

IRISES



English Literary Association Journal

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Jamia Millia Islamia**



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Editor's Note

The year 2021 is inevitably shaped by grief and loss as a result of the ongoing pandemic but also showcased the true power of hope and recovery amidst adversity. Through this magazine, we have attempted to give a space to students to unleash their creativity amidst their online university mode as well as try to acknowledge some of the smaller losses, the memories we all could have made, the joy of in-person classes skipped college traditions and distance from the people we adore and love.

“Iris” the title for this year’s magazine is a vivid personification of rainbow in Greek Mythology which symbolizes faith, courage, and hope for better times ahead. As we mark another year grappling with the pandemic there is much to mourn, the people we lost, the economic devastation as well as longing for shared experiences. But there are myriad reasons which solidify our spirits as we all have innovated and learned to cherish the simpler pleasures in life. The world certainly progressed in battling the pandemic through vaccinations and preventive measures which have united humanity and instilled within us indomitable courage.

Our aim to bring this magazine to life would not have been possible without the tireless efforts and ceaseless guidance of our Professor Nishat Zaidi, our Head of Department, and Dr. Shuby Abidi, our ELA advisor. We would like to thank our dear teachers and staff who worked tirelessly to make a smooth transition to the online mode of education. To the class of 2021, we hope that you have a successful life ahead and be blessed with every joy in this world.

Isha Ahuja
Editor

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Bulging Veins

These veins on my dadi's hand,
 remind me of her children.
 How two became seven,
 four sons and three daughters.
 how they were together,
 before boundaries on the globe,
 created cracks to form continents.
 Pangaea breaking into seven,
 disabling communication.
 Three letters a year were shared
 between fathers and sons
 but rarely between brothers.
 Talks limited to news of marriages or
 conversations about loans and acres.
 Her four fingers are her four sons,
 the separate ways they have embarked on.
 A couple of millimetres-
 enough of a distance for separation.
 What she yearns for
 is to see them all together,
 like they were in Jalkeni, as kids.
 But she tells me that is not possible
 I tell her it is.
 Like the bed we were were sitting on,
 the four legs would come together and heal.
 I try to bring the four fingers together,
 but she retreats them
 And tells me it hurts.
 Maybe two together is still possible,
 But four, not.
 And it is that one finger I realise.
 that causes most of the hurt,
 The one with the gold ring, stuck.
 I then look at her amputated right leg,
 and think what once,
 used to be her thoughts.

Umanath Chettri
 MA English, First year

The Tiny Closet Under the Stairs

The aroma of fresh Jasmine blended with sandalwood lacing the air,
transported me a decade and three years back,
to a tiny closet under the stairs.
I find myself in front of the tiny closet,
which emits the fragrance of,
fresh Jasmine and comforting sandalwood,
that lift my spirits to study
the beautifully written dates with an ink pen on the old diaries,
stacked inside the massive drawer beneath the large wooden table.
Rummaging through the drawer I find a rusty heavy tin,
fascinating to my eight year old self.
Curiosity opens the lid,
to find as many coins as sand on the seashore that,
are gleaming as if they have been cleaned a while ago.
The inquisitive eyes take a tour of my Grandfather's closet,
that is like a pandora box of exotic things!
On the huge wooden table,
Are the neatly arranged books that are still incomprehensible,
a purple paper mat fan that was,
seldom used due to the frequent power cuts,
a bottle of castor oil which brought forth a sparkly shine to his salt-pepper hair!
I still remember the peculiar wall bulb lamp,
which looked like a sunflower in my imagination,
and i continue to imagine so..
The best times in the closet,
were spent sitting on my Grandfathers chair,
looking through the opened windows,
facing the front yard of the house,
Leading further to the busy roads.
My Grandfather's tiny closet under the stairs,
has always been the most serene and composed,
space out of all the places i have ever been to!
The fresh aroma of Jasmine with an iota of sandalwood,
will always take me a trip down the,
memory lane to my Grandfather's tiny closet under the stairs.

S.Wiselyn Amy
MA English, First year

If I Were To Love You Today

If I were to love you today
 And embrace you in my arms,
 If I were to forget the world
 And all perils of the past
 Would I sin so greatly? So humbly?
 To let my comrades take up arms
 Would I sin if I let,
 Their limbs to gash & scar.
 If I were to love you today
 And be blinded by your charm,
 If I were to kiss your lips
 Would I taste the blood & be calm?
 The rivers of my land
 Are dense, with remorse
 The forests of my street
 Flourish metal and grow
 The birds in my garden
 They don't chirp anymore
 The rusty stains of blood
 Are all over the floor
 We don't live in Paradise!
 We live, in a morgue.
 How am I to love you then
 If they have crushed my heart.
 How am I to betray the soil
 Of my present,

my future,
 my past.

Could I then laugh with you?
 Under the scarlet showers,
 Would you then have a place?
 To call 'home' that's truly ours..
 If I were to love you today,
 And go against the odds,
 If I were to forget the world,
 I'd be chained in thorns.

To Jamia, With Love

The coffee wale Bhaiya
 always
 smiles at me while handing
 me my eight bucks coffee,
 The rickshaw pullers are
 always
 amused when I say
 Thank you
 for making sure I reach my destination
 safely,
 The car drivers
 always
 cuss and curse
 while I hip-hop
 my way through
 the crawling traffic,
 The sunbathing students
 play their cards off
 in the way they smoke cheap cigarettes,
 A rainbow of shirts
 and petticoats
 soar through rooftops
 after late night
 laundry sprees,
 The sky is always blue
 the window next to my seat,
 Sometimes the dogs pee
 on the sunflower path,
 Pleas and protests and police overwhelms
 the silence in here
 that I am so
 accustomed to,
 My friend breathes in between her fits of laughter
 in Urdu
 Yet prefers to
 always
 Swear in Hindi,
 We find our common ground in all those words in English
 we fail to pronounce,
 Our Maggi is usually
 always
 sprinkled
 With corn,
 Onion when it's not the hour of inflammation,
 This is the Jamia I know,
 Twenty years in a dystopian Delhi,
 caught between the chaos of its own choosing,
 embers of blood flowing through the likes of lotuses,
 This would be the Jamia
 I would have known.

Antara Vashistha
MA English, Second Year

Tyranny

On some days Tyranny catches
up; stealthingly tauntingly around me
as I deliriously claw scratches
on the wall desperate to break free

"Narrow your light" It demands,
"Pay no attention to your right.
You were just a child when this began
So my darling child sleep tight."

I consider Its request to be forgotten;
A full night's sleep does sound assuring.
Just then my naked
heart threatens to rotten
And I go back to my tiresome scraping.

"Very well," It thunders, "Ignore my caution
All you want but do remember
Your tenderness will betray you, a weapon
To be used against you for

Not even love survives death."
I tremble at this declaration
For what good is courage without breath
Only to be ashamed at my hesitation

"Love senses the menaces of violence
But still marches against the war,
And I too shall love despite the silence
Of death, and break free," I roar.

It warns "You won't be free forever"
And disappears into the night.
I curl up beside my lover
And dream of love's respite.

To Democracy, With Love

Dear democracy,
I admired the way you glistened amidst the multifarious bazaars on the streets,
In the eyes of the sundry folks,
as they rubbed off the nation's dust along with their feet.
I loved your sweet aroma, wrapping the air as I walked past the monuments with
Timeless architecture, that had witnessed the dawn of your developments.
I remember the words penned down about you,
Of songs of victory, valor and your powers to subjugate the wrongs,
The vital sparks, the revolutions that you gave birth to.
I loved your paramountcy and savoured it as I grew.
But dear democracy,
As I grew up, I noticed you were scarred.
As the eyes of the sundry folks judged each other,
even though you made them share synonymous identity cards.
I noticed you were sundered.
The air that wrapped your nation was sweet.
While somewhere, it was wrapped with multiple towers of smoke, and a whole
lot of deceit.
I noticed you were wounded.
As the songs penned down about you;
Were mere notions buried under the fabric of sheets.
I noticed you were mistreated.
As the revolutions you gave birth to, paved the way for resolution, for love.
But, at the cost of annihilation and quietus all above.
I was selfish, and I apologize for shutting my eyes to your scars.
Eyes, that were curtained by your hefty definition; only open to your bright side,
while turning a shoulder to the dark.
I was selfish, and I apologize for merely savoring your definition when all you need is a cure,
To cease the ruins carried out on your name, to such an extent, that you are no
longer secure.
From freeing a caged Bird, to opposing afflictions,
I promise to help you, to regain your identification.
From plucking your fruits, to sharing them with the diversified flocks.
I promise to water your roots, even if it's drop by drop.
From writing poems about you, to implementing every word,
I promise I won't let your sniveling be unheard.
Dear democracy,
I love the way you unite the diversities,
Though wounded and scarred,
I promise to protect your ideals of fraternity, of integrity, of liberty.
I promise to protect the ideal of a true democracy.

Venus Of The Waters

Her white skin shocked by waves,
Of waters colder than the Land,
Scoops precious drops that it saves,
By virtue of the most beauteous, blessed Hand.

The air that stings her after fails,
To arrest a moment breath bated by.
What Beauty, like the Cold assails,
This Truth upon the Hidden Eye.

The Mind is numbed as is Abode,
By shivering veils, Adonis worn,
The Dream is lifted, it's veneer echoed,
By Love, it's memory sweet Reborn.

Was there a Woman? Did Vision Lie?
Could such Beauty, gleam serenely by?
Living, breathing, Could she Die?!
Not perhaps, for now she'll never say Goodbye.

Kirtiman Hazarika
MA English, 2nd year

Rest in Peace

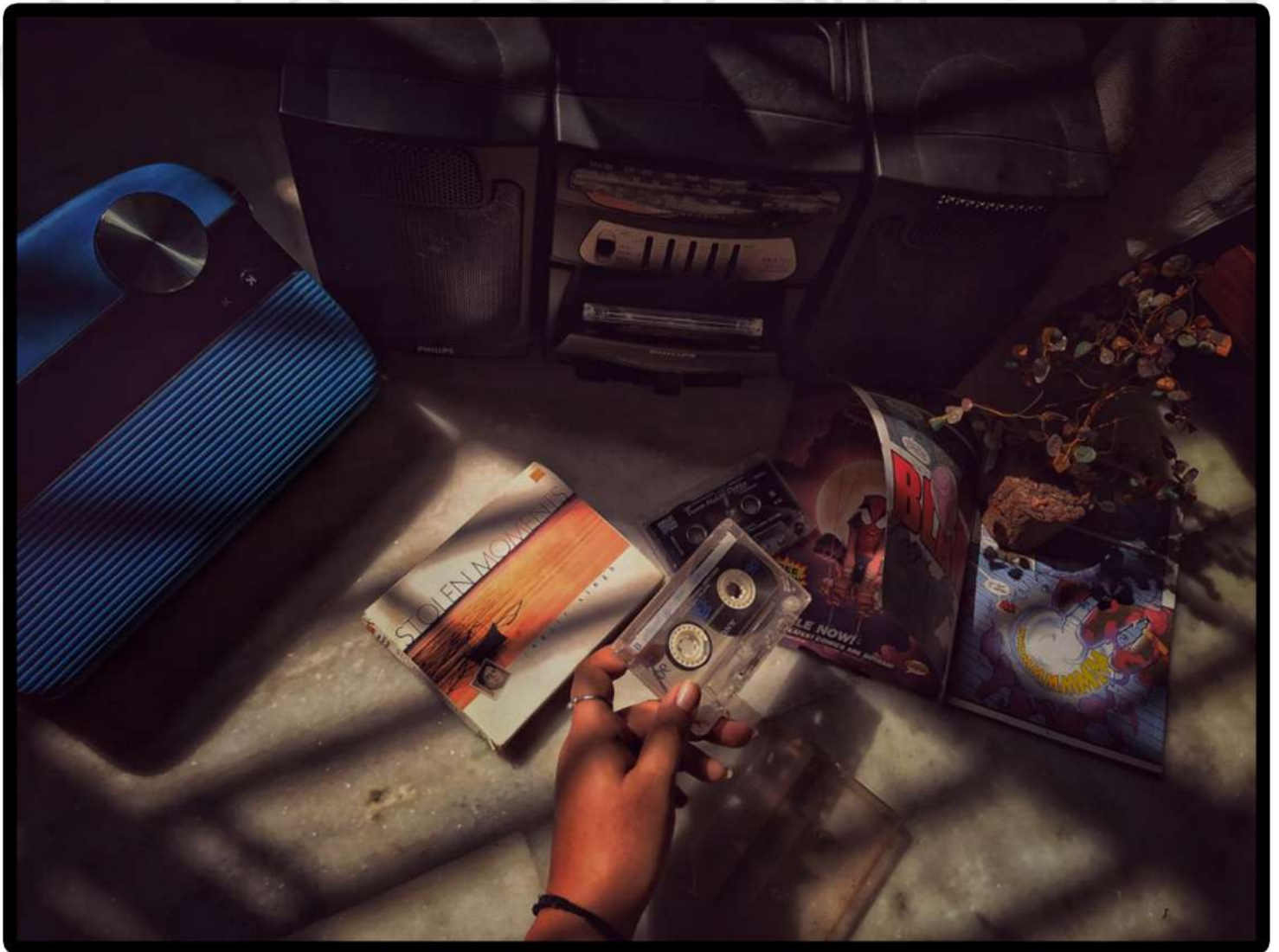
It is hard, to keep going like this,
 To have it on the tip of my tongue,
 And not being able to say it,
 To think about it all the time
 And never sharing it,
 As if it will change,
 Change feelings,
 As if it will harm,
 Harm perspectives.

I don't want them to know,
 I don't want them to find out,
 For that will make me vulnerable,
 Vulnerable from inside out,
 And that is not good, no, not at all,
 That is what scares me.

What will happen if they discover the truth?
 How will they react?
 Will they hate me?
 Will they be disgusted?
 What will I do?
 What should I do?

No one can find out.
 No one will find out.
 My secret will be safe forever.
 It won't be hard anymore.

Shabnum Khan
 MA English, Second year



This photo captures the, "stolen moments" that once again are relived due to the pandemic. Listening to Jagjit ji, in an old cassette player while drinking Rasna or reading old comics; playing carrom with family or Uno with cousins, everyone found their way of bringing normalcy mixed with nostalgia. Lockdown brought back some memories filled with love, laughter and lost childhood

Abhilasha Mansi Gururani
MA English, Second year



What is fiction? and what is reality? It is the age of blurring binaries.

Isha Ahuja
MA English, Second year



The View from within

Jyotsna Singh
MA English, Second Year



Child-hood

Hanzala Mojibi
BA English (Hons.) Final Year

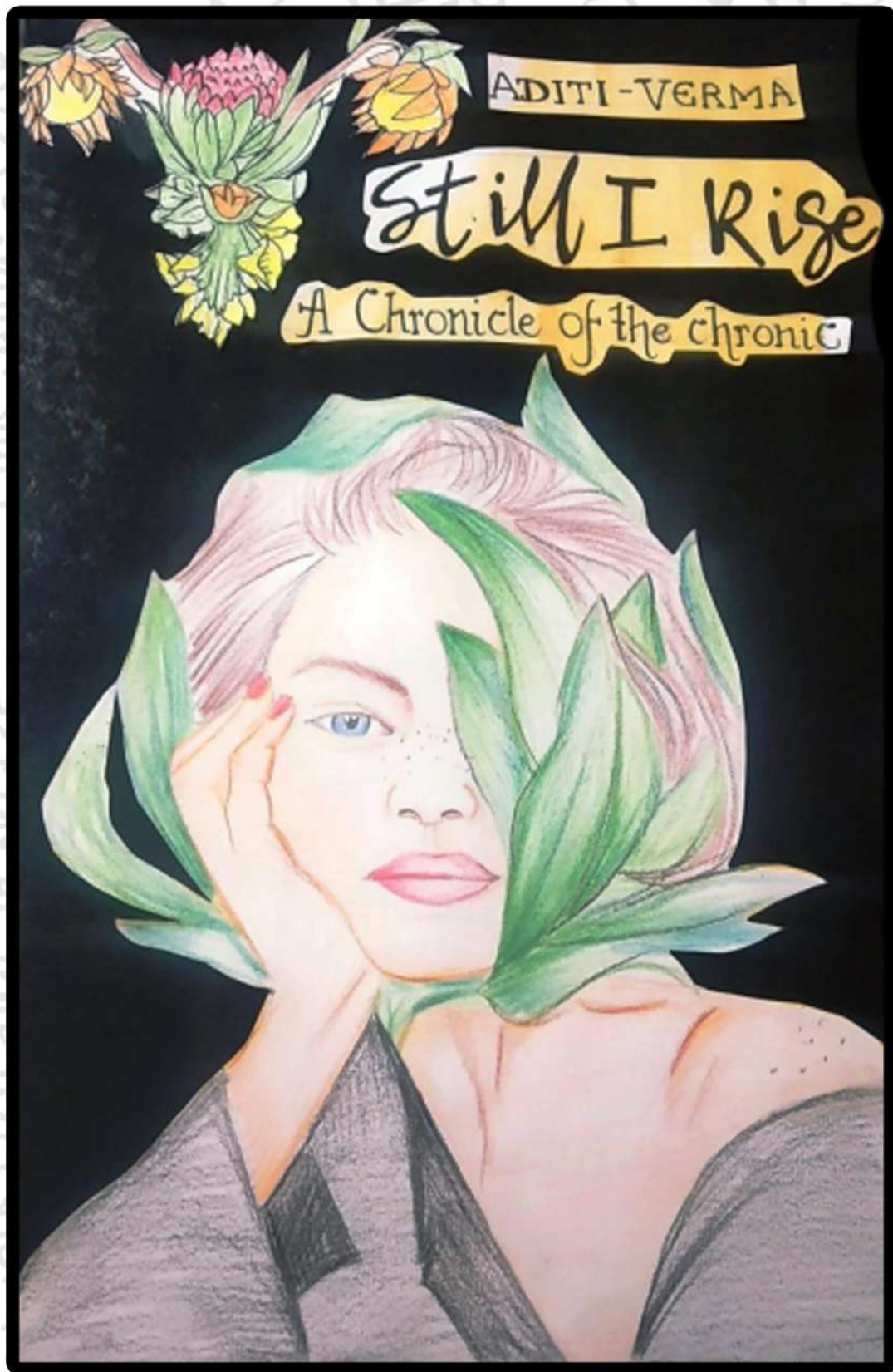
Artwork

Still I rise
Aditi Verma

Self-Portrait
Syed Sufia Ali



2m



Aditi Verma
MA English, Second Year



Syed Sufia Ali
BA (English) Hons, Second Year

Lockdown; A Period of Understanding

An activity-packed life devoid of breaks suddenly came to a halt. Before the nationwide lockdown was announced, I was living a mechanical life. My day started at eight every morning, waking up to rush to college, getting back to take home tuitions, and ended at the same time, every evening. Then, I sat with assignments if I had any or spent time in self-study. The responsibilities of household chores were not entirely upon me as I live with my siblings and my sister did everything to help me run this treadmill of life.

One fine morning, I woke up to rush to college when my eyes fell on the books kept on my study table. Those were the half-read books nicely placed. We saw each other daily. Even on that day my eyes looked at them, and unconsciously my lips uttered a wish, "how I wish this world comes to a pause, and I have all the time to leisurely devour them". It was impossible to imagine the same. I wanted to live my moments listening to the engrossing tales of the characters sitting with anticipation of my attention. Two days post that episode our country came to a halt. College was shut, and tuition lessons were canceled. I was at liberty to not traverse the exhausting distance each day. It was as if my prayers were heard and graciously granted. In a world where people were suffering from life-changing events like sudden financial constraints, illness, and death, I was glowing with a hope of living my lockdown period to the best, but little did I know that life had other plans for me.

The lockdown began with excitement without any particular reason. The energy that I would use in dealing with the hustle-bustle of daily life was busy making every cell of my body active and alive. The first task I took up was household chores. The intensive task of making the house look the same every day would wear me out to such an extent that I slept like a log caring about nothing. I started to notice a system that women in our society follow in terms of how specific gender roles are assigned to the two sexes without thinking that those definitions are paralyzing us. Women, the caretaker of household chores, and men, the master of the outside world, to some extent, look a fair deal but if closely scrutinized, it robs away from both the sexes a chance to live a complete life and hampers their growth. I had taken the entire responsibility for the household chores without asking my brothers to join in. It is imperative that both the genders should take equal responsibility in both domestic and professional realms to lead a healthy and balanced life. I started to raise my voice and realized that explaining a woman is a task more difficult than explaining a man. A woman begins to live in guilt if she fails to serve or please the people around her.

However, with my incessant articulation of the inherent ignorance disguised in the name of affection, people around me started to comprehend my words. It made sense to them that being independent means to be able to take care of yourself in every way unless you genuinely require help. They understood that adults should share responsibilities while making sure that nobody is overburdened. It was my first achievement of making a change.

Being locked up with people in a house for uncountable days is not an easy task and it gave me a vivid insight into facets of human personality. When people live together with no specific tasks at hand they tend to make much ado about nothing. The thought that people living with me did not think or behave like me befuddled my mind. I childishly wanted everybody to align with my thought process in terms of my behaviour and how I perceive things. I kept some of them at arm's length only because their mindset did not match mine. However, gradually I started to observe the way life has been created and how nature has a balance in everything lacing this world. If one person is an introvert, another is created differently as an Extrovert. Every way of living is the right way as long as it is not interfering with others' liberty. Conflicts begin from this lack of understanding and acceptance of differences. A family is like a team and it can win any battle only if it has members with different qualities and multiple perceptions. No family member is entirely like another, yet they stand on the same base, share the same roots and that's the ultimate beauty of life. Accepting the difference with warmth and understanding was my second lesson learned during this lock-down period. But that was not it.

Online classes began, and I got involved in meeting the academic deadlines. I was with a book or in front of the laptop twenty-four into seven. I paid heed to nothing because my priority was to complete my work efficiently. However, I started to hear comments such as, "Why does she study all the time?" "Does she want to be an IS officer?" Undoubtedly those comments were in good humor, but that humor had stemmed from a lack of understanding. A natural reaction to such comments would be of disgust, but I am grateful to have acquired the tools of analyzing situations in these years of learning literature and analyzing characters. After getting a little annoyed initially, I brought my tools of analysis out and employed them to see where these comments were coming from. My analysis revealed that some people are not able to comprehend the difference between the understanding level (that is school level) of learning and the reflective level (that is higher education level) of learning. We are indebted to Morris L. Bigge for this classification of teaching and learning levels. I am in the reflective level of learning wherein I have a responsibility to understand a concept and then represent it adding to it something of my understanding. This entire process demands undivided attention, time and consumes an immense amount of energy. I knew this, but that was not enough. I had to make the people living with me aware of this so that I was saved from the comments that bothered me, and also because it was important. Therefore, I started to articulate the difference between the two, loud and clear. It was a herculean task yet possible. Souls living with me began to come in tune with my understanding, and I got the space and respect I deserved.

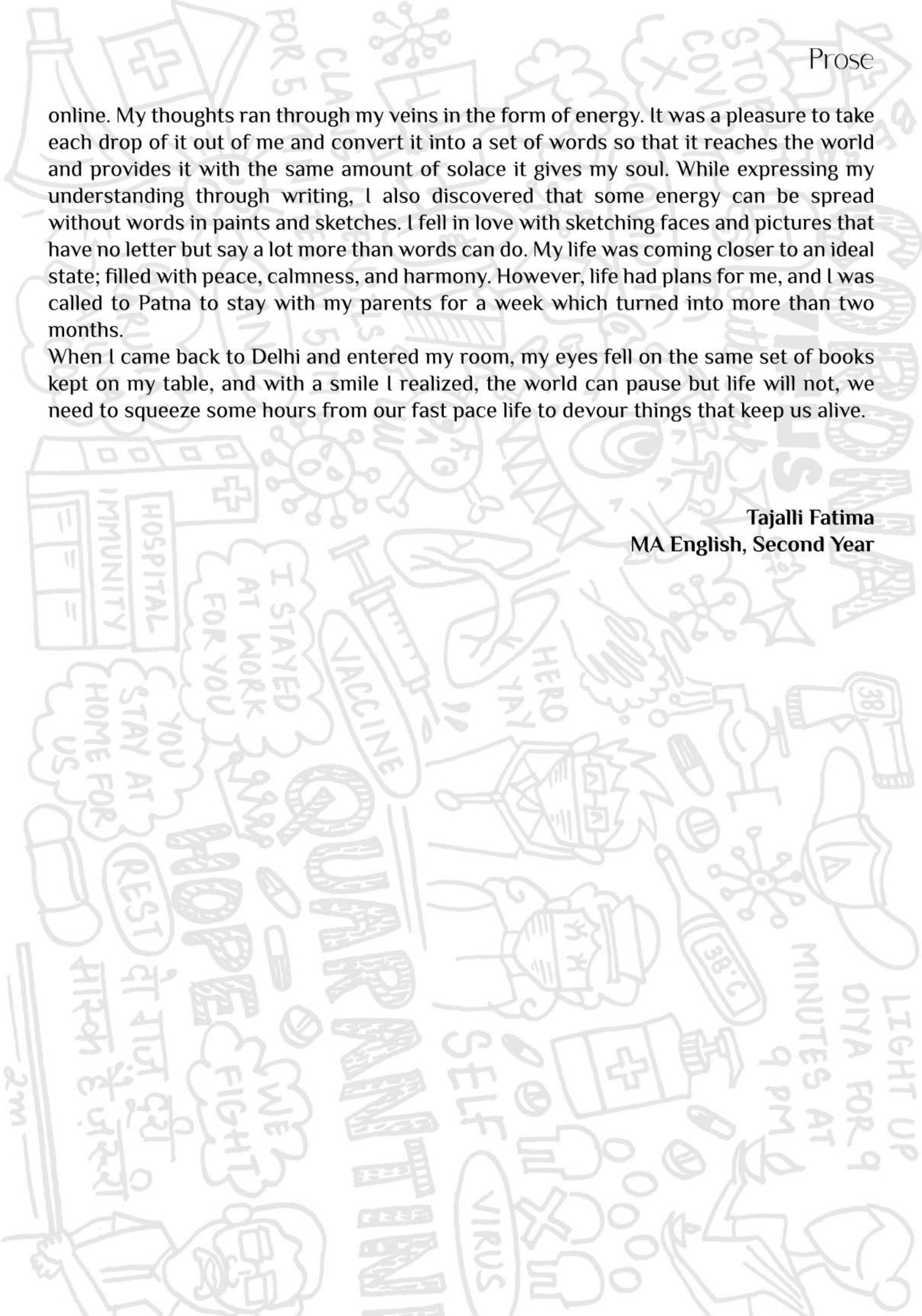
I arrived at the understanding that if something bothers you, do something about it. There is always a way to lead people out of ignorance. A mind that understands has a greater responsibility to help the mind that does not, without being tangled in the nodes of negative emotions. The three great understandings that helped me bring my life to routine and harmony needed to be shared with the world. Thus, I started to write articles

Prose

online. My thoughts ran through my veins in the form of energy. It was a pleasure to take each drop of it out of me and convert it into a set of words so that it reaches the world and provides it with the same amount of solace it gives my soul. While expressing my understanding through writing, I also discovered that some energy can be spread without words in paints and sketches. I fell in love with sketching faces and pictures that have no letter but say a lot more than words can do. My life was coming closer to an ideal state; filled with peace, calmness, and harmony. However, life had plans for me, and I was called to Patna to stay with my parents for a week which turned into more than two months.

When I came back to Delhi and entered my room, my eyes fell on the same set of books kept on my table, and with a smile I realized, the world can pause but life will not, we need to squeeze some hours from our fast pace life to devour things that keep us alive.

Tajalli Fatima
MA English, Second Year



Ruminations in a changed world.

Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Uncertainty is the only certain and inconsistency the only constant. We recurrently strive to control, only to see our wishful efforts falling futile. We, sapiens, rebuke fatalism. We board the bullet trains, and race towards our own extinction, masqueraded as technological advancements, modernism and development. These trains move so fast, and are so well maintained, that we fail to realize, they lack the most requisite requirement- A driver! An accident of this train is inevitable. What we rational fools, are currently in a midst of- is a similar kind of accident. A pandemic of corona virus has pressed the pause button for humanity. It won't be wrong to claim that the year 2020 is jinxed. With a plethora of natural disasters and man-made accidents while the pandemic is engulfing human lives, the death toll rising at an alarming rate, and all that in the same year. No matter how hard we try to claim the "death of divinity", we can't completely deny His existence. For both the innocent lamb and fearful 'tyger' are but the creation of the same hands. Thus, so many occurrences, which makes man realize the fragility of his existence, can't be a coincidence. This is the world's way to show humans who is the Actual Master. As in the words of Haroon Rashid- "We fell asleep in one world, woke up in another, Suddenly Disney is out of Magic, Paris is no longer romantic, New York doesn't stand up anymore, the Chinese wall is no longer a fortress and Mecca is empty. Hugs and kisses suddenly become weapons, and not visiting parents and friends become an act of love." Life has come to a standstill.

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, countries all across the globe have declared a lockdown. Everybody is in quarantine. The imprisonment of humans in their self made concrete cages has alienated them physically too, for alienation of souls had been done long back. Be it offices, schools or - all have been transformed into a 15 inch laptop screen. The webcams are our metros and the internet our cabs. As we adapt to this new way of living, we realize that with all our reality changing to virtual existences, our identity changing to our user names and our residences changing to our email ids, our soul needs some retreat. As we are cooped up in our dwellings, this quarantine can have a toll on the mental health of our already unhealthy minds that only have the 9 to 5 jobs, and weekend social interactions to thrive on. This time can be seen as blessing in disguise for the rediscovery of self. Taking a break from our mechanical existence and witnessing the nature heal itself. Social media has indeed played an important role in keeping everyone connected, and from noticing how most of the people have sustained their sanity in such times we realize the importance of arts. More and more people are inclining towards arts, and through arts I say we can retreat our souls. As I talk about the significance of arts during a time when the human lives are fragile and our souls need solace, I am reminded of the lines from "Dead Poets Society" "We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business and engineering are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for." With a lot of spare time in hand, and no productive obligations in mind, we can pick up our pens and paint brushes again. The

passionate writers who were forced to turn engineers due to societal pressures and the painters who had to drop their brushes and hold the stethoscope, now have a chance to live what they love. Though we can't travel physically, we can travel with the books that have been bought long ago, but were left in the dusty shelves with a promise to be read when we have time. Now is the time. Time to board our Hogwarts express, or walk the Malgudi with Swami and his friends, go to Wessex or meet Macbeth in Scotland- who said we can't go for a world tour in quarantine! The enrichment of our mind as well as souls through reading, and the outlet of our emotional outburst through writing is the best way to both relax and nourish ourselves. This is one of the best self care advices we can implement. The verses of poetry, both profound and revolutionary can re instill in us morals and consciousness- the two things that we left behind in that bag, before boarding the train of modern existence- it was too heavy to be carried along! Men, who were raised with deep rooted division of gender roles, are now surpassing the faint lines of so called masculinity and femininity and entering into kitchens. They are making their first tea. Some who had already been interested in culinary arts are rediscovering new flavors- in food and in life. We can pretend to be old schooled again- write letters to self, to the ones we love, will love or have loved and lost. We can find solace in music, the lyrics, the beats, the tunes... aligning them with our heartbeats. Dance can distress our inner anxieties, with its miraculous powers. We can resurrect the dead divinity. Find Him within ourselves, for there is no other place He would rather reside in. Connecting to our spiritual sides, connecting to Him through art is indeed the best way to retreat our souls. We can do all this, or do nothing at all! It is all a matter of our choices. The idea and journey of self discovery is exclusive and subjective to every individual, thus the need of each soul is exclusive too. Therefore we can conclude that even though we are facing a time of immense crisis, we as individuals can use this as a lesson and reflect on ourselves, look beyond the trivial monetary gains and work on achieving a higher realm of reality. However we decide to spend our quarantine we must remember what Haroon Rashid concludes in his poem- "The world continues its life and it is beautiful. It only puts human in cages. I think it is sending us a message- 'You are not necessary. The air, earth, water and sky without you are fine. When you come back remember you are my guest. Not my master.'

Aditi Verma
MA English 2nd Year

The Dark in Academia is Nothing to Be Romanticized

As students navigate through a thriving university culture, we grow and so do our expectations. This grab-bag of opportunities and the meta space for intellectual development, can arguably, be the driving force behind the complex and toxic competition between students in terms of cognitive performance. While developing expectations from academia, students often falter in gauging what is in turn expected of them. This expansive academic space is extremely narrow in social, economic, and cultural sensitivity that the method of learning and eventually existence of each student is uniquely affected and influenced by it. The unsaid obligation to move up the social ladder, to fit in, to know and to be informed makes a badly-mixed college cocktail.

The university “intellectual” circles, in all its glory, can prove themselves to be judgmental at best, and virulent at worst. Once a student is exposed to this reality, their perception of academia, as well as their yet adolescent hopefulness starts changing. One was perhaps seeking to be challenged academically, or to expand their mental horizons through the learning and unlearning process. However, the widely propagated culture of shaming students into learning or assessing them (mostly belittling) throws their curiosity and potential into a state of constant questioning. This practice facilitates an alleviated self-confidence, a feeling of estrangement and psychological distress. The struggling psyche of students to move through in an environment of intimidation hinders their personal advancement, which is precisely the opposite of what academic spaces claim to do. While being deprecated for not being as learned, an additional condition of equating each students’ idea of growth only aggravates the already flawed structure of meritocracy. The disappointment when a student does not know what the Regina George of academia knows is indicative of an elitist phenomenon.

The fundamentals on which academia operates is largely unmindful of the socio-economic background of students. The shrewd demand of being well-read and well-informed emanates from a place of privilege. What if someone’s first book was not an English classic or that deemed to be “high art”? The supercilious and lofty undertones in this determinative of the cerebral capacity of students is not only ethically wrong, but is fundamentally problematic.

Additionally, it channels itself into an impenetrable barrier for students trying to shape their identity and find their purpose in academic spaces, along with organically growing as individuals. As young adults, entering the bigger world, we are still malleable with highly impressionable minds. If our identities would be constantly scrutinized on the basis of how much we know or how “intellectual” we are, then most likely, we will be pushed into a self-critical phase, wherein we lament our academically less-than-ideal personality while starting to believe what snobbish university intellectuals have to say about us.

Students are put on a ladder marked by elitist temperament, prone to unhealthy standards of growth. Many fall for this inferiority/superiority swindle and eventually to a disservice to their own long-term and short-term goals. Making persistent efforts

towards being better, on your terms, is what academia should promote – not setting an unfair and unsound litmus test for filtering students. An academic system should not be defined and controlled by a one-dimensional perspective. Building symbiotic relationships, sustaining and advocating diversity, and being inclusive of people outside the conventional intellectual groups should be the primary focus of universities.

To have the agency and avenue for pursuing traditional “intellectual” activities is expensive. Not only that, it is also a subject of proper guidance and direction being available to the person. Hence, concentrating power structure within those who come from a place of generational wealth and wisdom is exclusionary. It should be normalized to not already know critics, scholars, authors, philosophers or theories; students enter university to learn. They were not privy to the debased traditions of shaming and judging.

The hustle culture within academia and the disproportionate importance given to the art of articulation; the discreet pressure of consuming only a certain standard of art; The necessity put on knowing a certain language; to be grammatically sound; the acute demand of being able to contribute in debates and discussions are the ticket to the group of so-called intellectual circles. This leads to the gradual fading of one’s individuality. Devoid of exercising their choice, academia can suffocate its beneficiaries. It might also take away the opportunity of tapping on one’s potential where they could have rationed their time and energy in making the best out of all available resources.

In this global mosaic culture, if we are unable to be multiculturally sensitive and open, in what line would our progress fall. Academia should not be sustained as an elitist space, it should be broad, expansive, and available to all those who are a part of this and to those who need this. Internal deterioration is not an academic aesthetic.

Nuzhat Khan
B.A Hons English, 2nd year

Reviews

A Fine Balance, Book Review
Isha Ahuja

A Palace of Illusions, Book Review
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House Rules, Book Review
Vivek Kaul

A State of Freedom, Book Review
Aditi Sharma

Before We Visit the Goddess, Book Review
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The Cakemaker, Movie Review
Umanath Chettri

A Fine Balance- A Book Review

“A Fine Balance” by Rohinton Mistry, offers a panoramic view of the politically turbulent era of the Emergency Period in India, projecting the lives of a motley of characters from different walks of life such as a Parsi widow, two tailors from a lower cast, and a disillusioned youth caught in the vortex of patriarchy, the brutal caste system, poverty, and commercialization. It was an Oprah Book Club selection in 2001 and this book is extremely relatable as an Indian reader but it also brims with a universal resonance as the world continues to be ridden with travesties of systematic oppression and misuse of power, ceaselessly rendering the lives of people devoid of dignity, kindness, and love. The tragic is interwoven with the indomitable human spirit in each strand of Mistry’s rich tapestry of human existence in the wake of injustice and inequality, laced with the life-changing lesson of maintaining a fine balance between hope and despair. Mistry successfully punctures the dominant accounts of historical and political events as he unravels the bleak reality through the lens of the marginalized amidst the diverse Indian landscape still grappling with the fragility of its democratic system. A peculiar sense of humour pervades the poignantly crafted novel, depicting the grim reality of an array of characters caught in the whirlpool of calamitous circumstances. Mistry’s literary genius lies in the way he couches the highly controversial period of Emergency in an obscure connection with the mundane daily realities of the common masses, hence unsettling the sensibilities of the readers. The complexly layered characters engineered by Mistry heightens the literary quality of the novel. Vasantrao Valmik, the idiosyncratic philosophical voice, the Beggar Master, the revengeful Monkey Man, the Rent Collector etc, form the core of the novel, each giving a vivid insight into the social structures they represent thereby enhancing the reader’s exposure to the entirety of the Indian social, political and economic frameworks. His narratorial style exposes the pomposity and ridiculousness of the political machinery governing that era through ample jibes at the political giants, attributing the entire scenario with a circus-like carnivalesque tint. The novel emerges as a rich concoction of comedy, pathos, sentimentality, farce, satire and humour with Mistry employing a matter-of-fact tone in a journalistic manner of narration.

This book does not offer any utopian solutions but transcends its bounds by jolting a reader from a state of complacency into discarding their rose-tinted vistas and acknowledging the atrocities unleashed upon the downtrodden and discriminated sections around them. It is an empowering read because it manages to capture reality powerfully and teaches us to remain hopeful despite the failure of humans to uphold basic humanity.

The text due to its length might not be suitable for impatient readers having a penchant for fast-paced narratives as Mistry’s masterpiece is to be savoured unhurriedly. The novel is a must read as it creates a whirlpool of emotions that modifies a reader’s vista intensely as the text emerges as an unforgettable experience transforming the meaning of life.

A Palace of Illusions- A Book Review

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 2008 novel *The Palace of Illusions* is a remarkable attempt at retelling the story of the great Indian epic Mahabharata from the perspective of the female protagonist Draupadi. In doing so, the author makes a paradigmatic shift from considering Draupadi just as an agent of destruction to finally giving her the individuality to tell her own story. The novel traces the journey of Panchali from childhood to adulthood and describes the war-torn world of that time from the point of view of the woman who, across several generations, has been cursed to have initiated it in the first place. The author gives her the voice that further gives the reader an insight into her life. Though being born into a "man's world" where she was time and again subjected to the whims of patriarchy, she comes across as a woman who is struggling yet strong. She is very well aware of her position in the society that is unfair to women but at the same time, she tries to reclaim her identity, sexuality, and individuality. The readers can witness her spectacular movement from the domains of marginality to the centre. The readers are acquainted with the desires, aspirations and emotional dynamics of not only Panchali but other women as well, including Kunti, her mother in law, Gandhari, the wife of Dhritarashtra (the blind king), and Uttara, the wife of Abhimanyu. These women, over the period of history, have been systematically eliminated from the main narrative and are barely talked about. But Divakaruni, through her magnificent style of storytelling, provides us a glimpse into their worlds. Moreover, she does not portray the women as mere victims of natural subordination but as individuals who were as powerful and strong as their male counterparts but with limited opportunities. Our folktales and mythological stories often consider the sacrifices these women made as a marker of their weakness but Divakaruni subverts these conventional stereotypes, presenting these women in a completely different light.

The book is a beautiful and an easy read. It has the capability to transfer the reader into a whole new world which is both familiar and unacquainted. Structurally, the book is divided into 43 chapters and each chapter has a unique name. Interestingly enough, the first and the last chapter both go by the name "fire", which is also symbolic of the way Draupadi was born into this world and known thereafter. Also, the book comprises an author's note in which she lays down the intent of her writing. To quote Divakaruni herself, "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*". For the convenience of the readers, the book also consists of a family chart of the main characters in Kuru dynasty and a list of other major characters. The book cover is bright green in colour and has an illustration of a palace door. This door can also be symbolic of how the author will open it and take the readers to the unexplored dimensions and possibilities of truth which through ages has been made available to us as facts.

The novel explores a variety of themes that have contemporary relevance such as - birth of a girl child, the choice and agency a woman has when it comes to marriage, the toxic ideals of beauty laid down by the society, the vicious circle of exploitation in which the

woman is deemed helpless, the glorification of immoral acts justified through the notions of Dharma, and the utter futility of wars that cause mere destruction and loss of lives. Thus, though Mahabharata has been judged through the binary lens of good and evil, Divakaruni displays a vivid picture of all the grey areas involved. She takes a radical, unbiased and much liberal stand when it comes to depicting the situations, characters, and the plotlines. She weaves her story through myth and magic and blurs the distinction between what seems real and what is just an illusion of reality.

Furthermore, the book can be read as a reinterpretation of the events of Mahabharata from a strong feminist perspective. This can be explained from lines such as, "Remember that, little sister: wait for a man to avenge your honour, and you'll wait forever". Such examples form part of the book's appeal and can be read as a call to making women realise the immense potential they possess and how they are themselves sufficient to fight their own battles. Also, the marriage of Draupadi to the five Pandava brothers has always been morally glorified without understanding what it meant for her. As she says, "I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not". What makes the book enigmatic is that even though the readers are aware how the story ends, the narrative has the power to hold the readers till the very end. One is left awestruck and mesmerized by the narrative quality and talent of Divakaruni. The book explores the ideas of love, friendship, and relationships which are remarkably relevant in the present times. It also furthers the idea that even though the world has changed a lot since then, it also has not changed much. This is the reason why the book is so relatable, engaging, and is an eye-opener, all at once.

In conclusion, the book is highly recommended for audiences of all ages. It is an interesting yet perceptive adventure where the reader is "taken back to a time that is half history, half myth, and wholly magical".

Nisha Bothra
MA English, Second Year

House Rules - A Book Review

“My biggest hope for Jacob is that moments like this won’t happen. My biggest fear: that they will, and I won’t always be there to keep people from thinking the worst of him.”

“House Rules” is a tantalizing story revolving around the family of Hunts which is not anything like your family next door. Jacob Hunt, 18 years old, is suffering from Asperger’s Syndrome which affects the family consisting of his mother, Emma, and younger brother, Theo. Their perfectly imperfect life with its quirks and perks suddenly upturns after Jacob gets accused of murdering his tutor, Jess Ogilvy. Emma fears he might be guilty. This book brings forth the harsh realities of life, veracities you don’t want to admit and the lies we convince ourselves with. Enclosed in its sarcastic comedy, family drama, suspense, and a pinch of romance, this book is far from fiction and lets you relate to every character. All the characters are simple and the book is full of intricate details that make the book more intriguing and don’t fail to leave you laughing and crying at the same time.

The book’s target audience is teenagers and adults. Jacob, the protagonist, is very particular about his daily routine to the point that even if a small thing does not happen according to his schedule, he feels uncomfortable. Emma, despite her frustration at Jacob's obsessive need to perform carefully planned, single-minded activities, makes sure that he feels at ease, and to do so she adjusts her and Theo's lives around his needs. Jacob is also obsessed with forensic analysis; the novel opens up with him enacting a crime scene and asking his mother to solve it. He does so to the point of compulsion. It is this very compulsive habit that turns his life around, as later in the novel he is accused of murdering his tutor Jess Ogilvy. His brother Theo breaks into Jess's house, and as she gets startled, she accidentally slips. When Jacob comes for his tuition, he finds out that Theo had broken into the house, and that he was innocent. Therefore, to protect his brother, per a 'house rule' set down by their mother, he stages a crime scene so that it looks as if Jess's boyfriend Mark Maguire had committed the crime. The story moves forward linearly, with the point of view of every character being told simultaneously about the ongoing events.

Chapter Review “Everywhere I look, there are signs of struggle.” ~ Jacob

The book starts with an explanation of the everyday life of the Hunts and the daily struggles that Emma and Theo have to face because of Jacob. Some of them included, bullying that Theo had to bear, the expenses of Jacob’s medicines, Theo feeling less loved and cared for by Emma and they strictly needed to follow and adhere to a routine, because any change, even a minor one could put off Jacob. Theo is shown to be sneaking into empty houses, trying to get away from all the madness and the chaos. The story proceeds into Jacob telling us his point of view of the world, which is very different from how we see it. This is how Jacob explains it to us - “I don’t understand why people never say what they mean, it feels like immigrants who come to a country and learn the language but are completely baffled by the idioms. I have spent much of my eighteen years learning how to exist in a world that is always chaotic, too loud and full of

hypocrites.” “On the other hand, I think cats have Asperger's. Like me, they're very smart. And like me, sometimes they simply need to be left alone.” The story continues with Jacob telling us about his relationship with Jess Ogilvy, who was his social skills tutor. Jacob thinks he is in love with her because she listens to him and understands him and accepts him the way he is. He dislikes Jess' boyfriend because he is always making fun of Jacob, and also doesn't treat Jess in a nice manner. Jacob is confused regarding his feelings related to Jess. “I think you're the only person who gets me. When I'm with you, the world doesn't feel like a problem I can't figure out. Please come to the dance, because you're my music.” The novel proceeds with Jacob being charged of murder of Jess Ogilvy. The problem is, Emma feels he is guilty. The book ahead is a series of court proceedings, a struggle where Jacob's lawyer tries everything to prove Jacob's innocence, but it is because of society's stereotypes against autism, that the Jury gets biased.

Instead of revealing what happens next in the novel, we can have a look at some of the lines from the book I found are really powerful and can instantly connect us with the novel:

“Sometimes people shush people not because of what they said, but because they gave voice to the unutterable thoughts we've been thinking.” ~ Jacob

“In reality, you don't ever change the hurricane. You just learn how to stay out of its path.” ~ Emma

“It's never the differences between people that surprise us. It's the things that, against all odds, we have in common.” ~ Jacob

“Logical thinking keeps you from wasting time worrying, or hoping. It prevents disappointment. Imagination, on the other hand, only gets you hyped up over things that will never realistically happen.” ~ Jacob

“I imagine how cool it would be if all small talk wasn't lies.” ~ Jacob

My final verdict would be, Pick up this book if you want to go through a series of different emotions in one single read. The language of the book is easy and uses everyday vocabulary and flows easily. This book manages to encompass a wide range of emotions in a beautiful way that will leave you mesmerised. This book is also a tribute to motherhood and it's struggles. Apart from these reasons, the book is important because it questions the way law and society functions without keeping in mind the requirements of the ones who don't fit into the mould of what we call as 'normal'. Grab a copy for the emotional joyride as well as for the questions that it raises that can make the society think towards creating a more flexible system.

Vivek Kaul
MA English, Second Year

'A State of Freedom'- A Book Review

"Brute force, no matter how strongly applied, can never subdue the desire of freedom." - Dalai Lama

A State of Freedom by Neel Mukherjee, isn't a novel in the conventional sense, but rather a series of noncoherent voices screaming for freedom in desolation. These voices have many faces, and blur the distinction of social hierarchy, gender and age, singing the elegy on human condition in chorus. They, being the archetype of the 'hollow men', exhibit the never ending urge of Man, to exchange his life for a better one, only to realize the inevitability of tragedy and its synonymy with human conditions. They can therefore, be equated as the present day 'trishankus' with immense sound and fury to gain more, and ending up with a life that signifies nothing.

Being the third novel of the much acclaimed author Neel Mukherjee, who has been awarded the 'Vodafone Crossword Book Award' for his first novel Past Continuous 2008, and shortlisted for the '2014 Man Booker Prize' for his second novel, The Lives of Others, it won't be an understatement to quote that if A State of Freedom is unable to surpass the mark of millennia, predefined by the previous works, it is bound to die a premature death. The author refuses to call himself a diasporic writer, claiming to be an Indian writer who resides partly in the US, UK and India. An ardent keeper of his traditional roots, Mukherjee, precisely like Ghosh and Lahiri, keeps this novel fragrant with the Calcutta soil. It has a vivid portrayal of Indian sensibilities, and the harsh realism of the society that feeds upon 'freedom as a myth'. The various situations along with questioning the true essence of freedom, also presents the sense of helplessness that comes with alienation and a life in transit. The novel can be classified as an experimental one, for it discards the linear plot, and presents five different situations in five different parts, rather than stories interwoven in an intertwined manner. The parts have no coherence, yet have a unity of theme. The resolution can however be found in the last unpunctuated monologue which can be equated to Joyce's "stream of consciousness" before the "ghost" in the city commits suicide.

The first part begins with an NRI father and his six-year-old son's visit to India. The father tries to instil interest in his 'American' son, by various means. The son however remains indifferent and quiet, after witnessing the hullabaloo on the street. Unable to make his son relate with his nostalgic past, the father finally realizes "He had become a tourist in his own county." This part of the novel presents the undertones of migration for a better life, and the de-rooting of one's being. Migrants seek 'freedom' from what once belonged to them, to get what they consider to be a "utopia", only to realize that "a utopia is a myth". Therefore, in order to get something, they leave everything and end up in a limbo, in a nothingness.

The next part continues the nostalgia of migration where a son, residing in London, visits his parents in Bombay. He recreates the Indian essence by using Indian dishes, as a means of preserving pieces of what he has left behind, "In a divided life that was lived between two countries, separately and in a rigorous succession, maybe I had saved a few things to belong to each of them solely, without flowing in between them." The notion of

freedom takes a wider percept as the boy encounters his house helpers Renu and Milley, and breaks the norms of social status and class hierarchy, by visiting Renu's village, only to be stunned by a revelation. This revelation is striking and the readers are left to ponder, 'is the state of freedom transferable?' 'If so, how can we break through this cycle?'

The novel further talks about a fox-faced man called Lakshman, and his pursuits to make more money. He does it by becoming a qualandar and training a dancing bear. He leaves his village behind, as an 'exchange of a better life' and goes to the city. We again see "freedom for oneself", by "caging of the other" when Lakshman finally realizes that he now stands alone in the no man's land, a destitute met by severe misfortune with no one but the bear Raju as his sole companion; "Besides, he feels lonely without Raju".

The next part deals with the backstory of Milley who was once 'Mahoua' but had to convert to Christianity in order to escape from poverty and hunger. She leaves the village to work as a house helper in the city with roads and motor bikes and cars only to be caged by her owners as a bounded labour. The tribal setting intertwines the strands of her life with that of her friend Soni, who ends up joining a Naxalite party and dies fighting for what she considered freedom. Milley too escapes the shackles, only to realize that she was now in a bigger city, in the same state of poverty that she was running from.

The last part is an unpunctuated monologue delivered by Laskhman's brother Ramlal, who works at a construction site at Agra. He is envious of the NRI's son who, sitting in the car, can close the windows to the real world and open it again at his own will, "he cannot be the boy at the end of that path". These thoughts begin to consume his being, and he finally jumps off a site of construction, where he worked as a labourer.

The title of the novel is well thought of and abstract, open to interpretation precisely as the entire novel is. As the theme of freedom, alienation and life in transition dominates the novel, there are undertones of nostalgia, features of culinary fiction and vivid descriptions of the harsh realities of India. The novel can be interpreted through the lens of feminism, Marxism, psycho-analytical criticism and ecocriticism; it also employs techniques like foreshadowing and use of colloquial phrases to give the novel an authenticity of the Indian sensibility. The only drawback with the book I found, which some readers may consider as a merit too, is the ambiguity of characters and plot. The author has used so many sub-themes in the process of making the book universal, that at some points fail to hit the nail. Seemingly, no specific target audience has been kept in mind while writing the book, which makes the novel easier to be appreciated by a variety of readers. It would however be helpful for those specifically interested in socio-literary studies, diasporic literature and regional studies, as it is set in various parts of India. The book is therefore recommended, in spite of its flaws, and would serve to enhance the sensibility of readers towards the lower strata of the society. It is also bound to make them consider being careful what they wish for.

Before We Visit the Goddess- A Book Review

Before We Visit the Goddess is an entangled story of three generations of women- Sabitri, Bela, and Tara about heartbreak, betrayal and maternal love. Sabitri has worked hard to provide for her daughter, Bela, overcoming obstacles of her own, only for Bela to defy her mother's decision and flee to America to form a new life filled with new challenges. How Bela handles these challenges, how her judgements are affected by her mother and how this affects her daughter, Tara is what Before We Visit The Goddess is all about.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning author of sixteen books. Her major novels include *Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *The Forest Of Enchantments* (2019) and many more. Her works are largely set in India and America, having lived in both of these places, and deal with themes of Indian traditions, culture, and immigration. Before We Visit the Goddess revolves around the intricacies of a mother-daughter relationship, focusing on the lives of mothers as well as daughters, showing the world through both perspectives, making the reader sympathize with each character. With its setting in India as well as America, the novel deals with how difficult it is for immigrants to survive in a new country as well as how challenging it can be for a single mother to provide for her children. The novel shows the daughters' damaged relationship with their mother and how the daughters are the ones who break away from their mothers, yet when in need of support, look for the one person they feel they can rely on - their mothers, even if they have caused them great grief themselves.

The novel with its themes of maternal bond (or lack thereof), immigration, and culture, along with its simple language and complex structure targets a wide range of readership. The novel can be enjoyed by beginner readers for its captivating plot and can be analyzed by scholars for its diasporic connections and thus belongs to the literary fiction genre as well as can be successfully placed in women's fiction as it also highlights issues of domesticity, familial bonds, and social and cultural struggle. The author has dedicated the novel to her "three men": Murthy, Anand, and Abhay, her husband and two sons respectively. The epigraph contains two quotes; the first is from Manusmriti that says, "Where women are honored, there the gods are pleased" and the other from Jean Thompson's *Fire Dreams* that says, "Everybody lives two ways. The first is simple, the second less so". It has nine chapters followed by an acknowledgment by the author at the end. With a third person narrative, each chapter shows the perspectives of different characters with only Bela's and Tara's perspective shown more than once.

Before We Visit the Goddess is a novel mainly about the relationships of women with other women. The title of the novel creates a mystery around it which the reader expects will be resolved. Even though the idea behind the title is revealed, the moment when Tara, who has not been kept as far away from religion as possible due to her father's communist beliefs, is about to enter a temple and is told "Before we visit the goddess, we must cleanse ourselves", how the title encompasses the whole novel is not completely illustrated and the mystery is resolved unsatisfactorily so. In addition to the title, the epigraph too remains some sort of a puzzle. The quote from Manusmriti leads the reader

to believe that there is going to be some divine connection in relation to women's position but the connection comes down to only the names of the female characters with that of the goddesses - Durga, Sabitri, and Meena. The second quotation from Jean Thompson is rightly justified with respect to the struggles that the three women face in their lives and the way they overcome it.

The novel spans more than six decades. In a non-linear narration, it begins with Sabitri getting a call from her distraught daughter Bela leading her to recall her own experiences from childhood to marriage and to the moment when the first seed of the soured relationship between Sabitri and Bela is sown. As it moves further, it shows how bitter childhood memory stays with the characters even after years and it highlights their own complex ways of dealing with them. The characters, in hopes of a better life, move to a different place only to be haunted by the past every now and then. The novel captures these emotions beautifully. The novel actively illustrates how a parent's decisions in providing the best for their children are affected by their own childhood experiences as well as how those decisions affect and form the decisions that their children take. The novel highlights upon the fact of how a woman, whether in India or in America, needs to be independent not merely to survive but to live a satisfactory life, to achieve the "happiest moment" of their lives, to be a "fortunate lamp".

The novel displays the complexities of human relationships with respect to parents-daughter and husband-wife relationships through various characters but the presence of several perspectives makes the reading of the novel confusing. The reader does not know whose perspective is being read as the title of the chapters provides no insight into the characters identity. Not the most difficult task but it is up to the readers to figure out the same and thus leaves room for improvement. As stated earlier, the title of the novel is not the most suited title for the novel and a better one could have been "Fortunate Lamps" as is what Sabitri wanted the purpose of her lineage to be. Overall, the novel is a captivating read and is recommended to the readers. In spite of its somewhat minor flaws, the lives of Sabitri, Bela, and Tara stays with the reader and the shortcomings can be overlooked for a women-centric, empowering and nostalgic read.

Shabnum Khan
MA English, Second Year

The Cakemaker

Ophir Raul Graizer

Thomas works at a bakery in Berlin. Oren, an Israeli who visits Berlin frequently for business purposes, falls in love with Oren. Thomas travels to Jerusalem when he learns of Oren's death in a car accident there, meets Anat, the widow, and the two fall in love. What ensues and more importantly the way it does, with so much tenderness, is what makes this movie special.

Gender fluidity, race, religion, nationality and love are terrains it touches upon and does full justice to it all, to its themes, the characters and the countries it's set in and with the perfect narrative pace, pretty much in congruence with the titular process (The Cakemaker) of baking, patiently and gently and lovingly.

The movie weighs heavily on the shoulders of its wonderful leads: Sarah Adler, Tim Kalkhof and Zohar Strauss and its brilliant screenplay by Graizer himself (achieves brilliance through minimalism) and doesn't need a background score for the most part to heighten any sort of emotion, be it of grief or happiness. It's quite raw and realistic in this regard. It's made so beautifully that one can't sit through it without being a crying mess. It is, for all the right reasons, the best movie I've watched this year. It's so powerful that a two-minute highlights of sorts of Thomas and Oren's brief relationship is enough to understand the two of them, to feel for them (we do see flashbacks of the same in the later half though). The cinematography by Omri Aloni works wonders, as it complements the tone and thematic concerns of the movie really well.

It is immensely touching to see Thomas trying to seek his lover in his lover's partner, trying to find the dead in the living, trying to be Oren through a union with Anat. It is beautiful to see the two fall in love with each other. One of our literary theory professors in Jamia, while teaching us Plato, had told how Plato believed we humans were the most imitative of creatures. The Cakemaker took me back to that lecture, and it's so heartbreaking and beautiful at the same time to see Thomas replicating the sentiment of that quote by immersing himself in everything that was Oren, his life, his wife, the one kid, Jerusalem and its culture. Another aspect of the movie that hovers around the entire narrative but isn't specifically touched upon and dealt with is grief. We see the two's process of channelising the same through their love for each other. The Cakemaker is an unforgettable tale that shatters labels of all kinds through a beautiful depiction of the lives of three people, two nations, different religions and just one kind of love, the unfiltered and the unlabeled sort, the one residing in the centre of the human heart.

Umanath Chettri
MA English, Second year

Shabnum Khan. MA English 2nd Year. New Delhi, India

“she would sleep; she would wake; she would walk”
 -sums up my lockdown experience.

This is an exaggeration, of course. I am by no means a 17th century ghost stuck in a limbo, forced to live a cyclical existence. However, life at present has become so lifeless that I sometimes hope for sleep as soon as I wake up so that I don't have to live the same day over and over again- waking, eating, waiting for sleep, and finally some peace and quiet. There is one companion, though, who is always there in moments where I am feeling a little too low brimming with guilt. Guilt because as soon as I feel the despair that all of us have become too familiar with, I remember that I am one of the few privileged ones who should be grateful for being lucky enough to still lead the comfortable life of yore (that's how long ago it feels). I have to then, apart from being grateful, remind my companion that mental well-being is just as important. If there are days where the rays are harsher than sandpaper, there are ones where the clouds bring a chilly warmth wrapped in a good book, phone calls from friends, long walks after dinner, and Covid negative reports.

Asweel M. BA English. Kochi, India

I have spent these days fretting through a pain that cannot be expressed through words. Often, I feel extremely depressed, worrying about the future, my family's financial situation and everything else. I was not able to travel and interact with people and was merely existing as a doomscroller. I've been spending 4-7 hours every single day watching useless Netflix series, and like everyone else, relying entirely on hope.

Kirtiman Hazarika, MA English, Guwahati, India

Death lurks in the infinitesimally small, beyond the paranoid reaches of man. We investigate it and culture it in laboratories, while bodies pile up in the shabby corners of the hospital. Families mourn those who struggled with blank breaths, their eyes widened in want of air, yet unaware that their lungs have failed them for the first and last time. In the meantime, the parades of politicians continue spitting out their invectives onto the huddled masses, awake in the frenzy of politics, unaware or uncaring of the promise of death. Many had survived with barely a sniff, which they would laugh off at parties and phone calls alike, ignorant of the grim reality it could have led to. The confidence of statistics has minimalized the more than quarter-million dead as barely a percentage point compared to the ones who had lived; barely people who counted. All over there is an ennui of existence. Sufficient in entertainment and groceries, the middle class think themselves prisoners as they are denied their little frivolities like gupshup with the neighborhood aunties, or a stream of golgappas hurriedly shoved into the salivating

mouth in quick procession. The poor? They die as they always do, survive as they always do, dream as they always do. The need for two square meals and the haunting question in the silent eyes of their children is enough motivation to send a quick prayer to God and pray for relief from death and often their life while they wane their bodies like candles in the fires of urgency. Life continues, on and on and here we are to endure its meanders. Drifting. Rudderless.

Inam Nabeeha Mushkan. BA (Hons) English. Assam, India

The first case of the COVID-19 pandemic in Assam was reported on 31 March 2020. As the number of cases rise, there is an increasing degree of fear and concern among people. The impact it's having on the lives of every person is overwhelming. Although it is normal to feel anxious and stressful at this point but we all have a significant role to play in protecting our mental health as well as physical health. By doing simple things that can reduce our distress such as talking to a friend, making an exercise routine indoor and indulging in any kind of leisure activities that enable you to remain calm. There are helplines where you can even consult doctors for any mental health issues that you have been dealing with. We must keep ourselves healthy and take all the necessary precautions.

Falak. BA (Hons) English. New Delhi, India

Goodbyes may seem hard, but isn't it better than not getting an opportunity to say one? What if you cannot remember the last conversation you had with the loved one you just lost or the last time you were in their presence. Everyone is trying to grieve the loss of someone they knew as it is the new normal, and even if it seems that we're alone, then aren't we together in being alone as well. Grieving is healthy, it helps to reconnect our consciousness back to reality and regain the stability we had earlier but what if we are too numb to grieve? We'd rather drown ourselves in work or cut ourselves off from every possible source of communication that could help us.

What if we cry for help and nobody is left to hear it or we all are just too desensitized to identify when someone needs our help or fall short on words that could console a friend. Apart from the colossal scar, this pandemic will be leaving us with a social stigma as the impact of its occurrence is not uniform and we are not equally affected by it.

Anxious and gasping for air. Does anyone deserve to die this way? Or simply incubated away from a loved one surrounded by doctors performing CPR, but then I guess it's better if your family doesn't get to see you in your last moments...

Last year has been a learning experience for all of us. We have to uplift our spirits and those around us by radiating optimism and by helping whomever we can before ensuring our safety, we have to move forward... thankful for all that is left.

Maryam Hassan. BA (Hons) English. New Delhi, India

A horrendous cyclone, hitting us amidst a disrupted state of mental as well as physical health, deaths, unscrupulous politics, and what not. From day one till now, it has not stopped to take a breath. Not stopped to let us take a breath. It has snatched our breaths (literally). From my father being pulled back from the brink of death, to many familiar faces falling from that brink. From applying for colleges amidst the peak of the pandemic to attending college through a phone screen. It has been a luxated ride. A ride that is yet to come to a stop. But even in this tale of tragedy, I have found my comic relief in my family, who even while being tested positive have moved on with a positive attitude. Writing has been another balm for me. The unfortunate writeable situations mixed with the never-ending enforced leisure, impelled me to put my fears and stress on paper, leading to what one can call a catharsis of these emotions. It has brought out the poet in me, whose existence was foreign to my sanity. But more importantly, realizing the fact that the impact and consequence of this virus on us is different from others, owing to the differences in our status as members of the society, has taught me to be grateful. While many of us were able to adapt to working online, ordering food through delivery apps, and staying connected to our loved ones through video calls, many others had no choice but to be exposed to the virus while keeping the society functioning and thus suffering the painful consequences. My privileges have hurt me like never before. Even though this time has snatched away from us our opportunities of getting a desirable education in classrooms, I feel that it has taught us more than any institution could ever include in our syllabus. It has taught us to be grateful for the Lilliputian things such as the touch of a loved one. It has taught us the value of education, people in our lives and the value of life itself. Moreover, it has trained our minds for the upcoming difficulties that we might face in our lives ahead.

There is an end to every ride. It may be far, but there is. The important thing is to buckle up, be strong and don't let go.

Aqsa Equbal. BA (Hons) English. Gaya, India

It feels like I'm somebody else.

"So, when do you think our lives are going to be normal again?"

"I don't know, maybe someday. By the way, I just learned a new TikTok dance"

This is the same conversation each of us is having since 24 March 2020, the day we had our first lockdown. Life seems immensely unstable. I am sure that about half of us are going to suffer from social anxiety once everything gets back to normal. But it won't be a problem for me because I'm an introvert as I like being alone and I have always been a socially awkward person. I have tried every new trend that I came across while scrolling through my Instagram including the famous Dalgona coffee which no one actually liked, learned every new TikTok dance, mulled over the meaning of life and counted all the tiles that I have in my house (200), tried learning a new language but failed and added some new words to my vocabulary for the new normal, 'pandemic,

epidemic, lockdown, zoom meetings....'

But the point is that I want the life I had in 2019 back. I'm tired of this lockdown. Okay, I admit I was over the moon when I heard that our colleges won't be opening any time soon. . But I didn't know that I'll be in a situation where I will be doing my degree online or I would have eaten the chocolates my mom bought for my brother which I promised to God that I won't touch if he continues this lockdown period.

One thing which all of us can agree upon is that physically we all are in our houses , doing things mindlessly but mentally we all are on beautiful sun kissed beaches, tanning our skins and uploading our aesthetic pictures or at least I am.

I wish this pandemic never happened. This thought encapsulates my journey from 2020 to 2021. There must be some button or an option when clicked or chosen, one can skip a certain chapter in their life. I think this is the first symptom of losing one's mind , you wish for things that aren't possible. I am not the scientist of a time Machine and H.G Wells ain't making me the protagonist of the book even if he was alive.

Who would have thought that one day the entirety of mankind would be battling against a pandemic? Like how did we all go from "Eww...he/she is wearing a mask" to "Thank god...he/she is wearing a mask". Or how did our conversations changed "Please wear a mask" "Please keep a 6 feet distance !" or "Use a sanitizer." How times change.

By the time I'm all ready to leave the house, I look like an altogether different person wearing a million things such as mask, gloves, face shield and carrying sanitizer rather than a regular college girl. And as the days are passing by I'm all but certain that I will continue wearing masks throughout my life because I'm enjoying being ugly in private. It makes me look more approachable like Caspar the friendly ghost and less scary like the doll Annabelle.

Sometimes I do wonder how life would have been in this situation if I was super-rich. Would I be also chilling and travelling mindlessly like these rich celebrities and billionaires? I think life would have been pretty much the same apart from the fact that I would be doing my online classes from an exotic location.

Us—"How many more problems till we all get wiped out from the planet?"

God—"Yes"

Is it just me or we all feel like we are in a game, where God is always watching you and made you the main character of the game with a mission to fight the villainous Corona virus and do you know the big surprise or the cherry on top—you have to fight a disease which is new. Or that you have somehow transmigrated in the Netflix series 'The Walking Dead' where in the place of the zombies you have this virus and save the world. I also wonder (seems like I have found my new hobby, wondering) what would have life been if we weren't facing this pandemic? Did we adjust well in our current environment or do we need to compromise more? I'm certain that I would have been whining like a child to my sister about how I want to go back home so desperately while lying down on her hostel room's bed like a sloth

Remember how Elon Musk got an encrypted message from Aliens? Well, we got one from the almighty mother nature and after decoding it, the result is pretty cool for a virus- 'Cause I, I, I'm in the stars tonight (and coming days and nights)

So watch me bring the fire and set your life alight (literally)
Shining through the city with the little (or did I mean more?) death and soul
So I'ma light it up like a dynamite.

At last, I just want to say "Life isn't always about butterflies and sunshines,
sometimes you have to endure snakes and hurricanes too "

But this doesn't mean it got the right to book a one way ticket and settle comfortably in
my life and refuses to leave my humble abode.

Sahil Alom Barbhuiya. BA (Hons) English.

The Coronavirus pandemic has stirred a variety of emotions and feelings within everyone. Frustration, anxiety, stress, and guilt are some of them. The guilt of people dying has ransacked our hearts. And the loathsome lockdowns have rendered us helpless. Amidst all these disparities, the great Indian epic, Ramayana, airing on national television filled us with optimism and positivity. At a time when the despicable governments admitted their defeat, there were netizens who didn't abandon hopes, came forth, and tackled the infallibilities.

The pandemic and the resultant lockdown have changed our lives in every facet. The horror of the entire country grappled by the virus will continue to haunt us. These days have left a scar in our hearts and a fearful trace in our minds. But I'm glad that we've learned a lot of things from this time. Perhaps our priorities will shift from the machines and the materialistic aspect of life to the people around us and we will remember that the lives we've lost are irreparable.

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COVID-19 VIRUS



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