s good for them, and that’s like telling kids to eat their veggies or do their homework. We don’t really do something wholeheartedly because it’s good for us, so the argument to be made for reading is that it’s enjoyable, not that it’s good for you.

Possibly, I was one of the last few generations that grew up

reading anything and everything by Enid Blyton, she was such a prolific writer. In our times, the circulation of international books was pretty low, and we had to visit libraries to borrow books, there was no Amazon or Kindle. So, most of the shelves used to be filled with these wonderful books by Enid Blyton. *The Secret Seven*, *The Famous Five*, *The Faraway Tree*, and *The Wishing Chair* are still some of my favourite books written by her.

Alongside Enid Blyton, I grew up reading books written by Roald Dahl. I loved *Matilda*, and I still do. I also really like his other books, such as *The Witches* and *The Twits*, and I can enjoy them even today. I absolutely marvel at Dahl’s wicked humour and outlandish imagination. It is funny how the books I loved as a child are very much the books I love even today.

Was there a pivotal moment that propelled you toward writing, or do you feel your journey into storytelling was a natural progression from your experiences and interests?

It was a bit of both. I was always a storyteller; I made up a lot of things as a child. I used to lie and make up stories to get out of trouble. You know, I loved drawing and scribbling on the walls of my house, and this artistic expression of mine, as you can imagine, was not appreciated by my parents. So, every time my parents asked, ‘Who did this?’ I’d have an elaborate story handy, and I guess they humoured me, even when they had to have known the truth. I remember forming detective clubs with my friends, thinking up and reading mysteries into our everyday lives, and then setting off to solve these ‘mysteries’.

I think I grew up in a world where I used my surroundings as props to build my stories. I had an overactive imagination, which couldn’t have been for my parents. I was a child, so it didn’t bother me much. I have this fond memory of writing my first poem when I was 10 years old. I don’t know what prompted me to sit down and write that poem, it rhymed, but that was the only thing that qualified it as a poem, but I still have it safe with me in the original book it was written in. When I read it out to my parents, they clapped and told me that I was super talented. In a way, they made up their small little story about me. It provided me with a lot of confidence to write, and I kept on writing, so I am truly thankful to them.

Can you share the story behind the first piece of literature you ever wrote? What inspired it, and how do you feel about it today?

Wisha Wozzariter, my debut novel, is about a girl called Wisha who wishes she were a writer. It was very much a book about writing a book.

It’s an adventure tale that begins with her meeting a Bookworm and taking a ride on the Thought Express. She goes to a Marketplace of Ideas and finds an Inspiration Balloon that has no air in it. In the past, it was used by some great authors, but nobody wants it any more. Wisha gets it at a throwaway price, and as you can see, the abstract concepts around writing become real characters in my story. If you want to know what happens next, you’ll need to read

the book.

I started writing this when I became a mother. I was in my late twenties, a young mother full of energy, stuck at home. The only thing that could take me beyond the four walls of the house in those early days of caring for a baby was my imagination. So, I sat down to write, and I found myself grappling with the angst of not knowing where to begin, I mean, which writer does? All I could think about was, ‘I wish I was a writer,’ and that’s how the name of the character came to me! She becomes this 10-year-old kid who wants to write, a sort of stand-in for me. That’s how this book began, though I ended up leaving it halfway and returning to my life as a journalist with Outlook Magazine once my maternity leave had ended.

After a few years, I found myself missing my writing and wanting to go back to it. So, I wrote to Penguin asking if they’d be interested in publishing a new author, and quite naturally, they responded by asking me to share some samples of my writing. I panicked, I did not have anything but journalistic writing in my repertoire! I rummaged through all my Word documents and found this forgotten half-story of a girl called Wisha. I sent it off. Within a few hours, I got an urgent email from their commissioning editor, she loved my story and wanted to discuss it further on call.

I recall even now how my heart was racing and my reluctance to share my number because I had no idea what to say if she called. She called, sure enough, and when she asked, ‘Where is the other half of the book?’ I admitted, ‘I don’t have the other half, not even in my own head. Wisha Wozzariter is stuck, and so am I.’ So, she said, ‘If you can finish the book, we will run it.’ That was all the motivation I needed. I sat down and completed it, and you know what? At the end of the book, Wisha becomes a writer, and I became one too.

The book won the Crossword Book Award in 2013 for Best Children’s Book. It was nothing short of a fairy-tale beginning. It gave me the assurance I was looking for, maybe I could write after all! I decided to quit journalism and become a full-time writer. I haven’t looked back since!

With your educational background in English literature and journalism, how do you think these fields have shaped your voice and approach to writing?

I did my Bachelor’s in English from St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai. The study of literature exploded the top of my head wide open. It exposed me to authors and writing styles and storytelling techniques I would have never explored on my own. It took me far beyond my comfort zone and allowed me to appreciate the craft, the utter musicality of writing. As a student, I had this opportunity to read books, so many books, and books are the final printed drafts of their authors. It made me realise how many choices an author struggles with as she writes a story and how writing is such a craft.

Journalism was quite different. It threw me out into the real world and showed me how many stories can be found in real life by observing real people in their surroundings. It instilled a sense of discipline. It made me sensitive to the nuances of editing; to seek clarity and accuracy in my

writing. When I sit down to read, my eyes always settle on the grammatical error, the typo, the missing punctuation. My life as a journalist has trained me to look at writing through the lens of an editor.

Having written across different formats—fictional books and non-fiction articles—how does your writing process differ between the two? Can you please elaborate on it?

In some ways, both are similar. You have to put in the research, and this is the basis of any and every form of writing. Even while writing fiction, you must explore your memory as if it were an archive, trying to remember things you’ve experienced in the past or something that caught your attention and never left you completely. You’re sifting through your past for the vivid detail of those life-defining moments. Fiction writing gives you the liberty of taking these details, these tiny truths, and turning them into a narrative with the help of your imagination.

I wrote a biography of Dr BR Ambedkar for teenagers, and it required me to do plenty of elaborate research on his life. Non-fiction is about staying loyal to the facts, but even here, I did have to call upon my imagination to make Dr Ambedkar’s life journey fascinating and relevant for young readers who know very little about him. To make my story resonate, I had to imagine what it must have been like to grow up as an ‘untouchable’ in a caste-ridden society.

There is this overlap between fiction and non-fiction, and as a journalist, I came across it over and over. You stick to the facts, you are bound to them, but the writer in you is able to relate these facts in a way that they can resonate with readers. As a writer, you are always stretching across your writing to imagine what your reader feels, to empathise with him, and to empathise with the people in the stories you’re telling.

The literary landscape is constantly evolving. Where do you see the future of the book and publishing industry heading?

People are not reading as much as they used to. I think our reading habits in India are still not as evolved as they are in parts of the developed world. We don’t have the ability or the desire to read beyond our comfort zone. With Instagram, with all the doom-scrolling we do, our attention spans are so truncated, we are certainly not reading as much as we should, and I can’t help feeling pessimistic.

It’s so much easier these days to watch Netflix or flip through five posts than it is to sit down and read. There are still people out there who appreciate reading and know how marvellous it is, but I wish it were not such a well-kept secret, you know. I wish more people would discover the joys of reading.

Maybe there’s a challenge for writers like me to write smarter and cleverer. We also need to invest in the next generation of readers and make reading as lively and engaging as we can.

In your latest book, *Woebegone’s Warehouse of Words*, you delve into themes like censorship, oppression, and the power of language. Were there any real-life events or experiences that inspired these explorations?

You don’t know what a book is going to be about until it is done. You often have an overarching idea of the story, but you don’t have a clear answer to the question, ‘What is it about?’ Somehow, the exercise of writing the book helps you explore the thoughts running in your head, and as they appear on the page, they become visible, clear, evident.

Woebegone’s Warehouse of Words is set in a world of speakers and ords. The speakers look like us, but they must buy words to use them. The Words are living beings that also look like us, from the outside anyway, but they are made of flesh and ink, not flesh and blood. They allow themselves to be caged in a warehouse because that’s the only way for them to be found by the speakers, bought and spoken. Words that don’t get spoken fade—and so, in my book, the Words have given up their freedom to stay alive.

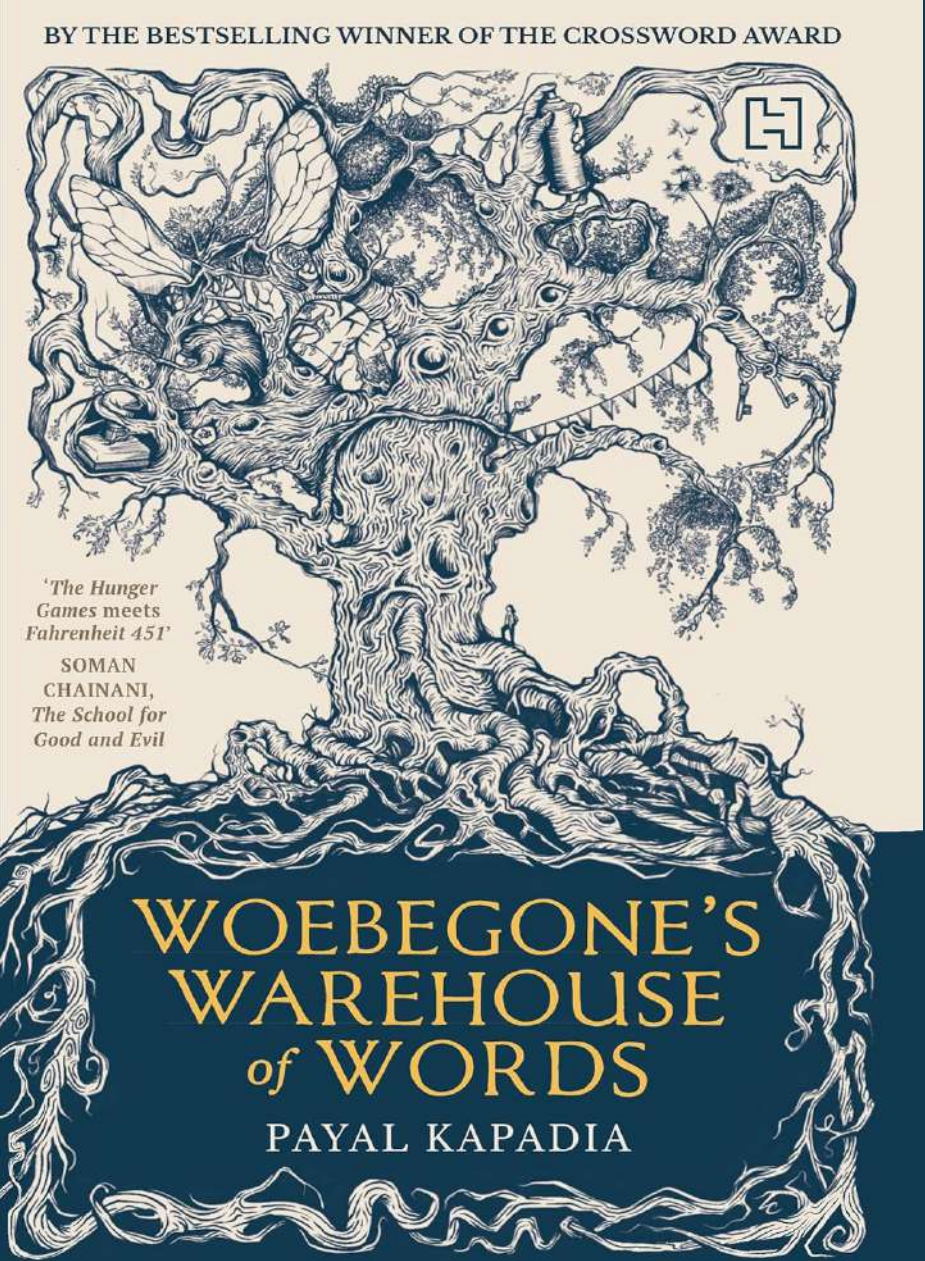
This book came out of my sheer love for language, for the words and how they shape us. All our stories are composed of their words, aren’t they? Yet, how much attention do we really pay to our words? I wanted to write about words as if they were living beings, to make readers care about them. I guess I was also reacting to the ways in which we write and talk to each other on digital platforms. I feel people are losing the ability to articulate. When I started writing this book, it was to celebrate language in all its richness and to lament the death of our old ways of communicating. Today, people hardly write letters to each other or engage in long, meandering conversations. Our vocabulary has shrunk. So many languages die every year. And when our languages die, a part of us dies too. A way of looking at the world is lost forever. It is just as tragic as losing an animal species or a rainforest.

As I was building this world where the speakers needed to buy words to use them, I began to see so many parallels with our own world. We don’t buy words to use them, not yet at least, but don’t we have to be careful about what we say, and aren’t there so many things we cannot say? Either we censor ourselves or the authorities censor us.

Look at everything around us. Even our social media content is packaged as a story, when all it’s trying to do is sell us something: a product or a persona, or a life full of things, more things than we know what to do with.

Then, there were other influences that seeped into my story. I began to look closely at how elections were being run all over the world. New-age dictators and autocrats coming to power. I began to see how polarised we were all becoming. People either believe one thing or the other, and it’s almost a crime to stand somewhere in the middle. All of these things posed a question in my head: If we don’t invest in the words we are using and the conversations we are having, will we lose track of our connections with the world, with ourselves, with the truth?

So, I thought of this world where you have to buy words to use them, and I depicted them turning up in boxes at people’s doorsteps. Just this idea of living beings inside boxes was startling and disturbing. I used that to make my readers think about not just the words but all the living beings in our world that pay for our insatiable needs and wants. What are the hidden costs of living in a world where we can buy everything at the click of a button and we are consuming more and more? Do we end up getting less?



Considering the boom of self-publishing in recent years, how do you think it will impact the thought process of aspiring authors?

There has been a definite boom in self-publishing. Unfortunately, so much of self-publishing has poor production quality, it's more of an ego trip, a commercial enterprise aimed at self-promotion and massaging the writer's vanity. We need publishers and publishing houses for their expertise at curating content and putting out writing that meets a certain quality standard. A good editor can help an author up her writing game dramatically.

I think budding writers should avail of all the online platforms out there, things like Substack, to sharpen their voices. But I'd still support going through a traditional publishing route, getting your work seen and vetted by an experienced editor before it goes out into the world. Once it's out there, your readers will decide for themselves, and no one will give you a second chance to clarify what you meant when you wrote something.

Your writing often uses humour as a key element. How did you discover this voice, and what role does humour play in your storytelling?

I'm not sure who said this, but 'comedy is tragedy seen from a distance.' It's 'tragedy plus time.' Humour often comes from our own lives, from little struggles, like missing a train or being ghosted by a friend. When you take a step back and see these little struggles from a distance, you can laugh at them without wallowing in self-pity. The best humour writing draws a lot from the writer's ability to laugh at herself and be humble and to see everyone around her as human, with a genuine affection for human flaws. Humour makes it easy for us to think about difficult things because it frees us of inhibition and judgement.

Kids have an intrinsic sense of humour, they respond to it very well in stories and books. They're so comfortable laughing at themselves. As a children's author, you enjoy the freedom to say some of the most outrageous things and to get away with it because children aren't as stuck on being politically correct as adults are.

Does the ever-evolving social and political landscape play a role in deciding what themes a writer chooses to explore through their work?

It does. It might not always be an intentional thing, but writers don't exist in a vacuum. The world does creep into our work. We keep absorbing things from our surroundings through interactions, experiences, and news we come across. So, as the social and political landscape evolves, a writer is exposed to newer things to think about. One might choose not to write about certain things in a conscious and deliberate way, but they certainly colour our imagination and shape the stories we tell.

Finally, is there anything else you would like to share about your work, upcoming projects, or some words for budding writers?


A new book is like a newborn child, honestly, and you can't send it out into the world without settling it in. I've been travelling all over the country, reading this book to vastly different age-groups, sometimes young kids, and at other times, young adults and adults. There are so many

conversations to be sparked: our connection with our words, the commodification of language, the death of so many languages, the elusive nature of the truth, and the ease with which modern-day dictatorships can flourish by controlling the words and the narrative.


I have other half-done projects to return to when this book has been settled, a satire about a world where books are not safe anymore, and a collection of literary essays that draw from my own life.

My advice for budding writers would be that there is no substitute for reading. Your best teacher is the written word. Read. Read as much as you can. Form writing groups – writing isn't easy, and it's so terrifying to look deeply inward and to share stories, to risk being judged and evaluated. There's safety in numbers!

Write without waiting for the right time or the right story because there is no such thing. Once you look at your life through the lens of a writer, there will always be stories to be found. Writing is an act of noticing, of discovering, of seeing in an old world that which is new and astonishing and revelatory.



“Humour makes it easy for us to think about difficult things because it frees us of inhibition and judgment.”



लम्बा इंतजार?

By Janmesh Vaishnav

Lambaaaa intezaar?

Why do I have to wait for everything in this city that claims to be fast? Maybe I'm not there yet; maybe the journey feels fast because the destination is far, long gone. I wore a saree today - would this city judge me for that? I mean, they abandoned the tree next to me! I hope they abandon me, too. I want to go home.

Until then, I'll wait...



जिंदगी लहरों सी

By Aishwary Patil

जिंदगी कुछ लहरों जैसी, कभी शांत, तो कभी तूफानी ।
चमकती रोशनियाँ, जैसे हमारे ख्वाब हैं,
अँधेरे में भी अपना रास्ता ढूँढती ।
ये कश्तियाँ हम सब हैं - अपने अपने सफर में,
किसी अंजाने मंजिल की तरफ बढ़ते हुए,
कभी रुकते, कभी डूबते,
कभी हवा के साथ चल पड़ते ।
लहरें हमारे उन लम्हों की याद दिलाती हैं,
जो हमने किसी के साथ गुज़ारे,
और किनारा उन रिश्तों का अंत ।
इस लम्हों के समुन्दर में,
ख्वाबों की कश्तियाँ बनके कितना घूम लगे ।
मंजिल तो सबकी एक किनारा ही है, मौत को तुम यहीं पाओगे ।



The Iconic Dome

By Joy Sharma

This unique perspective of Mumbai's Taj Mahal Palace captures the hotel's grandeur, blending intricate architecture with the timeless elegance it has represented for over a century. Known as a symbol of resilience and luxury, the Taj stands tall on the shores of the Arabian Sea, embodying the spirit of Mumbai. Through this photograph, the iconic dome and arched balconies reveal themselves in a fresh light, reminding us why this landmark holds a special place in the heart of the city and the world of architecture.



बोल

Illustration by Raj Darji
Nazm by Faiz Ahmad Faiz

बोल कि लब आज़ाद हैं तेरे
बोल ज़बाँ अब तक तेरी है
तेरा सुत्वाँ जिस्म है तेरा
बोल कि जाँ अब तक तेरी है
देख कि आहन-गर की दुकाँ में
तुंद हैं शोले सुख है आहन
खुलने लगे कुपलों के दहाने
फैला हर इक जंजीर का दामन
बोल ये थोड़ा वक्त बहुत है
जिस्म ओ ज़बाँ की मौत से पहले
बोल कि सच ज़िंदा है अब तक
बोल जो कुछ कहना है कह ले



गुब्बारे

Illustration by Tejas Binalwar
@tejas.flicks
Nazm by Harivansh Rai Bachchan

YAHAN BIKTA HAI SAB
KUCH ZARA RAHNA
SAMBHAL KE,
LOG HAWA BHI BECH DETE
HAI, GUBBARE MEIN
DAAL KE.

ITNA KYU SIKHA JA
RAHI HO ZINDAGI

HUMEIN KAUNSI SADIYAN
GUZARNI HAI YAHAN

जिंदगी

Illustration by Tejas Binalwar
@tejas.flicks
Nazm by Gulzar

Parents Playing The Reverse Card

By Samriddhi Mehta

Imagine it's 2022, and you're barely out of the COVID era. The world is gradually opening up again, and the desire to regain your social reputation while maintaining a sense of homeliness has presented itself as a combined state. Reel viewership is spiking across the country, and you are a part of it now, even if you weren't before.

"Can you put down your phone now? Uske alawa kuch dikhta bhi hai tumhe?" was a sentence heard regularly, and we, who were busy indulging in a sticker/GIF war with our friends, wondered what our parents were even going on about.

But who knew that 2 years later we would be using the same phrases as them?

"Mom, get out of your phone."

Streams of clothes and random items flew out of my cupboard as I dug into different drawers to find that particular shirt I had been planning to wear for days. With barely a few things left untouched, I sat on the pile littering the ground, legs crossed. I wondered if I made that or if the wardrobe just threw up.

And just like every other time I couldn't find something, I called out to that one person who knew where it was, "Mom!" I got no reply. I tried again. This time, she shouted from the other room, "What?"

"Can you come here, please?" Silence again. What was she even doing? Sighing, I stood up to find her.

There she was, in the living room, scrolling. Yes, scrolling. No matter how many times I've seen her do that, it is still hard to digest that the same person who used to scold me for scrolling social media for hours is now doing the same.

She turned her attention towards me. "Yes?" "I can't find the T-shirt we bought a month ago. Remember the one with..." By the time I finished my description, her attention was elsewhere already. However, she spoke again, "Listen, come here." I walked towards her and leaned into her phone screen with a questioning look.

My jaw fell when I noticed a bunch of dresses filling my mother's phone screen. "I have to go to a function next week. Which of these looks good for that?" She clicked on one

frame. "I personally like this one."

I eyed the unopened delivery packages I ordered for her last week on the opposite couch. I poked her arm to get her attention. Once she faced me, I pointed towards the brown packets. "Get out of your phone and try those first," I said.

Goodness, how the tables have turned.

"Ye kya sticker-sticker khel rahe ho?"

With the family trip coming up, the group has been buzzing constantly with either itinerary details or activity ideas to keep everyone entertained throughout. Photos, texts, payment details, site links, etc., everything was here, including the enthusiastic replies. The younger group, a.k.a. the kids/us, had our internal conversations, too, mostly with meme stickers and GIFs.

I was busy playing Temple Run 2 (yeah) when a notification appeared. My eyes widened as my character jumped off the cliff. A bigger problem had appeared.

(Notification)

Uncle

I accidentally cancelled the final tickets instead of the older ones.

(Added notifications)

Cousin 1

What?? How??

Cousin 2
Ab kya karenge?

Aunt
I told you to check twice.

I opened the chat and began to type a similar stream of thought when Dad sent something. I blink twice and rub my eyes to confirm if I saw that right. My dad had sent a sticker. A sticker made out of Munna Bhai M.B.B.S.'s cutout saying, 'Tension kayko leta hai? Yele chana kha.'

Glancing from the screen and right at my sister across the room, our eyes met. She wore a similar expression: 'What the hell!' Surprised and amused, we got up at the same time and rushed to the living room, where the said person hunched

over the table, typing away on the laptop. "Dad." My sister called out. "What did you just send to the group?"

His eyebrows furrowed. "What?"

I opened the chat again to find a further conversation about our cousin correcting his father that only one ticket had been cancelled, not all. I breathed a sigh of relief before returning my attention to why we came here, only to see Mom asking him something and tapping on her phone.

The next beep revealed the short conversation. She had sent a sticker too. A dancing frog.

I half-laughed and half-spoke, "Since when did you guys start playing these sticker games?"

"Phone use nahi karna to rakhte kyu ho?"

The hour hand of the wall clock was millimetres away from 12 as my sister and I paced the room. We were trying to ring our parents' phone but to no avail. They were out at their friends' place for dinner, and we were pretty sure they lost all track of time and forgot to tell us.

"Still nothing?" I asked my sister. She had called a few times, and I texted them—not enough to be alarming, but ones they would reply to. She shook her head.

"They better get us something good to eat after this. I can see the variety of dishes they had from the photos they sent earlier." My sister spoke, now seated and resting her head

on the couch.

In the next few minutes, food delivery apps had our attention as we discussed what looked worth devouring, all the while knowing that we weren't ordering anyway.

Suddenly, there was a noise of steps outside, followed by whispers. My sister and I looked at each other. Keys jingled. As soon as the pair entered, the surprise was visible. Dad spoke, "Oh, you guys are still awake?" I furrowed my eyebrows, "Did you guys see the time?"

My sister joined, "Where are your phones? Do you know how many times we called?"

"Must've missed it. It was quite fun since it had been a while meeting them." Mom shrugged, ready to get to her room. "You guys know how it is." She said pointedly, a smile sugarcoating the attack.

"Why do you keep a phone when you don't plan to use it?" I asked. The pair exchanged a glance before laughing, "Look who's talking." And they went in.

Looking at my sister, I questioned, "Are we seriously turning into them?"

.....

These are just a few instances of how older generations have started turning things around for us. While the evolution of this era has brought changes in almost every domain, these quirky and amusing twists were not exactly what our generation had in mind.





A CHOICE : BEYOND THE HILLS

By Sapna Dodmani

Harish Ram had always been deeply connected to his roots. More than anything else, he loved the land he was born on, the soil of Surangpur, a remote village nestled in the dense forests of Maharashtra. Surrounded by hills, rivers, and lakes, Surangpur was a paradise untouched by the noise of cities. The tall trees and the fresh air filled with a mix of soil fragrances, flowers, and farms. People are often lost in this scent. Every evening, the setting sun behind the hills painted the sky in colours. Nature existed in its purest form. For Harish, this village was more than just home, it was his world. He had spent his childhood running along the riverbanks, playing in the fields, and climbing the hills to catch the last glimpse of the day. Being the eldest son of hardworking farmers Shivram and Sarita Ram, he had grown up in harmony with nature and had a deep respect for it.

Unfortunately, living was not easy for them. Shivram and Sarita toiled under the blistering sun, their hands toughened from the years of working on their small farm, but despite all their efforts, life was a constant struggle. There were times when the harvest was meagre. Sometimes, wild animals would destroy their hard work overnight. There were multiple nights when the family had to go to bed with an empty stomach. However, they always made sure that Harish and his younger siblings had enough to eat, even if it meant they had to do without any food. With every season that passed, the weight of their debts pressed down harder as wild animals relentlessly tore through their fields, leaving behind broken crops and dashed hopes. Shivram and Sarita never complained, but Harish saw the tiredness in their eyes and the silent agony they had been carrying for years.

Through hard work and determination, Harish managed to pass the SSC examination. But that dark night, fate had something else planned for him. Harish overheard his parents speaking in low, anxious voices outside their house. His father's voice cracked as he spoke about the mounting debt. His mother, usually the calm pillar of the family, did not say much. But the tremble in her voice, so rare, made Harish's stomach twist. Their conversations broke him into tears. He turned over, staring at the ceiling, feeling helpless about how could not do much. The weight of their burden pressed down on his young shoulders like the humid night air, thick and suffocating. Silent tears slid down his face, soaking his pillow.

He could not bear the thought of them struggling, fighting a battle they seemed destined to lose. Harish sighed, making a decision in the darkness, one that would pull him far from the only home he had ever known. That night, sleep eluded him. His parent's unspoken pain echoed in his mind countlessly, their silent tears carving deep into his heart.

The next morning, Harish woke before the sun. The quiet air weighed the heaviness of his decision. Harish dressed in his best clothes, though they were simple and worn, and stood by the door, his small bag gripped tightly in his hand. His mother, half asleep, noticed him. Her eyes slowly widened as she saw him standing there.

“हरीश, कहाँ जा रहे हो? ये बैग क्यों पकड़ा हुआ है?” she asked, her voice still thick with sleep but words spelled with concern.

“माँ,” he began, trying to keep his voice steady despite the tremor he felt inside, “मैं मुंबई जा रहा हूँ। मुझे काम करना है और पैसे कमाने हैं। मैं आपकी और बाबा की मदद कर सकता हूँ, और राजन और बहनें बेहतर खाना खा सकेंगे और... शायद स्कूल भी जा सकें।”

His words struck like stones at one's face, and for a moment, Sarita was speechless. Her face paled, and the worry lines on her forehead deepened. She called for his father with her trembling voice. Together, they stood in front of Harish, pleading to stay. They told him he was too young and the city was no place for a boy like him. However, Harish's resolve was unshaken. The decision had already settled in his heart. After hours of tearful persuasion, they finally gave in, their eyes filled with fear and resignation, knowing he was doing this for them. The sight of his mother wiping her eyes weighed heavily on his heart as he boarded the bus to the station. Her silent tears streaming down her face dissuaded him more than anything she could have said.

The bus ride was long and quiet. Harish sat by the window, watching as the dense forests and gentle hills of Surangpur slowly disappeared. His heart ached with each mile, as though the farther he went, the more distant his childhood became. By the time he reached the railway station, the sun had set, casting long shadows across the platform. He bought his ticket to Mumbai and found a nearby bench to sit on, lost in thought. Memories of home, both good and bad, flashed before him, and tears slipped down his cheeks as the weight of what he was leaving behind hit him like the rays of the morning sun striking the mountains.

When the train arrived, Harish boarded with unsteady feet, his heart heavy with conflicting thoughts. The sudden horn of the train seemed to echo his uncertainty. As it sped towards Mumbai, he felt overwhelmed by the burden of responsibilities fortifying him.

The train journey was transporting as if the city seemed to swallow him whole as he arrived at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus. The biggest station Harish had ever seen. It was filled with a wave of strange faces, rushing, pushing, living lives that seemed too big and too fast for Harish to even comprehend. He had heard stories of Mumbai, the city of dreams, but now, standing amidst the chaos, he felt like a small, lost figure in a world too large for him. He clutched his bag tighter, the reality of his choice pressing down on him like a weight on his chest.

For days, Harish roamed on the streets of Mumbai. He knocked on the doors of every tiny shop, restaurant, and small business for a job, but the answer was always the same: “No Vacancy.” Harish felt like a small fish lost in the vast, unknown ocean of Mumbai. With every job refusal, his heart broke into smaller bits and pieces. As the sun disappeared below the horizon on his third day, Harish found himself with nothing—no job, no friends, and nowhere to sleep. His money had slipped through his fingers like water in one's hand, leaving only a few rupees. He had eaten barely enough to survive, but his growling stomach was a lesser concern compared to where he would find shelter for the night.

His body ached with exhaustion. That night, Harish found himself sitting at Marine Drive, watching the waves crash against the rocks. The loneliness was unbearable. He had come to Mumbai to help his family, but now he couldn't even help himself. As he crawled through the long streets of Churchgate, searching desperately for someone to offer him help or a place where he could rest for the night. Later, he sought shelter at Oval Maidan, hoping the open ground would provide a place to rest. But the guards quickly shooed him away. Their harsh words trampled his hope. Exhausted and disheartened, he finally collapsed near a closed grocery shop with nothing but his bag and the clothes on his back. He lay there, shivering, staring up at the dark sky, wondering if his family was fine and had eaten something. He had left to help them, but now, he wasn't sure if he could.

Early dawn, as the sun rose, spreading its rays across the streets. The sharp sound of shutters being opened roused him from his restless sleep. The streets began to stir as sweepers were clearing the litter, and a shop cleaner noticed him lying by the store. The man called for the owner, assuming Harish was a thief.

Mr. Anil Kumar, the shop owner, approached Harish with suspicion, his eyes narrowing as he asked, "आप यहां पर क्या कर रहे हैं? क्या तुमने कुछ चुराया?"

Harish, startled by the accusation, quickly stood, his heart racing as he tried to explain. He spoke about his family, their struggles, and his desperate search for work in Mumbai. Mr. Kumar's expression gradually softened as he listened to his quivering voice. Mr. Kumar, seeing the sincerity in Harish's eyes, felt sympathy for him. His voice was now filled with warmth. Realizing the boy's situation, he offered Harish a job as a helper in his grocery store. It wasn't much, but to Harish, it was everything, a new beginning. Not only that, Mr. Kumar helped Harish find a small room to stay in, understanding how difficult it was for someone new to the city to survive without a roof over their head.

Working in the store wasn't easy, more than stocking shelves or handing items to customers, Harish was stepping into a world he had never known. He had never even used a telephone in Surangpur, where people still relied on postcards. Now, he had to operate smartphones and computers for billing. Technology was waiting at the backstop to pull him to the sea of adversity. However, Mr. Kumar waited patiently and taught him how to use and operate these systems. In the beginning, Harish found it difficult, but as time slipped, he slowly and steadily adapted to his new life.

Months passed, and Harish slowly found his pace and interest in the work. Those first two months were the hardest in his life. Each day was a battle to keep up with the demands of the store, to understand the technology, and to communicate with customers, who mostly spoke in English. The language posed a great challenge while dealing with the customers. But Harish was determined. He spent days working and nights learning and practising the language. He knew he could not give up, not after everything he and his parents had sacrificed.

The store became a second home, and Mr. Kumar a mentor. Harish saved enough money to send back to his family, alongside letters filled with hope and stories of the city. In return, his parents wrote of better days. His siblings were eating well, and Rajan had finally started schooling.

Though Mumbai was cruel at first, it slowly gave him the strength to endure the best and the worst. He no longer feared the future. He had faced hunger, loneliness, and fear, and now, with each day, he grew stronger. His journey was far from over, but for the first time in a long while, Harish felt a sense of hope and accomplishment.

One day, he would return to Surangpur—not as the boy who had left, but as the man who had survived the worst.



Dear Miss Austen

By Jineeta Jain

Dear Miss Jane Austen,

With great admiration, I write to you from the 21st century, where your novels continue to enchant young and old readers, and your characters have become timeless figures of strength, intelligence, and wit. Though you penned your works in the early 19th century, they continue to resonate deeply, as if they were crafted with modern sensibilities in mind. Your female characters, especially, have stood the test of time. After so many decades, your vision for them has finally come to life.

Miss Austen, your books even now inspire authors of the 21st century to write stories portraying love not as a fleeting emotion but as mutual respect and understanding between equals. Your male characters grow through their relationships with their heroines, just as the heroines evolve in their own right. Mr. Darcy, Mr. Knightley, Captain Wentworth, Colonel Brandon, and even Edmund Bertram. Each of them learns to love deeply and fully, valuing the inner strength and intellect of the woman they adore. It's a vision of partnership that feels profoundly modern, even though it was written when marriage was often more about economic security than mutual affection.

When creating characters like Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and Anne Elliot, the world you lived in did not provide women much freedom. Yet you imagined an extraordinary position and equity for women who were not defined by societal expectations but by their intelligence and moral compass. In your books, you portrayed women as complex individuals full of desires, contradictions, and agency. You gave them the power to challenge societal norms even if it was only through their words, and you made it clear that their worth was not dependent on their looks or marriage prospects but rather on their character.

Today, women around the world look up to these characters as examples of independence and self-assurance. Elizabeth Bennet, with her sharp tongue and quick mind, is my favourite character, and I adore her for how boldly she defies social expectations. Her refusal to marry for convenience and her courage to speak her mind, even in the face of Mr. Darcy's intimidating pride, is as courageous now as it was then. It is something that no longer needs to be fought in quiet parlour rooms or under the scrutinising gaze of society but one that now echoes in boardrooms, courtrooms, and government offices.

I imagine you might find it revolutionary to learn that, in many parts of the world, women now pursue careers, vote in elections, hold political office, and run businesses. They are no longer only confined to the roles of a wife and a mother (though those roles are still valued) but are free to make their paths in life, just as your characters yearned to do.

I always found Emma Woodhouse, who was so sure of her ability to shape the lives of those around her, reflecting an early vision of what we might call leadership. In her, you created a woman who is confident in her abilities, even if she doesn't always get things right. Emma is a woman of means. Yes, but her journey toward self-awareness is what makes her truly remarkable. Her path to understanding her limitations and the consequences of her actions is proof that the strength of a person comes from introspection. Today, I see women lead nations and corporations, and they do so with the confidence, wit, and self-assurance that Emma possessed.

Yet, like Emma, modern women are also reflective. They navigate a world that is still resistant to the idea of female leadership. Just as Emma faced the consequences of her meddling, modern women in positions of power often face scrutiny and criticism, sometimes harsher than their male counterparts. But they persevere, learning from their mistakes and growing stronger in the process. In this way, your depiction of Emma's growth resonates powerfully with women today, who understand that leadership is not about perfection but about resilience and the ability to learn from one's experiences.

Perhaps one of your most poignant characters, Anne Elliot from *Persuasion*, encapsulates a quieter form of strength. Anne, who is often overlooked by her family and society, finds her voice later in life. Her journey speaks to the idea that it is never too late to reclaim one's narrative and that women, even if they have made sacrifices or been sidelined, can still find happiness and fulfilment. Anne's story reminds us that patience, grace, and inner resolve are powerful tools in a world that doesn't always reward them immediately.

In today's world, Anne would find herself among many women who have had to put their dreams on hold for various reasons—be it family obligations, societal pressures, or financial limitations. Yet, like Anne, they find ways to rise above these obstacles. Women in their forties, fifties, and beyond are reclaiming their stories, whether by going back to school, starting new careers, or simply pursuing passions they had set aside. Anne Elliot's quiet determination resonates with these women, proving that it is never too late to take control of one's life.

But I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the sharpness of your pen when it came to societal critique. Your satire of the marriage market, class divisions, and the ridiculousness of social expectations can be as sharp and relevant today as it was then. Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins, and the ever-charming John Willoughby remind us of the absurdity of a society that values wealth and status over character and integrity. Marriage, though no longer the sole marker of a woman's success, is still a topic of discussion for many aunts and uncles. But now, women have the choice to marry for love, like Elizabeth Bennet, or to choose not to marry at all, like you.

Beyond your lovers, the relationships you depicted between women as sisters, friends, and rivals are also significant. Today, we speak of "sisterhood" in the context of feminism, where women support one another in their personal and professional lives. Your portrayal of the bond between Elizabeth and Jane Bennett, or the complex relationship between Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith, reminds us that the support and companionship of other women is crucial in navigating the challenges of life. These relationships reflect the importance of female solidarity, a concept that is central to modern feminist thought.

Miss Austen, your characters have become more than just literary figures; they have become cultural icons, inspiring generations of women to speak their minds, pursue their dreams, and live authentically. It is a joy to live in a world where the vision you had for your female characters—their independence, intelligence, and strength—has finally come to fruition. Your works, once confined to the drawing rooms of Georgian England, now echo in the hearts and minds of women around the globe. Thank you for giving us such strong female characters who continue to inspire, challenge, and guide us in our journeys toward self-realisation.

One of your biggest fans,
Jineeta.



A Fortnight on Earth

By Mrunmayee Ghadge

Dear Diary,

Today, it's been a month since my visit to the planet Earth. I thought it would be a memorable trip: bathing in yellow sunlight, eating juicy fruits, swimming in lakes, listening to the ocean. I did experience these incredible things, however, not the one thing I was looking forward to the most—love. I grew up listening to tales about humans being intensely emotional creatures. They were said to be affectionate, empathetic, and kind. What a huge lie. When I got to travel to my dream destination, Earth, I jumped at it. After spending two weeks there, my illusions were shattered; I realised their coins had two sides.

It began as soon as I landed my spaceship. It was nighttime, dark, and quiet. I wore a pretty dress to blend in with humans; surprisingly, I couldn't find anyone wearing them. I was so excited to interact with people that I went looking for any sign of life. I came across two men; I recognised the alcohol in their hands and remembered my mother's advice, "Stay away from drunks." I walked past them, and to my shock, they started following me, laughing amongst themselves. I didn't understand what was happening; I ran fast out of panic and finally lost them. "That's weird. Why do they want to kill me?" I wondered, but I would soon realise that killing wouldn't have been the worst thing they could do to me.

In the morning, I decided to use the internet, a source of unlimited information. I wanted to find out what happened last night. I came across a website, Reddit, where all your questions can be answered. After I posted on Reddit, instead of providing any answers, most comments blamed and ridiculed me for going out at night and for wearing a dress. I was so confused. Why am I being attacked? I opened my private messages, and a few asked me whether I "liked the attention." No, I didn't! I was scared. Just as I was about to close it, somebody messaged me, telling me what I experienced was called catcalling and stalking. I got curious and responded. She revealed herself to be a woman who has experienced similar things. She guessed that I must be no older than 12 for me to be asking such a naive question.



Of course, I couldn't tell her the truth, so I went along with it. Our conversation lasted hours, and afterwards, I was bewildered. She educated me on the system of patriarchy, the history of oppression, ingrained misogyny in society, and heinous crimes that are committed towards women because of it. She gave me several examples, which seemed more like fictional horror stories. She revealed how she recently divorced her abusive, cheating husband, and yet she loved him. I couldn't understand. Aren't relationships based on love? Oh, how wrong I was to believe it. She told me all about how he mocked her in front of people, added to her insecurities, stole her money, and never did the house chores. Why was this so common and normalised? A chill ran down my spine when she said, "At least he never hit me; he's better than most men."

The next day, I spent the entire time on the internet, trying to learn more about misogyny and trying to look for more stories of more women. My perception of romance was destroyed. I kept asking myself whether these men even liked women, let alone loved them. I forgot about enjoying my trip; I wanted to research everything about women's history. Why would you restrict someone's access to education? Why would you dictate her life choices? Her freedom? Why would you not let a fellow human buy a house or start a business if she isn't married? Why does your gender determine whether you're superior? I tried to ask myself these questions, but there was no logical answer. When I came across the topic of rape, I realised that my questions were only the tip of the iceberg. I read every horrific case, right from Junko Furuta to Josef Fritzl. The utter lack of respect for another person's dignity made my skin crawl.

How could someone be capable, or rather, even imagine doing this? Scrolling further, it dawned upon me that some people are as sinister as rapists, which are rape apologists. Imagine enduring a traumatic event, speaking up about it, and having everyone dismiss you, claim you're lying, and blame you instead. My imagination was a million women's reality. As if that wasn't bad enough, a lot of victims never get justice. I wondered, what if a victim falls pregnant? I learnt that in a lot of places, abortion is denied; it's not an option at all. So women don't have rights over their bodies either?

After being cooped up in my hotel room for almost 5 days, I decided to clear my mind. I enjoyed the beauty of sunsets, sandy beaches, and amazing food. However, for some reason, I felt guilty for having a good time. While I was hanging around at a beachside bar, a group of friends invited me to join them since I was the only one crazy enough to go to a bar alone.

I thought to myself, "This is a good opportunity to find out whether the internet is right." I soon got my answer when one of the guys made a "go back to the kitchen" joke, and all the guys laughed as if it was the most hilarious thing ever. I decided to avoid talking to them and sat down with the girls. One of them told me how her fiancé forced her to quit her job just when she got a promotion. "That's so strange. Why didn't you refuse to?" I asked her. "Oh, he doesn't take no for an answer," she replied, unfazed. Am I the only one who could see everything wrong with that statement?

I was unexpectedly happy to return to my planet. I never wish to go back to Earth. I still wonder, though, how long until the people on Earth fix this flawed system? I did escape, but when will the women be free?

Love, Honey Badger

By Arshita Peshen

Dear Danny,

I'm not even sure where to begin. How does one write to someone who has given them so many heart-stopping moments, laughs, and memories? From the very first time I saw that signature grin light up the paddock, I knew you weren't just another driver. You were something special. You weren't just racing against the clock—you were making the whole thing a show, an adventure that we all got to come along for. And wow, what a ride it has been!

Let's start with Monaco, shall we? 2018. The jewel of Formula 1, the crown every driver wants to wear, and you—you made it yours. I remember watching that race like it was yesterday. The pressure, the anticipation that came with having a pole, and not knowing what tomorrow will bring given the mishap in 2016, the anxiety I had was unbelievable. And then, halfway through the race, disaster struck—power issues! It felt like the universe was pulling one of its cruel tricks, trying to steal the moment that was yours. But you weren't having any of it. With sheer will and a car that was running on about half the power it should have had, you held off Sebastian Vettel like a lion defending its pride. That victory? It was more than just a win. It was redemption. Watching you on that top step in Monaco, grinning as always, but with a knowing smile, like you'd just conquered a dragon... well, it felt like we'd all won with you.

And then, there was McLaren. It was quite the journey! Ready to start a new chapter, you brought that same contagious optimism to McLaren but things got off to a bit of a rough start. At first, it appeared like nothing was working, as we waited and watched, knowing you had the power. Then Monza 2021 occurred and oh man, if I could bottle the feeling of watching you cross the line that day, I'd have a lifetime supply of happiness. McLaren hadn't tasted victory in nearly a decade, and there you were, bringing them back to the top.

It wasn't just the win that was special—it was seeing you back at your best, reminding the world that there's no one quite like Daniel Ricciardo. Especially the radio message you sent out as soon as you crossed the chequered flag, "To everyone who thought I was gone, I was right here baby!" and boy if that has not been one of my top mantras in my life, to just put your head down and put in the work, until one day the victory is all yours and sweeter than ever.

While I am at it I have to mention Austin. It's like you were made for each other! Every time we hit the Circuit of the Americas, it's like you light up even more (if possible). Maybe it's the cowboy hats, perhaps it's the energy of the crowd, or maybe it's just the fact that Austin embraces your wild spirit like no other place. Whether you're wrestling Longhorns, rocking cowboy boots, or simply tearing up the track, Austin is your stage. Your love for the city and the fans comes through every time, and they love you right back for it. It's your playground, and we get to be part of the fun.

Every year, it's a highlight, not just for the race, but because we know you're going to bring something special, something no one else can quite pull off.

Now, I have to talk about that grin. The "Honey Badger Smile." It's almost become a symbol, hasn't it? You know my friends say I have the same infectious smile as you, though I tend to disagree but that has to be one of the best compliments I have ever received. No matter what's happening on or off the track, that grin makes everything feel a little bit lighter, a little bit more fun. It's not just about the results with you, Daniel—it's the joy you bring to the sport. You've got this incredible ability to remind us that F1, for all its intensity and high stakes, is supposed to be fun. You can be fierce on the track, a fighter who won't back down from a wheel-to-wheel battle, but off the track, you're the guy who's cracking jokes, dancing in the paddock, and making the entire F1 community smile. I don't think there's another driver who's ever embodied that balance quite like you. You've taught us that it's not just about the victories—it's about how you carry yourself through the challenges, too. And you, my friend, carry yourself like a true champion, on and off the track.

It's no secret that you've had to wrestle with some frustratingly ill-fated race strategies. I still remember watching in dismay during that infamous 2016 Monaco GP, where a pit stop mishap cost you the win—seeing you come out on track, only to find the tires weren't ready was the ultimate heartbreak. Or how about those races at Renault when bold strategies didn't quite deliver, leaving you in positions that didn't reflect the fight you put into each lap? You faced it all with such resilience, even when the armchair critics piled on the scrutiny as if race strategy was something you could control from the cockpit!

You have had to take some bold decisions that people from outside looking in might have condemned as foolish too, like the move from Red Bull, where you'd proven your skill and tenacity, to Renault—an ambitious leap that you took in stride, ready to build something new. McLaren offered yet another chance, a fresh start we were all rooting for, but the car seemed to have a mind of its own, as if determined to keep you just out of reach of that top spot. Now, with AlphaTauri, and no clear future in sight, it's tough to see you navigating this uncertainty. But through every setback, you've kept that unstoppable grin, showing us what grit really looks like. You've given us more than just race wins—you've given us a reason to believe that even when things go sideways, you can still laugh, push forward, and stay true to yourself.

So, Daniel, thank you. Thank you for the memories, the joy, and for being exactly who you are. Wherever your career takes you next, whether it's more wins, more cowboy hats, or even something completely unexpected, know that this fan (and many others) will be cheering you on every step of the way.

I will leave you with one of my favourite quotes, I hope you remember it: "Enjoy the butterflies, enjoy the nerves, the pressure. If you kinda wanna stand at top from day one then there's nothing else to look forward to."

Love,
your greatest fan, Arshita.



आजकल

By Jaswant Singh

कुर्सी की ताकत से कितने ज्यादा डरते हैं लोग,
नेता सिर पर मूत रहा, फिर भी गाते हैं उसके बोल ।

धर्म की बात आते ही मूर्ख बन जाते हैं सारे लोग,
रिश्ते नाते पीछे छोड़कर, हिंसा पर है देते जोर ।

जितने सितारे वर्दी पर, उतना ज्यादा कांपते हैं लोग,
पुलिस के आते ही, दुम दबाकर भागते हैं लोग ।

सवाल पूछते ज्ञान बांटते, कितना सताते हैं लोग,
अकेले पड़ जाते हैं जब बेरोजगार होते हैं लोग ।

सच की क्या कीमत है, अब बस तू दाम बता,
एक बोतल पर ही बिक जाते हैं, न जाने कितने लोग ।

परीक्षा में पास होने का फिर से टूट गया है ख्वाब,
पेपर लिंक कर कितने पैसे छाप रहे हैं लोग ।

घुघट में बैठी औरत का भी हो गया है बलात्कार,
कपड़े कितने छोटे थे यह पूछ रहे हैं लोग ।

जिसकी जेबे खाली हैं और जो बोलता है सच,
पागल कहकर ही बुलाते हैं उसे सब लोग ।

इस नकली दुनिया से सबको एक दिन जाना है,
मरकर ही केवल आजाद हो पाते हैं लोग ।



Crisis of Purpose

By Mrunmayee Ghadge

When the stormy clouds descend
onto the train, I ascend.
Tik-Tok the clock mocked,
I'm late, my wages will be docked.

A day of politics, passive aggression,
not a battlefield but my workstation.
Droopy eyes worked overtime again,
dragged my dead soul home through the rain.

Stared at another fast-food burger.
Is this what life is? I wonder.
Checked my temple for fever,
Yet again, groceries or doctor?

Rich get richer, poor get poorer,
venomous capitalism, oh dear.
Escape the matrix, they say,
but I become a husk of a man every day.

Don't be a corporate slave, they exclaim,
don't you see? It's all an elite's game.
Waterfalls to see, mountains to climb,
I'm trapped in corporate ladders to climb.

Costs skyrocket, but wages stay still,
Another day, another new bill.

Who saw blue skies and pristine lakes
and thought to invent interest rates?
Is joy limited to 10 vacation days a year,
beyond money? Is there no purpose further?

Why judge by riches, my status,
and not by joy or my kindness?
Are we feeding this capitalist monster,

or is there truly an option none other?



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