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CURATED

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INSIDE THE ISSUE

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ABOUT CURATED

Pandora Curated is a magazine published by Political Pandora, dedicated to exploring and dissecting critical perspectives on global culture, socio-political life, and the production of knowledge. Bringing together interdisciplinary analysis, situated narratives, and visual inquiry, the magazine foregrounds the cultural and ideological dimensions of contemporary experience across diverse contexts.

Curated examines the intersections of power, identity, history, and representation through essays, reportage, interviews, and curated visuals. Centring intellectual rigour, the magazine engages with questions of politics, literature, sociology, anthropology, and critical theory, ultimately highlighting stories that both unsettle and illuminate dominant worldviews.

QUILTS, GARDENS AND WEAVING

Inheriting Knowledge Without Words

By Harriet Sanderson

Today, most of us are disconnected from the people who grow our food, make our clothes and build our homes. The crafts that once connected us and the earth have faded from view and taken with them fundamental relationships. A political enquiry into these media allows us to take craft seriously, as a tool to imagine and shape more cooperative, sustainable and liberating ways of life. This has never been more necessary than amidst our epoch of rapid accumulation, consumption and disconnection. Quilting, gardening and weaving thus come forth as not simply hobbies, but symbols of care, memory and resistance.
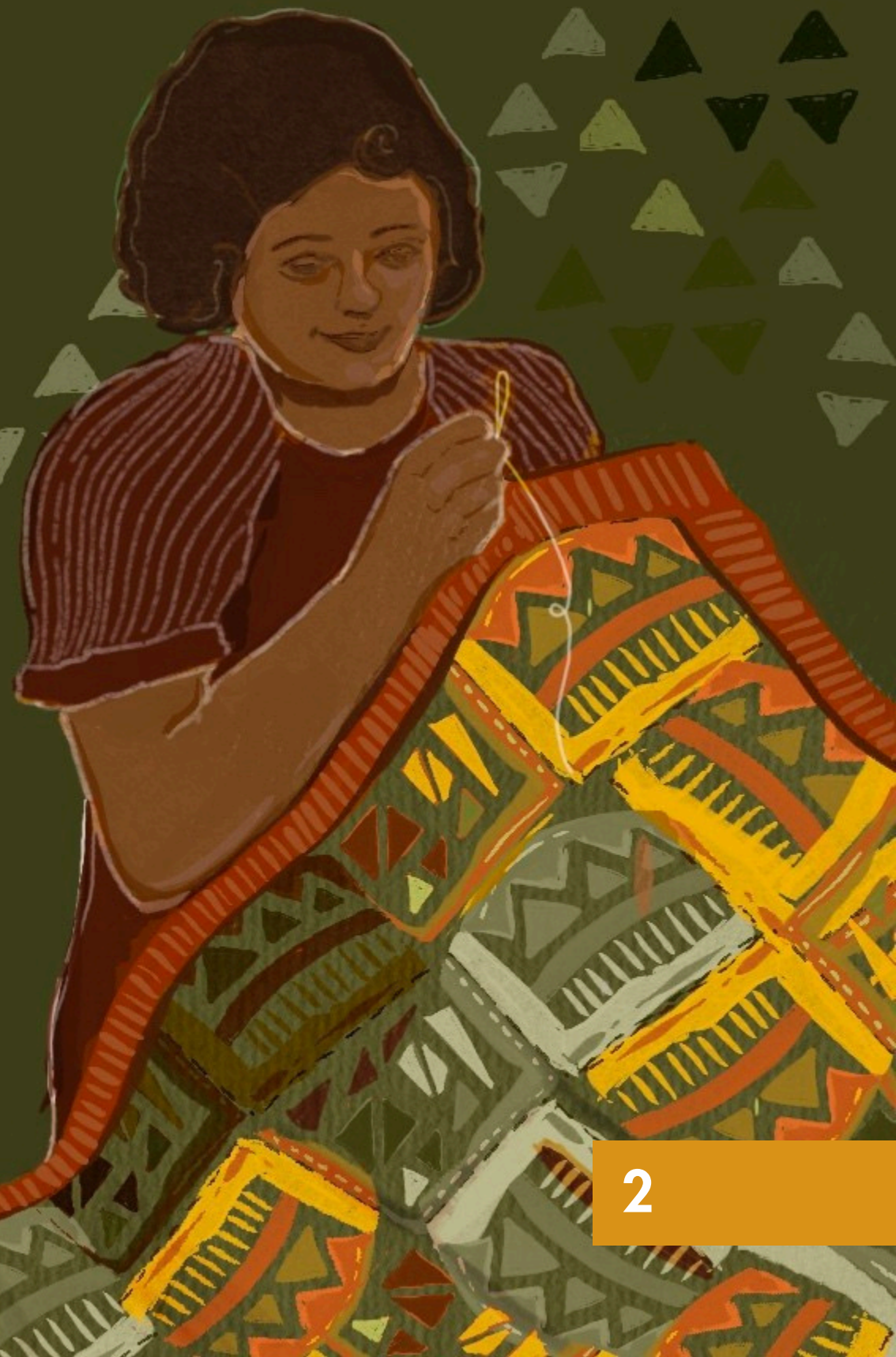
Quilting

Figures, colours and patterns, enclosed in a fabric tapestry to be used and felt: Quilts are objects that resist dismissal. Every stitch is visible, the labour unapologetically present. For African American women, quilts are also an artefact of storytelling and documentation.

Like the braids which mapped routes for fleeing slaves, quilts, too, were a way to outline and foresee the freedom they sought (Whitehead, 2023). Harriet Powers' 19th-century works are testimony to this power of pictorial narrative. She powerfully stitched local legends alongside Genesis and Exodus scenes; images of creation, bondage, and deliverance. By rendering sacred stories in tactile form, Powers wove together faith and resistance, reminding herself and future peoples of a promised liberation beyond earthly chains.

Quilting, born out of resourcefulness, charts intimate lives alongside historical testimonies. bell hooks notes quilts made from her grandfather's suits or her mother's childhood dresses, with some to be pinned as wall art and others to warm in the cold of winter. This variety and enmeshed utility is where Faith Ringgold locates the magic of quilts: that space where art and life are interwoven. It is through this self-made narrative and use of

personal materials that Whitehead states, 'it was a way of having a gaze of our own – able to define ourselves instead of letting white people do it for us' (2023).

A symbol of faith in the future, many quilts were made in preparation for married life or the birth of a child. Staring into their content, you are told to believe in something larger. It is a bounded, temporal process that both casts one back and wraps you in the thick of history, whilst forcing you to be present. Where did these materials come from? Who is yet to use this? And how can I transmit this story and skill to those who come after me?

If any piece showcases this dialogical process, it is Helen Murrell's quilt 'We Are All Warmed by The Same Sun', depicting the brutal Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which enrolled six hundred black men in a study of the disease when left untreated. No informed consent was collected, and many suffered complications such as lasting brain damage or death. Murrell's quilt preserves the shared humanity of these men and the viewer's likeness to them.

Even in the face of history, we must understand the trajectory of oppression, that this could have been you, too. You must care, and shouldn't look away. Speaking of the quilt, Murrell states, "I made this quilt hoping that it will remind us all that we are ultimately one family. If we are to give justice to the men [...] of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, we should not ever forget our humanity, nor let others forget theirs."

Mazloomi, founder of the Women of Colour Quilters Network, describes the group as both a family and a means to preserve the skill for future generations, noting that continuation flourishes in collectivities like hers, as reported by Kaplan (2025). She found hundreds of quilters to join her association, challenging the normative belief that Black female creatives are historical exceptions. In truth, they were and are everywhere, producing gorgeous artefacts of time that can be passed on for centuries to come.

Domestic Crafting

Clean sheets, a blossoming garden, a warming meal, or mending hands—quiet, but persistent markers of home. Despite their simplicity, they root us, reminding us of who we are and where we come from. This is a method of living, passed on not always through words, but through gestures, textures, smells, and the careful repetition of tasks. It is work so often neglected, and yet, it is this foundational labour that lets us move through the world with ease.

The 1970s Wages for Housework movement underscored the historical and economic significance of domestic labour. Much of this work has been unpaid, largely invisible, and overwhelmingly carried out by women, with ONS (2016) reporting that they perform 60% more unpaid labour than men.
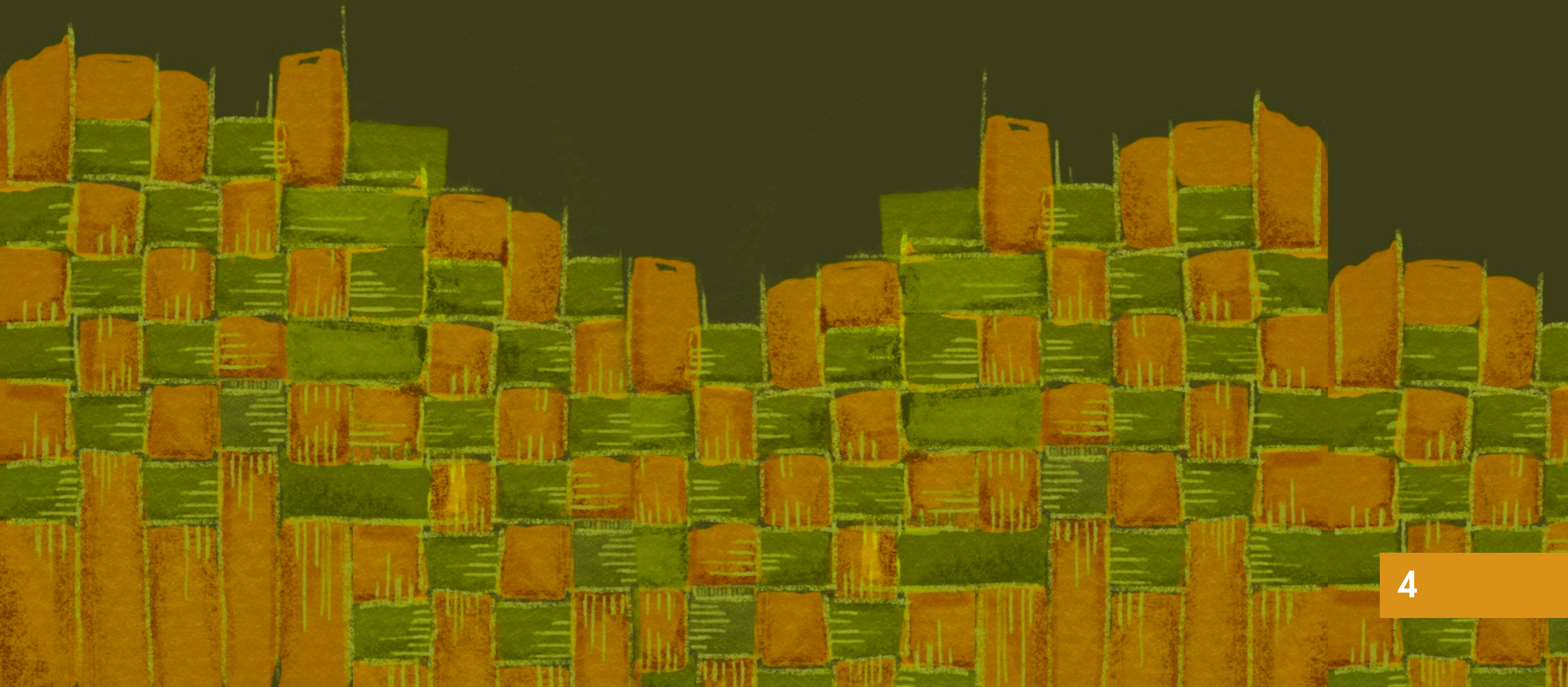
While economies value 'productive' work—labour that yields profit or measurable output — this 'reproductive' labour operates in the margins, enabling the conditions in which all other work can occur. The making of a family meal or the weaving of culinary traditions may seem trivial, but they are vital acts of cultural continuity, identity-building, and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge. What would cultural heritage be without the labour of women? And how do we come to know ourselves through these intimate, sustaining crafts?

This is the heart of care ethics: the understanding that care is not a peripheral virtue, but a foundational framework for life. To Gilligan (1982), moral reasoning emerges not through abstract principles of justice but through attentiveness, responsiveness, and relationships. It must be lived. In this view, the home is not merely a domestic space but a site of profound moral practice. When your grandmother teaches you to iron or a parent sits beside you while you're unwell, they are not only performing care but transmitting a deeply relational ethic of mutual dependency and responsibility. It may not be grand, but it whispers: *Thank you for helping me move through this life. Teach me more, so I can help you through yours.*

In a society driven by speed, automation, and mass production, to slow down and craft is a radical act. Silvia Federici reminds us that women crafters were historically targeted during the violent events of primitive accumulation: their land was seized, tools destroyed, and their ancestral knowledge demonised as witchcraft. These were not random acts, but deliberate erasures of autonomous, non-capitalist ways of life.

To engage in domestic craft today, then, is not a mere nostalgic retreat; it is a reclamation, a rejection of disposability and a refusal to become detached. It is to reunite oneself with the rhythmic pulsing of life, the textures of material, and the care of the hands that came before.

Like quilts and meals, even the most ordinary vessels carry memory. A bowl may be made and sold once. But it is washed, filled, passed, and shared for decades, a quiet witness to nourishment, conversation, and care. In this way, the crafting and materials are responsive. They draw us back into a relationship with each other, the earth and the sacred ordinary.

Basket Weaving

As Marcel Mauss (1934) proclaimed, when we learn a skill, we also learn culture. Craft is not only a technique but a philosophy; a way of understanding and relating to the world. For Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), basket-making became a practice for reconnecting with Indigenous knowledge systems and ancestral

relationships with the environment. Through this craft, she reconnects to Potawatomi, the language of her Anishinaabe people, where the notion of animacy—the belief that the world is not made up of passive objects, but sentient beings filled with individual spirit—is enshrined.

Describing the process of gathering materials, she writes: "As the basket makers pound and peel, he is always moving back through time. The tree's life is coming off, layer by layer." The act becomes an invocation, collapsing temporal boundaries. Through craft, she enters into kinship with the tree, the land and the stories held in its rings. This kind of attentiveness reduces acts of degradation, with indigenous lands experiencing around a fifth less deforestation than non-protected areas (2021), and biodiversity uniquely thriving (2019). If the world is alive with you, rather than existing for you, then care becomes the natural mode of engagement.

The process of learning a craft is visceral, learned through subtle, manipulative acts of the body that become intuitive over time. A Scottish creative centre, An Lanntair, explores how this embodied practice holds transformative potential in community contexts, particularly for disabled or elderly individuals. Bunn, in conversation with journalist Sandra Dick (2021), articulates how these events rekindle intergenerational relations in places where certain forms of labour have faded. In one moving account, a man living with

extreme dementia reconnects with lost memories through the act of mending nets, a task once central to his life. It is in these quiet, tactile acts that local histories are preserved, and the care once given is returned.

To engage with craft is to submit to something beyond yourself. You can't always manipulate materials as you wish; often, they manipulate you. You are at nature's mercy, feeling its resistance and quiet instruction. As Kimmerer reminds us: "When we braid sweetgrass, we are braiding the hair of Mother Earth."

In a digital era of speed, abstraction and endless replication, craft grounds us in the material world, cultivating an attentiveness to the irredeemable and transient. Contrasting neoliberal individualism, handiwork forces us to be relational and reframe the self in the face of a communal, larger task. The value of this shift cannot be understated.

Quilting circles, mutual aid kitchens or community allotments are not simply casual pastimes, but living infrastructure — sites where care, climate justice and decolonial politics take root. It is these spaces that teach circularity (mend, reuse, repair), honour indigenous stewardship, offer bottom-up self-governance, protect ecosystems, and demand that knowledge be communal and credited.

If we want a society that remembers, shares, and sustains, we must approach these crafting conventions as vital methodologies of survival. Name the hands that keep you alive. Valorise care work. Learn and teach a craft. Support indigenous land defenders. Refuse the logic of extraction. The world will not be remade by speed or production alone; without grounding praxis, we cannot claim to be building a shared future, only consuming what's left of it.

Illustrations by Swetha Prabakaran

ACCENT, ACCESS AND AUTHORITY

Language's Hidden Politics

By Harnoor Kaur Uppal

The function of spoken language extends far beyond mere communication—it is an indicator of one's identity, an instrument of access, and, mostly, a mechanism of establishing authority in a social setting. Our language, accent, dialect, and even grammar influences favourably and adversely the type of opportunities made available to us, society's perception of us, and our sense of belonging.

These invisible forces haunt our everyday speech, politicising the most essential of activities—our language. Yet, in the politicization of language lies a powerful potential to question institutions built on how we speak, restore identity and challenge norms. But who has the privilege to ask those questions, and whose voices echo when they do?

Negotiating Power

How we speak often depends on who is listening. Our choice of language serves as living proof of social hierarchies through the inclusion and exclusion of certain individuals and groups. The very presence of such a hierarchy indicates which accents or dialects are allowed access and authority and which are not.

Consequently, groups can be subject to marginalization depending on their choice of language, dialect or accent and in doing so, our chosen spoken language actively constructs our social class, culture and belonging.

American sociolinguist William Labov's work on the construction of social structures like class and gender through language unpacks belonging beyond marginalization. Languages taught in schools, heard in mainstream media, and utilised in courts and workplaces often

become the "standard" languages signifying professionalism, social ascent, intelligence, and the "right" social class. The ultimate result of a language becoming the standard language is the result of political and ideological dominance, not linguistic dominance.

Especially with the existence of linguistic diversity, people may adapt to navigate through these nuances swiftly. They may strategically conform their speech by alternating between two or more languages or dialects in a conversation or a sentence. This is known as code-switching, which functions as a social and linguistic adaptation of negotiating one's identity and power within any context.

Mary Bucholtz, a sociocultural linguist and professor at UC Santa Barbara, argues that code-switching is a deliberate attempt at adapting to the demands of a social setting, expectations, or expressing unity or dissent rather than an incidental strategy. It helps individuals to conform to existing social demands.

American academic and linguist John Baugh's work on linguistic profiling also reveals how sounding 'different' may deny a person access to services or goods that are freely available otherwise, solely based on their voice. For example, African Americans may codeswitch between African American Vernacular English/AAVE and Standard American English in certain social contexts.

Patterns of codeswitching are common among multicultural or multilingual groups, and the pattern becomes more nuanced when marginalized groups utilize this strategy. For them, it is a necessity to code-switch when navigating institutional or social spaces, but the habit of switching in order to be accepted may pose problems by alienating an individual from their identity.

In addition to codeswitching, code-meshing is the blending of dialects such that they coexist rather than compete. Vershawn Ashanti Young, a scholar of Black studies, proposes this method where individuals are not required to switch between 'acceptable' forms of speaking; instead, their fully compatible dialects promote authentic representation of diversity.

Access in Accents

How we speak answers where we belong. Regional dialects and accents are markers of geographic origin and social background. Certain accents—belonging to the dominant groups usually of urban or rural upper and middle classes and more—may be consistently favoured while other accents are disparaged or perceived as less prestigious.

For example, regional languages such as but not limited to Assamese, Khasi, Bhojpuri, Tamil, and Haryanvi are marginalised in India. This occurs because 'standard' English —usually associated with the urban and middle classes—and *shuddh* or pure Hindi are perceived to be more prestigious. According to the 2023 Annual Status of Education Report, many students from other regions of India residing in Hindi-speaking areas are subject to mockery for their regional dialect, pressurising them to surrender their native languages.

Groups speaking in non-dominant accents are at risk of facing discrimination in several social and political settings, especially when institutions like healthcare and education are built around the majority languages and normative forms of speech. Minority language speakers are at a disadvantage in spaces of professional work, legal proceedings, service delivery, etc., which may hinder their ability to access basic information and exercise their rights.

In the healthcare sector, diagnosis and treatment may be restricted to just a few languages, if not one. Effective communication, critical for any patient, may be hindered for minority language speakers, leading to miscommunication, decreased access and in the worst cases, misdiagnosis. A study in the US showed that speakers who were proficient in English had better health outcomes than patients with limited proficiency in English. There is an urgent need for interpreters and culturally sensitive assistance in the healthcare sector.

John Baugh reveals that companies in America constantly discriminate based on applicants' voices and screen calls. Voices that sound black or Latino are denied in-person meetings and jobs which are otherwise available to white people. The racism over the call is often conveniently denied, and companies refuse to take accountability.

This dynamic underscores the linguistic hierarchies that are constructed socially, establishing the standards for "acceptable" languages, accents and dialects which are enforced through media and institutions like media, schools, legal systems and even everyday interactions. Grammar must be "correct", and accents should be "pleasing to the ear" if not neutral. This cycle grants the languages spoken by the majority tremendous authority, respect and prestige by subjugating lower-status groups and minorities.

This is notably evident in the education sector, where a neglect of regional or non-majority languages may obstruct potential academic excellence. In India, students from rural regions—mostly non-English speaking areas—studying in urban cities may struggle to cope with "standard" forms of teaching where English is the primary pedagogical language. Here, English functions as a 'neutral' language, disregarding the mother tongues of students. Other languages are deemed 'vernacular' and 'unfashionable', and humiliation is reinforced through such terms.

The usage of children's mother tongue or their regional accent may subject them to ostracisation or bullying, detrimentally impacting their self-esteem and confidence. Students may also be subject to bullying due to the way they choose to speak. A stigmatization of their language may lead to such students struggling academically, further fueling the cycle of exclusion, poverty, and marginalization intergenerationally.

Most schooling systems promote one variant of a language, which is usually standard English. This comes at the cost of labelling 'other' vernacular languages as inappropriate and discouraging their use. India's National Education Policy 2020 aims to incorporate learning native and regional languages through compulsory learning.

However, this aspirational move of focusing on regional/native languages may hinder the employment opportunities that the knowledge of English provides. English is often perceived as an "instrument of progress", as described by Ramanujam Meganathan, a professor at the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT). This is because most higher education and 'elite' jobs demand knowledge of English.

Does knowing and promoting one's mother tongue empower or restrict, which inevitably leads to a different form of exclusion? One answer could be that it perhaps leads to a form of exclusion where people are rooted in their tradition but also restricted due to the same.

This paves the way for institutions to be built on a hierarchy of languages, where spoken languages are an indicator of civility, worthiness and intelligence. Children fluent in many languages may be compelled to choose between acceptance and identity. In such situations, cultural identity is at risk of falling prey to dominant norms as children may feel forced to abandon their regional accents or languages to conform to dominant ones.

Identity through Language

How we speak defends who we are and where we hail from. This is especially true for monolingual individuals who find their language their sole vehicle of communication, assertion of identity and connection. The presence of language is essential to maintaining one's heritage, cultural and social. Our form of speaking serves as a living connection to our ancestry by carrying stories, values, and rituals that define our group identity. By actively speaking our native languages, we are preserving cultural continuity and resisting erasure. This act is a performance of cultural survival, anchoring us to our roots.

For example, the Welsh Language Act of 1993 mandated that the Welsh and English languages must be given equal importance in the public domain. Many legal and official measures have been taken to preserve and promote the use of Welsh in the region. Tourism and business have boomed in the region ever since, with an increased sense of community within the Welsh-speaking population.

While assimilation of culture threatens to blend differences, speaking one's native language often asserts our identity and reclaims our space within an unequal arena. Simultaneously, language and accents

influence others' perception of 'us'. In some instances, it may foster unity, while in others, it may fuel bigotry. One's speech informs the audience of their social standing—social class, ethnic community or region. Policing or disregarding non-dominant forms of speech results in devaluing some histories and cultures.

Situations of migration across regions, for example, require individuals to adapt the regional form of speech. Migrants often find it necessary to adapt to linguistic variations as a survival strategy. They may learn a new language or change their accent to seem more acceptable. To navigate through a foreign land, this act of adaptation may be done consciously or unconsciously. Their sole aim: to reduce the chances of discrimination, exclusion and marginalization by expanding the scope of better employment, education and healthcare. However, this tentative sense of belonging may be jeopardised by traces of their origins.

Migrants face a linguistic inconsistency in the inability to hide their origin through accidental missteps in grammar, accent or even vocabulary. The tag of being an "outsider" may resist elimination, inviting acts of microaggression and exclusion. This constant friction between the preservation of identity and embracing change expose how language functions as a mighty boundary, yet an unbreakable bridge.

For example, Germany houses millions of migrants from around the world. However, the study by the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration reveals that migrants who look 'different' from the German population—migrants with dark skin or headscarves or foreign accents—frequently face discrimination. Migrants who speak German in their native accents are at more risk of being disfavoured in any social setting.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work on linguistic capital can be appropriately understood in this context. He describes linguistic capital as a type of cultural capital wherein the amassing of an individual's language skills determines their footing in society.

All of this is regulated by the established powerful social institutions and enforced through representations in media, law, and even everyday speech. Some equally complicated languages may be deemed unworthy, while others are considered valuable.

If we consider the Tamil Eelam Movement in Sri Lanka through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's linguistic capital, we can understand that the Sinhala language acquired high linguistic capital, which was institutionalised. Tamil, on the other hand, was devalued and lost its value in the nation. This was orchestrated through symbolic violence, making the Tamil identity seem inferior.

As Bourdieu describes, symbolic violence refers to the subtle yet profound ways in which dominance of values and ideas is exerted by the dominant groups, which will lead to the internalization of such structures and inequalities.
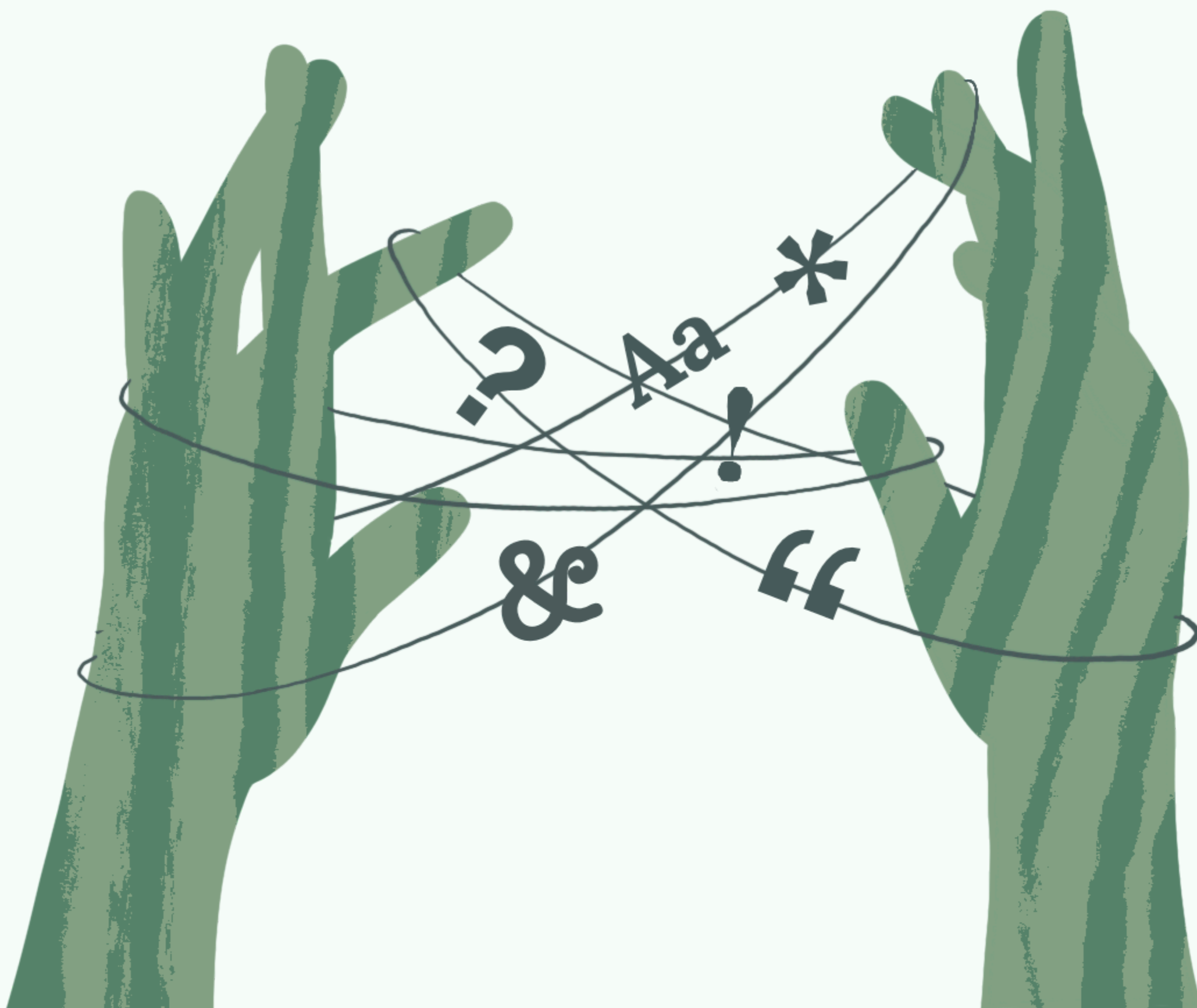
For instance, the material and institutional erasure of Tamil through various means can be classified as an example of symbolic violence. The Tamil language was not included in education, state work, or the judiciary. In addition to exclusion, the Tamil identity was systematically erased from daily life through the burning of Tamil libraries and institutions.

Additionally, language bans are infamous around the world. From Turkey to Spain, certain languages were suppressed in their entirety through law, restricting groups from asserting their identity. The Kurdish language was banned in periods in Turkey, resulting in generational losses of culture and identity. Similarly, in Spain, the Catalan language was brutally suppressed in the 20th century as it was viewed as harmful to the unity and the state of Spain.

Linguistic erasure may also result in many languages going extinct. Dead and dying languages result in years of lost knowledge, oral histories, and cultural diversity. The Eyak language of south central Alaska is one of the many extinct languages which disappeared after the death of the last speaker, Chief Marie Smith Jones in 2008. The reason for the extinction of this language was attributed to the spread of English and Tlingit in the region.

Linguistic erasure is thus an absolute outcome of systemic marginalization and devaluation of some languages under threat. Preservation through documentation and archival methods is of utmost importance for such languages.

Language can function as an act of defiance, too. Marginalised or minority groups may choose to communicate in their native language to embrace and assert their heritage. In Spain, this was done through the Catalan Cultural Movement in the 19th century. Concerning a country's diaspora, honoring their roots is nurturing selfhood through generations, dissolving the assimilating effects of globalization and migration.

It is in such a situation, the very act of speaking one's language becomes an assertion of their cultural existence. For scholar Gloria Anzaldúa, language is "a homeland closer than the Southwest—[one] that I can never abandon, because the word is my life."

Unveiling the Politics

Our speech reflects the power we navigate, the places we occupy, and the identities we are permitted to perform. Language does not have a neutral existence. It is at this stage that we must ask the question: Why do we punish someone for their speech, culture and history?

Language has functioned as a marker of our identity and culture. While globalisation threatens to homogenise some cultures, it also unlocks a world of opportunities. The global reliance on English as a linguistic franca serves as a medium for progress.

Historically, English has been attributed the tag of lingua franca as it has been used as a common language of communication. Colonization efforts around the world have contributed to the spread of English as an official language in countries. With globalization and increased interconnectedness, the need for a universal language stands essential in fields of diplomacy and business.

However, learning multiple languages benefits people in sectors of employment and education. Forms of multilingual teaching of regional dialects should be encouraged rather than penalised. Discrimination based on one's accent and/or language must be considered grounds for action and punishment in spaces beyond workplaces.

Marginalised groups and many others are undertaking constant efforts to ensure linguistic preservation. The Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages works to ensure the survival of many dying languages. Additionally, universities such as the University of Victoria in Canada have *Indigenous Language Revitalization* programs that enhance indigenous language knowledge systems.

In New Zealand, the initiative of language nests or *Kōhanga Reo,* where elderly Maori adults take care of young children from disadvantaged homes, also facilitates language revitalization through the transference of indigenous knowledge systems.

Additionally, positive representation in media through films, television, and news will help authentic and accurate representation, while community-led

initiatives encourage language-driven schools and archiving methods. Teaching code-meshing in schools will encourage affirming identities by speaking a blend of languages instead of forcing us to conform to the dominant one.

From classrooms to workspaces, grammar, and accents influence belonging, legitimacy, and access. Speech can serve as a gateway and a veiled barrier to opportunities, advancement and recognition.

Social mobility is heavily dependent on linguistic abilities, culminating in institutionalized inequalities that are rarely overtly accepted. Acknowledging the politics behind everyday speech is the starting point in accommodating more voices, more tongues, and more truths.

Illustrations by Yashashree Arawkar

If Beale Street Could Talk dir. Barry Jenkins (2018)

Set in 1970s Harlem, the story follows Trish and Fonny, two childhood friends who fall in love. Things take a turn when Fonny is falsely accused of rape, and now pregnant Tish must do everything she can to prove his innocence.

Strange Way of Life dir. Pedro Almodovar (2023)

After 25 years, an ex-hired gun visits his old colleague, who is now a small-town sheriff. Their past relationship is explored, unearthing shared memories and the unexpected depth of their bond, as is how they reflect on it in the present.
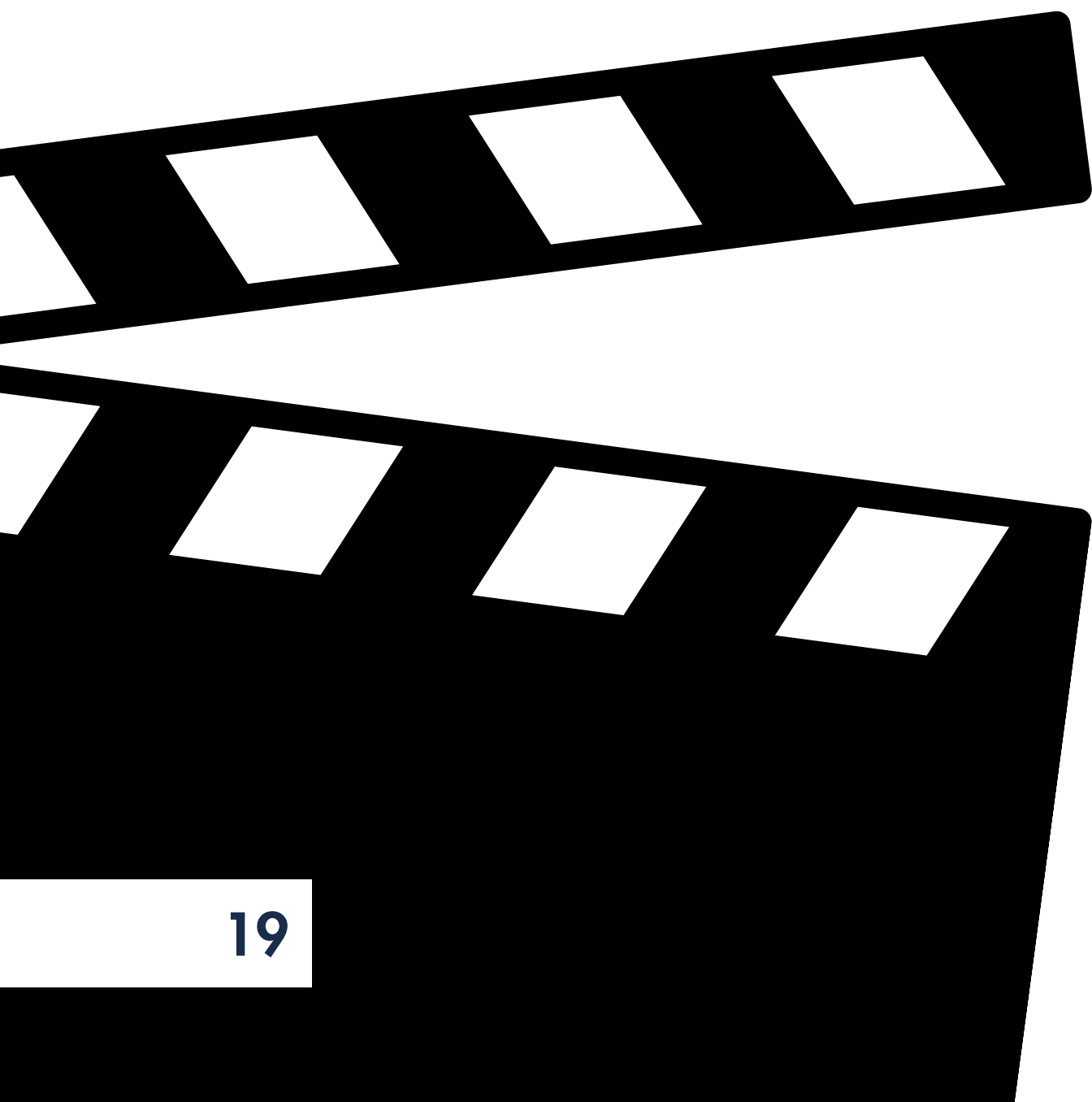
The Newsroom created by Aaron Sorkin (2012)

An examination of the inner workings of a television news program that airs nightly. Despite challenges, the drama depicts the ethical and pragmatic complexities encountered by the news staff as they attempt to achieve their journalistic objective of factual news reporting.

WHAT WE ARE WATCHING THIS MONTH

WHAT WE ARE

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One of Them Days dir. Lawrence Lamont (2025)

When Dreux's roommate, Alyssa, gives their rent money to her extremely unreliable boyfriend, only to discover he never paid the rent, they spend the day scrambling to make the money back and avoid eviction —an ode to creativity & friendships between black women.

Burning dir. Lee Chang-dong (2018)

Jong-su, an aspiring writer, becomes consumed with his obsession with Ben, a wealthy stranger, after his childhood friend Hae-mi mysteriously disappears, plunging him into a tense psychological hunt.

Adults created by Ben Kronengold and Rebecca Shaw (2025)

A bunch of twentysomethings in New York who aren't quite "good" or "people" yet attempt to try and figure out their lives and themselves.

WHAT WE ARE WATCHING THIS MONTH

The Five Devils dir. Lea Mysius (2022)

Set in a French alpine town, a child gifted with this supernatural sense of smell begins to unravel family secrets along with the arrival of her estranged aunt, exploring memory, desire, race, and intergenerational trauma with lyric intensity.

Superman dir. James Gunn (2025)

Clark Kent, aka Superman, is attempting to balance his role as an everyday human and a godlike superhero while grappling with his emerging powers and responsibilities in an ever-changing world.

The Americans created by Joseph Weisberg (2013)

Set in the 1980s, Elizabeth & Philip Jennings are Soviet KGB officers posing as an American married couple struggling to maintain their cover while living next door to an FBI agent in the suburbs of Washington, D.C.

Suspiria dir. Dario Argento (1977)

Dario Argento's horror classic presents an American newcomer to a German ballet academy who unravels and comes to realise that the school is a front for something sinister amid a series of grisly murders.

The Day of the Jackal dir. Fred Zinnemann (1973)

Disgruntled French generals employ an international assassin known as "The Jackal" to assassinate President Charles de Gaulle, while a devoted police officer follows the assassin's whereabouts.

Mistress America dir. Noah Baumbach (2015)

Tracy, a lonely college freshman, finds her world upended when she befriends her exuberant, soon-to-be stepsister Brooke and is swept up in her wild, ill-fated schemes.

WHAT WE ARE WATCHING THIS MONTH

THE HOLLOWING OF LIBRARIES

By Arshia Kashyap

"My Alma mater was good books, a good library… I could spend the rest of my life reading, just satisfying my curiosity."

– Malcolm X

As someone who has always been fond of reading, I constantly sought out new material growing up. While I knew that public libraries existed, they were never a crucial part of my childhood for one simple reason: they were scarce and inaccessible. Consequently, I had to either rely on my school library, with its limited collection, or buy the books that I wanted—a habit that quickly became expensive.

As a result, I lost out on opportunities to expand my knowledge and explore new ideas. I was privileged enough to access such resources through other avenues, but many are not. Those who are economically marginalised rely disproportionately on public libraries since they are free public repositories of knowledge. Most people cannot afford to buy every book they want to read.

Public libraries often hold resources that are otherwise difficult to find, including archival material, which school libraries lack access to. Libraries accumulate these materials by collecting and preserving newspapers, documents, and even religious sermons. The diversity of available texts allows people to develop informed and well-rounded perspectives.

While I was able to rely on the internet to access such diversity to some degree, in my experience, it has always been easier to access Eurocentric viewpoints. Unless I was actively searching for narratives and material related to the Global South, it was harder for me to

stumble across these resources. While times are changing and the Internet is becoming a more diverse space, algorithms continue to favour content produced by the West, in stark contrast to libraries, which are often shaped by local narratives, values, and ideas.

Given that the Global South tends to be the recipient of technology as opposed to the place where it is developed, technology and algorithms are seldom trained to fit the context in which they are applied. This is despite production and labour being sourced in the Global South due to their ready and cheap availability, allowing companies to increase profit margins. Biases and prejudices held by the Global North are then exacerbated, especially since regions in the Global South frequently lack the capital to create homegrown technology in the first place, or are unable to compete with the control established by Big Tech, as clarified by Research and Policy Director Shymla Khan in 2022.
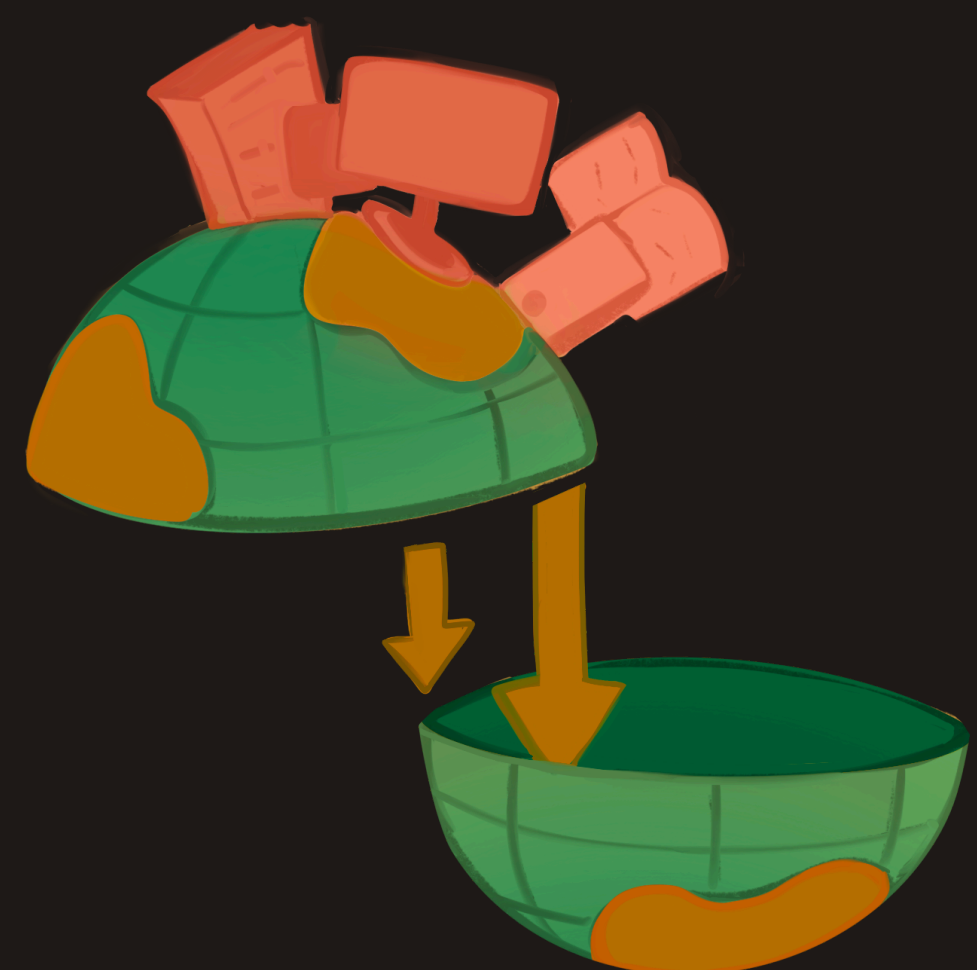
Moreover, the impact of libraries on a sociopolitical level is evident in how activists like Malcolm X and Nelson Mandela relied on prison libraries to develop an understanding of political and socio-cultural issues, helping shape their personal beliefs and become leaders of resistance movements.

As these movements gain popularity and attract mass support, they often succeed in raising issues of oppression and human rights, and even finding tools for resistance, frequently inspired by the readings of these activists in the first place. For instance, Mandela was greatly influenced by Gandhi's ideas of non-violence and truth, choosing to adopt them in his struggles against apartheid. This in turn leads to the strengthening of democratic ideals such as political participation, rights of association and expression, equality, and justice.

While underfunding and censorship still affect prison libraries, states have an incentive to place emphasis on their maintenance, due to the aim of prisons facilitating reformation. A well-funded prison library can greatly aid this process, positively impacting inmates. For that reason, countries like Chile, Germany, India and Slovenia have supported the same. Public libraries, however, lack an immediate incentive, which may explain why they are often ignored.

Local libraries are also critical spaces where communities form. This can be seen in the creation of library-centric movements such as the

Carnegie Libraries and the Indian Public Library Movement (IPLM), both of which aimed to improve access to and quality of libraries. The IPLM, for instance, created model libraries that others could draw inspiration from. It also engaged in research training programmes and introduced services such as English courses, digital libraries, and banking services, as identified by V. K. Vinayaraj, a scholar of South Asian Studies, in his paper on repurposing library spaces in 2021.

Though still active, these movements face hurdles in securing funds and state support, which limits the realisation of their goals. Often, they remain confined to urban spaces, creating disparities across regions. Library movements are valuable, but they need greater visibility, funding, and state backing to succeed.

Libraries serve as spaces for discussion and integration, enabling civic engagement to achieve equality and strengthen democracy by making knowledge more accessible. They are places where people can educate and organise themselves, become politically aware and connect with like-minded people.

My earliest sense of community came from the school library. Even as a child, I found camaraderie with others in the school library. We discussed themes in our favourite books, helping shape my value system and moral compass. Now, I can discuss and debate my political beliefs with those same people, an essential part of our intellectual development as young adults.

During the Civil Rights Movement, African-American librarians organised sit-ins in their libraries. This legacy continues through social justice resource guides created by the Massachusetts Library System, including material on the Black Lives Matter movement, as noted by R.L. Chancellor, an associate professor of Information Studies, in her 2017 study 'Libraries as Pivotal Community Spaces in Times of Crises'.

The seeds of agitation take root in libraries. The decline in library use among young people, and the physical disappearance of these spaces, are not only troubling but point to something far more dangerous.

We live in an age where the forces of capitalism and fascism are stronger than ever. Access to knowledge is deliberately restricted to create an unaware and subservient population. This is seen in, for example, budget cuts for public libraries in parts of the United States, censorship and book bans in China, Egypt and Bangladesh to protect ruling parties from criticism and Hungary excluding LGBTQ+ material from school curricula and libraries. According to *PEN America*, 10,000 books were banned in 2023-24, double that of 2022-23. Such censorship stifles people from accessing a diversity of thoughts and ideas and is done to promote narratives that are state-approved.

These consequences may affect people outside of those states as well. A study by Nethya Samarakkodige in 2022 argues that Chinese censorship of works on pro-democracy themes and independence movements extends globally, due to China's dominance. Chinese printing is 40% cheaper compared to that of the rest of the world, making censorship there a threat to what people everywhere can read.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, depicting a dystopia where women lack bodily autonomy, saw renewed calls for bans after the overturning of Roe v. Wade in the United States. It is not surprising, then, that book bans mimic the political situation and are a strategic tool used to hamper critical thinking, especially in authoritarian states that censor dissent to preserve their regimes.

This trend is observed across the globe. Removal of books from library systems in Turkey that seemingly 'vilify' the state was upheld by a High Court. Other anti-state books, too, have been deemed 'propaganda' and banned, including two books by writer Murat Kahraman. In Brazil, too, there were demands to remove nine books by non-Brazilians from public libraries. In Belarus, books in the Belarusian language are being removed from public libraries, including those by Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, due to the state favouring Russia.

Allison C. Meier, a cultural and historical writer, believes school libraries are the worst affected, as they are unable to fight back due to funding restrictions, parental concerns and pressure from school administrations. American states like Florida and Iowa have witnessed districts banning books like *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker in school libraries, deliberately to restrict access to voices from within marginalised communities.

This is supported by legislation that encourages 'age-appropriate' materials in school libraries—all while having a narrow and skewed definition of what the word entails. As a result, children are unable to seek diverse voices in their literature. Thus, school libraries are no longer as diverse as I was able to enjoy during my childhood. School libraries have become echo chambers of 'harmless' thought for the state, where book collections are carefully pruned until they fit neatly into state-sanctioned narratives.

Public libraries are more resilient, though not invincible. With adequate funding from non-government sources and individual donors, they can still withstand the current onslaught of censorship. Chief Operating Officer at Anne Arundel County Public Library, Catherine Hollerbach, also believes that they can have internal policies differing from the demands of the administration in power and can seek support from their local legislators.

While there is a push to ban books showcasing LGBTQ+ experiences and budget cuts for public libraries in various countries, local libraries that have support from their community can oppose the actions of the government by choosing to keep banned books on shelves and organising events within the community to increase awareness about themes of gender, sexuality, and race.

Libraries set up under India's Free Library Network, for example, are completely free of cost and exist to promote freedom, particularly in domains of caste and gender. These library movements acquire maximum funding from third-party donors and are often crowdfunded, as highlighted by Emily Drabinski, former president of the American Library Association and an academic. The issue then remains that libraries have been devalued in public perception, hindering these goals from being realised.

A similar idea has been explored in a 2018 research study conducted by the Online Computer Library Centre (OCLC) and the American Library Association in the USA. The study found that while libraries were still praised in theory, only 33% of people had attended a library programme in the past six months, while only 28% had contributed to library fundraising, and 35% were willing to pay more taxes to support libraries. Meanwhile, average visits for a year had plummeted from 13.2 times in 2008 to 8.6 times in 2018. Aleisha Stout has dug into this in 'The Changing Perceptions of Public Libraries' in 2023.

Furthermore, rampant consumerism has encouraged people to buy instead of borrow. Libraries were once social spaces with study groups, debates, community events. When urban life fragmented and private spaces (cafés, malls, gated societies) took over, libraries stopped being the commons and started feeling irrelevant. Books then became shopping-cart items rather than shared goods, and "owning" replaced "access" as the cultural ideal.

According to Devi Fitryani and others in their research on media and consumer culture, this is also due to the media shaping the values and desires of people through forces such as ubiquitous advertising and social media
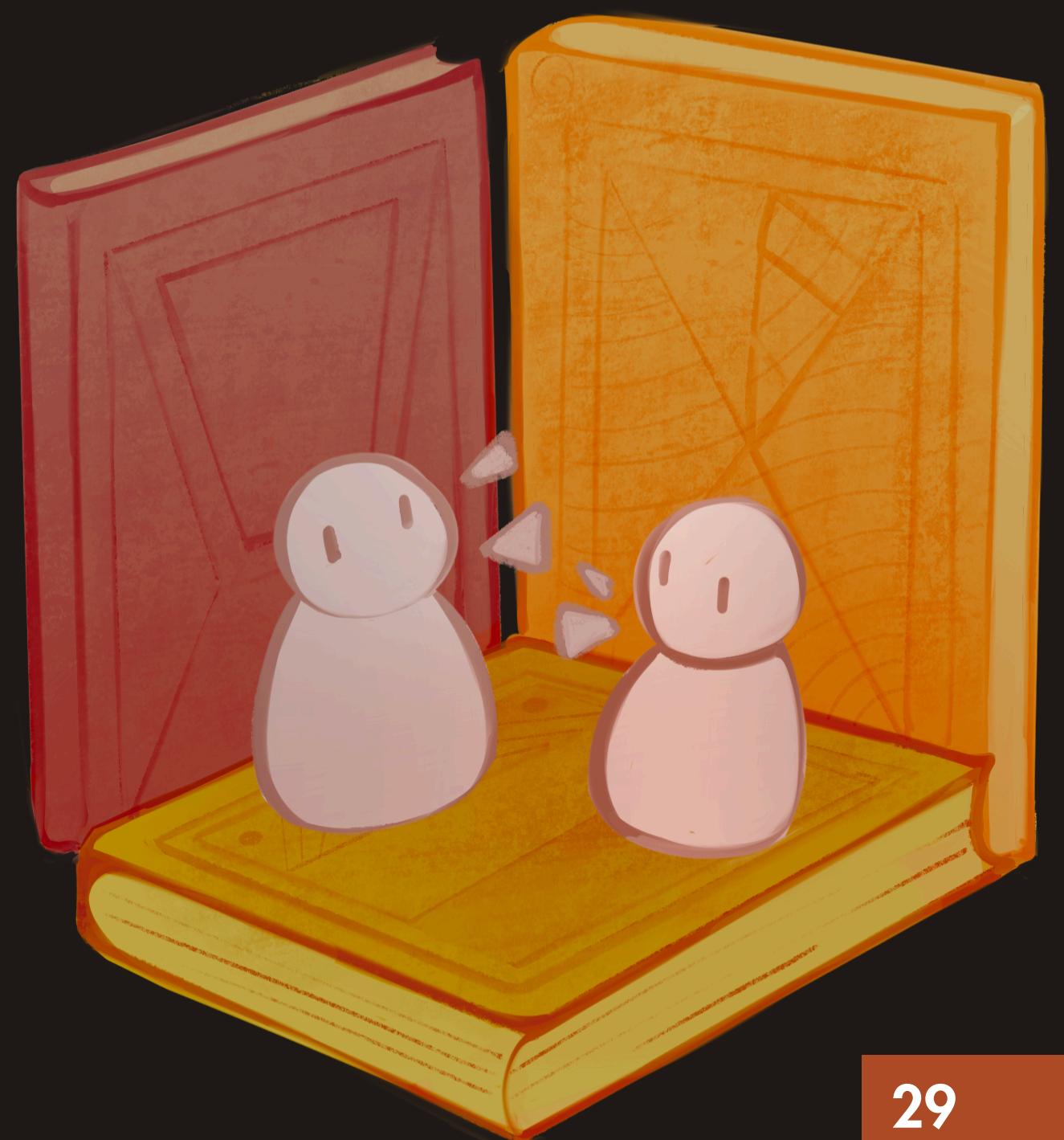
influencers encouraging viewers to buy more. Beyond people being unable to afford the ills of the practice, it also limits the growth of community and the resistance that libraries foster.

With libraries physically disappearing too, people are forced to buy, but not everyone can afford to buy. While there is a culture of buying secondhand books in countries like India and Argentina, not all countries have such a culture. Even then, the unique benefits of libraries are still not being realised by buying secondhand.

Community and accessibility of knowledge being compromised contribute to less critical engagement with ideas and decreased deep thinking; these are conditions ripe for ideological manipulation, which is exactly the kind of populace fascist regimes prefer.

This is evident in the rampant censorship and pseudoscience promoted during periods of fascist control, including the burning of controversial books in Nazi Germany and the state formulating educational books in Mussolini's Italy, an idea explored in 2023 by Prof. Eden McLean. Undermining libraries and restricting access to knowledge has long been a tool for consolidating authoritarian control.

Such an idea is echoed in Trump's voter base, where 67% of Republican voters in the 2024 presidential election did not have a degree, per research conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2024. Combine the lack of educational attainment with rising book bans and the abolition of the Department of Education, and it is clear that book bans do not occur in isolation. They are politically designed to shape the story the ruling party wants told. A similar trend is visible in India where the number of public schools fell by 8% in the past decade, as reported by writer Sanjay Maurya of the Hindustan Times. It is clear that the quality of education and access to a diversity of material thus systemically wither under authoritarian rulers.

Issues of poverty, gender inequality, ethnic and religious discrimination also often limit access to education and contribute to decreased literacy. Countries with an abundance of such problems are likely to face regional disparities in the literacy rate, a higher drop-out rate and a smaller number of people pursuing higher education, hampering human development as a whole.

Moreover, it remains true that the state of libraries varies across countries, and the Global North is more likely to have a robust library system as opposed to the Global South, which has to divert scarce resources to other sectors. Assistant Librarian Rahul Kohli and Assistant Professor Priyank Rana affirm this, and in 2025 said that they may struggle with additional problems of understaffing, limited technology, and limited specialised staff training.

Given that Norway has a fully literate population and Benin has a literacy rate of 47%, as per data by the *World Population Review* in 2025, it is not surprising that Benin had only 233 libraries by 2017. Per the *IFLA Library Map of the World*, Norway, on the other hand, had 3,356 libraries by 2015, due to different prioritisation of educational resources.

Libraries are not as deeply integrated into every country's cultural fabric, which leads to challenges in sustaining them. This is largely due to socio-economic conditions and scarcity of resources that limit integration, despite the urgency for the same. Wealthier countries and organisations such as UNESCO need to actively contribute to this effort—whether through increased funding for libraries in developing countries or training programmes for capacity-building.

Beyond physical infrastructure, the idea of a library itself is evolving. When physical libraries are not an option, e-libraries, such as the Internet Archive, Project Gutenberg, and state national digital libraries can serve as alternatives. But digital access alone isn't enough; libraries, physical or virtual, survive only when people actively back them. It is thus also important to make your support visible. Donations, help in fundraising, organising as a pressure group to make your voice heard or resisting censorship and budget cuts are all small ways to help your local library. In addition to this, becoming regular users of e-libraries and increasing user traffic to them serves as an incentive for them to update and expand their collections.

Knowledge should never be hidden behind a paywall and instead needs to be assessed on the metrics of overall benefit to society and on increasing the value that people can derive from it. The library is then not just an embodiment of value given to communities, but also the manifestation of what humans desire most: connection, expansion, innovation and intellectual satisfaction that allows them to flourish.

Illustrations by Anviksha Bhardwaj

IN OTHER NEWS

On the 80th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, Japan held a solemn ceremony remembering the more than 200,000 lives lost and the enduring trauma of survivors. Hiroshima's mayor warned against rising militarisation and the reliance on nuclear weapons. As international treaties face growing instability, calls for a nuclear-free world grow louder, echoing through protests, speeches, and the stories passed down through generations.

IN OTHER NEWS

In June, Spotify CEO Daniel Ek raised $694 million in investments for Helsing, a military AI startup of which he is also chairman. The high-impact fundraiser was led by Prima Materia, a venture capital firm also founded by Ek. The move comes in the midst of multiple conflicts across the globe and has been met by general public scrutiny and boycotts by Spotify's artists.

COMMODIFYING STREETS AND CONCEALING COMMUNITY

By Aisha Doshi

The ambience of Spain's bustling streets, usually filled with vibrant music, laughter and warmth, now echoes the discordant sounds of protesters and perplexing scenes of water pistols being aimed at tourists as their idyllic vacations to the country turn into waking nightmares for both them and the Spanish locals protesting their influx.

As thousands of visitors flow in, suburban neighbourhoods become noisy parks as rents skyrocket and the daily lives of Spanish locals are carefully packaged as an "authentic" experience for tourists to partake in, a classic case of appropriation. This commodification of local life, such as

experiencing festivals or 'tapas tours', has been exacerbated by the rise of social media and its now pivotal role in the tourism ecosystem. For locals, a combination of these factors has become a concern with their rich culture being explicitly objectified and transformed into marketable products and 'content', tailored to the taste of tourists rather than a genuine appreciation of local culture.

Spain, a country that has long been celebrated as a haven for travellers, now grapples with the heavy costs of maintaining this pristine image.

In response to these growing trends, locals have expressed their outrage through staged mass protests in Barcelona, Mallorca and the Canary Islands, highlighting their collective resentment. Locals also used the opportunity to voice other concerns, from limited access to healthcare services during peak tourist season to increased traffic congestion in the small island of Gran Canaria. The locals demand to return to their uninterrupted lives.

Beyond this, residents have even opted for graffiti as a form of protest, with banners reading "My misery, your holidays" among others. *AP News* reports that residents are attempting to reclaim their streets from what they term an 'invasion' caused by hyper-tourism.

At the heart of these protests lies a deeper ideological struggle. For years, Spanish policymakers and travel conglomerates have embraced the idea of limitless economic growth. The World Travel and Tourism Council forecasted that Spain's travel and tourism sector will contribute €260 billion to its GDP, indicating tourism as a central pillar of Spain's growth strategy.

Consequently, Spain has become a living laboratory that commodifies cultures and the daily lives of its residents for transient consumption. It began valuing visitor growth as a measure of national economic strength, prioritising it over its residents' satisfaction and quality of life.

In doing so, it created the perfect conditions for hyper-tourism to thrive. The repercussions? A dangerous amalgamation of housing precarity, increased gentrification and cultural erosion, the brunt of which is borne by locals.

The explosion of short-term rentals through platforms like Airbnb has catalysed these conditions. Barcelona, for example, has witnessed rental prices soar by over 40% in the last decade, according to *Reuters*, resulting in longstanding residents being priced out as their apartments are converted into short-term rentals.

Meanwhile, local businesses catering to everyday needs are replaced by overpriced cafes and souvenir shops designed for a global gaze. This exemplifies how gentrification not only changes who lives in a neighbourhood but also rewrites its history and identity, eroding the culture of these localities.

In Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, over 50,000 people marched to demand stricter caps on tourist numbers, arguing that unaffordable housing and expensive resources have crippled local livelihoods. The residents' chants of how mass tourism is "taking their homes away" were reported by El País. Madrid, too, saw a landmark court ruling ordering the closure of ten tourist apartments after a family alleged psychological harm caused by constant disturbances.

Spain's protests go beyond mere symbolic resistance and demand a reckoning. When locals take to the streets with their objections, they reassert themselves, reclaiming agency and challenging a system that continues to prioritise profits over people.

Concurrently, authorities have also slowly become aware of the crisis. *Reuters* reports that Barcelona recently announced a freeze on new tourist rental licenses set to begin in 2028, aiming to stabilise rent and restore residential life. In the same vein, the Balearic Islands have restricted influencer campaigns and partnerships that promote certain natural sites and new travel accommodations in key areas. These policy shifts show a growing recognition that tourism cannot be unchecked.

This Spanish resistance also taps into a larger global discourse of local discontentment as cities like Venice, Lisbon, and Kyoto confront similar tensions. Hundreds of protesters in Venice condemned the Amazon founder's wedding, holding banners stating "Kisses Yes, Bezos No."

Earlier this June, the ultra-wealthy nuptial ceremony stirred large controversies, as residents fought the reportedly "ridiculous and obscene wealth which allows a man to rent a city for three days," according to *The Guardian*. With canals being blocked for VIP movement and police intervention, parts of Venice were functionally cordoned off.

Activists found this occasion a fitting symbol of the exploitation of the city, its culture and its people and residents are already overwhelmed by over-tourism and the resultant rising housing costs.

This protest was thus brought to the streets as a platform that voiced the distinct public disapproval of the placement of lavish spectacles above the best interests of locals and to challenge elite influence over civic places.

"No Kings, No Bezos" is loudly plastered on the bell tower in St Mark's Square, registering the firm opposition against any form of oligarchic dynamics. It reiterates firmly that Venice isn't a place where the ultra-wealthy should be able to rent heritage sites that belong to the people.

Shared crises like these reveal the reality in the way cities, towns and the people who live in them are commodified for global consumption. They also spark a question of what social fractures the locals are willing to tolerate while tourism fuels economic headlines.

It's a game of tug-of-war when cities and authorities are positioned to choose between catering to visitors for economic growth and protecting the welfare of locals.

This reckoning goes beyond just regulation, requiring reimagination. Encouragement of community-led tourism here, rather than hyper-commercialising 'authentic experiences', can offer a path that works for the benefit of the locals. By controlling over-saturation at iconic hotspots and rethinking tourism-centric growth policies, cities sharing the crisis of over-tourism can shift away from the extractive system of hyper-commercialisation. In this way, slow tourism, too, becomes an act that rejects the idea that growth must be limitless at any cost.

Slow tourism thus envisions a model of tourism that doesn't cater to visitors and tourists, but instead one that sustains thriving local communities, those who call these places their home. Because at the end, the real question places like Spain face is: what good is it being the top tourist destination if local communities are priced out, pushed out or just ignored?

Illustrations by Anviksha Bhardwaj

OCCUPIED IMAGINATIONS

The Role of Art in Palestinian Resistance

By Harriet Sanderson

"The reality that I lived prior to 7 October has changed. I no longer have a safe house that shelters me and my small family. The rockets have fallen on my drawing studio (my little world) and destroyed it, and the planes have wiped out all the future plans I had for my children. The steel bird killed my small cat Sarah, and chewed her soft meat, before the cat could pass on her seven souls to my children."

– Maisara Baroud, 2024
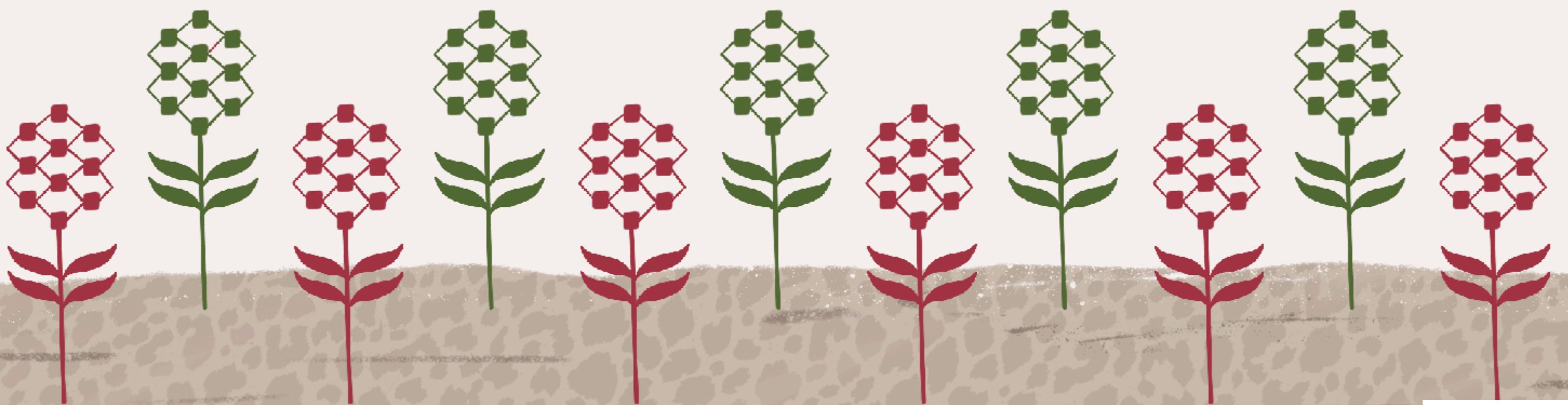
For Palestinians, the plea is urgent: to be heard, felt, and freed from genocidal occupation. From the Nakba of 1948 to Israel's ongoing assault on their right to exist, Palestinians have been rendered inconsequential, expelled from the global imaginary. How, then, can they be heard?

From universities and governments to art institutions, the Palestinian question has become unutterable. The ideals of free thought, of empathy, and liberation characteristic of this infrastructure are then smothered, policed and pathologised.

Even in professedly progressive democracies, repression abounds as the UK's supposed left-wing Labour government criminalises Palestine Action — a direct action network opposing the complicit British arms industry — as a 'terrorist' organisation. In this climate, where truth and noble resistance are punished, it is perhaps through art — the space where death matters and the heart is important — that Palestinians can be heard, and supported.

Art as Hope

Art is a way we can realise our imagination, feel its potential and piece it into a form of hope. Upon entering the Edinburgh Palestine Museum, one is not first encountered by

images of ruin, but by Anani's grand canvas of rolling hills, lush green trees, and floral meadows. Where one enters expecting violence, Anani's painting embraces us in its haven and pokes at our presumptions: Why is it that people expect only darkness when they hear of Palestine?

The piece also reimagines nationalism: how can we conceive of a country beyond violence, flags and the fictitious names we stand for in global contests of power? It proposes instead that we let our environment represent us, the gentle earth we came from and call our own. Here, it becomes clear that Palestinian art is not only a record of loss, but also an assertion of futurity. The art builds new imaginaries which build resistance by refusing to centre the occupation as the totality of Palestinian life.

A participant in a Nablus creative art group stated, "When we draw, we imagine that we are living in beautiful houses in a comfortable place . . . The most important thing to me is to draw rooms and beds for my children". These are simple desires, but allow one to transcend the material body for a moment and engage in Marxist philosopher Bloch's (1954) 'principle of hope' — the practice of envisioning the future as an act of resistance in itself.

Amid drones and checkpoints, art offers solace and psychological resistance. "If there isn't a way to express myself through rap, I will carry stones," said one young man from Mada Silwan Creative Centre, signifying that art not only transforms pain but redirects violence into processing and meaning-making.

Yet, we must ask: is the global embrace of Palestinian art driven by a preference for a more "palatable" victim, someone who paints or writes instead of resisting physically? Perhaps violence is justified. Perhaps other forms of resistance are more vital. In this realm, art is striving to humanise an inhumane situation, attempting to make visible a brutality beyond language. It is right that Palestinians are tired of having to manufacture this empathy where it should naturally reside. This is a dehumanising condition, constructing passive victims of a population that has desires of its own. Direct action, or legal advocacy, may then offer a more autonomous, material route for change than that which art provides.

Art's persistence perhaps hints at its utility. Graffiti sprawled across the West Bank Wall resists erasure by declaring Palestinian presence. It is a mode of visual protest that reclaims space and manifests *sumud*, the Palestinian ethic of steadfastness.

Presently, Palestinians have lost everything: their homes, rights and lives. Golda Meir's historic claim that 'there is no such thing as Palestinians' has become institutionalised. In this horrifying condition, art is a way to signal and retain the truth; that they do and shall continue to exist. *We feel. You must witness us.* When all other means of documentation are lost, art holds on to the memory and pain, making it a political tool just as essential as alternative means of resistance.

Art as a Political Tool

Art politicises the Palestinian experience by recontextualising everyday life as a terrain of conflict. Depictions of waiting in checkpoint lines, carrying water, or rebuilding homes reveal how occupation invades the mundane. Art also makes subjects out of what are attempted objects, inscribing the agency that has been stolen by degrading media and political institutions.

Though often described as a non-violent form of resistance, art is anything but passive. It performs a symbolic violence against silence, settler-colonial erasure, and narrative domination. To create art under occupation is to disrupt Israel's intent, laying the ground for solidarity and global action.

Through what LaCapra, scholar of trauma and cultural memory, calls "empathetic unsettlement," art emotionally disarms. Palestinian art forces people to *feel* beyond the dominant discourse. Whether through the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish or the art of Khalil Rabah, one is drawn into a relation. Khaled Jarrar stamping people's passports with a *State of Palestine* emblem or creating soccer balls made from the wall's rubble produces a visceral interaction with the physicality of occupation, one which audiences can't squirm free from. As Dr Laidi Hanieh, director of the West Bank's Palestine Museum, reflects: "[…] you can definitely acquire knowledge and change your perceptions by an aesthetic experience, by an emotional experience".

In Western and Zionist imaginaries, Palestinians are often rendered abject, a term theorised by philosopher and psychoanalyst Kristeva, to describe that which "disturbs identity, system, [and] order". It is what must be expelled from the nation, the symbolic mandate, to maintain an illusion of purity and coherence. Their very presence disrupts the colonial fantasy of a seamless, unbroken state. The border wall itself spatially casts the Palestinians as a pollution or threat.

In this space, Palestinian art responds by refusing the role of abject subject. Through murals, poetry, and photos, artists reinstate Palestinian presence in space, refiguring a site of trauma as a site of articulation. Awad's photography series, *Faces of Resilience*, uses the smiles of local women bearing fruits in their hands to confront the notion of abjection and affirm humanity. Staring into the eyes of Awad's subject, one struggles to demonise or reject and instead welcomes and locates a bond.

Some artists instead embrace the aesthetic of abjection, employing discomfort to destabilise norms and unearth truth. Artists Emily Jacir and Larissa Sansour, who engage with fragments, ruins, and objects of displacement, can be read through Lushetich's (2019) 'necropolitical aesthetics', which frames art as a site of mourning that refuses closure. Writing on the intersection of art and power, Lushetich uses this term to name artistic processes which expose how political regimes exercise control over life and death. Here, it is made visible through the bodies and the debris of the occupied.

At the Palestine Museum, sculptures of decapitated heads and mutilated limbs do not ask for mere pity, but instead demand recognition. The abjection here serves to rupture the colonial confidence; they become the sublime: too powerful to look away from and too human to erase.

Shibli, a Palestinian author and academic, emphasises the linguistic violence Palestinians face, where language itself becomes a battleground. Words like "Palestine" are erased from maps and road signs, turning Arabic and Palestinian identity into taboo. This suppression leads to what she describes as a "loss of language," a product of "staying with the pain" — reinforcing how visual, musical or spatial art provides a critical alternative.

But how much can art change? Does it reach those in power, or merely soothe the conscience of the elite?

Palestinian Interaction with Dominant Art Institutions

In some ways, the art world opens doors for the movement, allowing it to expand into 'elite' conversations and evoke pathos in scenes that hold potential for change. However, access is difficult and censorship is rife. Faisel Salah, Founder and Executive Director of the Palestine Museum in the US, explained that it was difficult to exhibit at the Venice Biennale, requiring navigation of diplomatic hurdles. Palestine's lack of national recognition meant exclusion from formal national pavilions, as reported by Winter in 2023.

Nevertheless, this exact inception of Palestinian works into dominant spaces creates a pause in the typical order, a nudge against the comfort of the art gallery, by forcing people to question the very validity of these spaces. One is prompted to see them not as educational institutions, but instead to witness them in action, seeing what they truly do: meaning-making and the building of narratives. When one witnesses Abu Sitta's recreation of an 1877 Map of Palestine, it not only discloses the erasure of Palestine from cartographic records after Israel's founding, but deconstructs our very idea of 'history' — while simultaneously embedding the notion of *return*.

Representation, in this sense, is never neutral and very distinct from reflection, as cultural critic and academic Edward Said (1993) notes. Representation necessitates selection and construction, not simply transmission of pre-existent notions, but the greater act of meaning-making. Here, Palestinian artists reclaim autonomy in narrative constructions about themselves, able to both depict and challenge imperial processes.

Still, at the UK Palestine Museum, as we stand in a pristine gallery on the streets of Edinburgh's New Town, far from rubble or checkpoints, we must ask: what does it mean to bear witness in such safety? Banksy attempted to collapse this distance, creating work in Gaza that could only be seen in person, demanding proximity and risk from those who wished to consume it.

Hegemonic art practices also infringe on the very idea of *how* to make art and make it difficult for Palestinian art to access engagement or fit neatly into creative categorisations. Noor Hindi's following extract, from the poem *Fuck Your Lecture On Craft, My People Are Dying,* tells of the way convention and normative art tropes squash and drown the Palestinian struggle, and asks how one truly articulates the unspeakable violence and loss at stake?

Colonisers write about flowers.
I tell you about children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks
seconds before becoming daisies.
[...]
One day, I'll write about the flowers like we own them.

The poem's broken structure and refusal of metaphor signal a demand to transcend the hegemony of craft and speak urgently and politically. This piece is a call for decolonisation of content, form, authorship and audience too. By rejecting abstraction, Hindi insists that Palestinian resistance not be reduced to symbol or sentiment. She underscores the violence of representation itself—how aesthetic form can become complicit in erasure, and asks, is it at all ethical to formulate beauty from such devastation?

Indeed, Palestinian artists are acutely aware of these risks. Many deliberately rupture aesthetic pleasure through fragmented narratives, abrasive sound, or self-implicating works, to avoid smoothing over pain. They remind us that beauty is not neutral. It can wound or awaken. It can be silent or scream.

Palestinian art is not a consolation; it is a confrontation. It resists not only military occupation but narrative domination, offering an effective politics rooted in both grief and hope. In a world that seeks to erase Palestine, art becomes an archive, a protest, a lifeline. It is not a substitute for aid or action, but it shapes how and why we act. To engage with Palestinian art is not merely to observe; it is to reckon with complicity and be moved to solidarity. In the face of compelled silence, the sculpture, the poem, and the mural proclaim: *"We are here. We remember. We imagine otherwise."*

Illustrations by Yashashree Arawkar

READS FROM AUGUST

As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow **by Zoulfa Katouh (2022)**

Zoulfa Katouh's historical fiction novel, *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* centres on Salama, a Syrian pharmacist and nurse during the Syrian Civil War. Salama grapples with the moral dilemma of leaving her country for a safer future or staying back and fighting. The book beautifully captures the themes of mental health struggles, martial violence and death during the revolution.

Cities of Salt **by Abdelrahman Munif (1987)**

This historical petrofiction tells the story of the arrival of the oil industry in desertic areas in Iraq. The book powerfully explores the changes brought to Arab societies, the novelty of urban spaces, and the shift from collectivism to individualism.

Politics of Design: A (Not so) Global Design Manual for Visual Communication **by Ruben Pater (2016)**

This book is a concise, thought-provoking collection of anecdotes and stories from the world of visual communication. Through these insights, the author explores the inherent biases present in all communication tools. It highlights communication as the volatile process it is and the how cross-pollination of ideas globally comes with its fair share of misunderstanding and subsequent undue cultural appropriation. While the book mostly centres around the West, it is a good example showing how power, its politics and hierarchies exist everywhere.

READS FROM AUGUST

The Covenant of Water by Abraham Verghese (2023)

Stretching across multiple generations in Kerala, India, from 1900 to 1977, this novel tells the story of a family cursed to meet death through drowning. Verghese offers a richly textured version involving culture, medicine, and deep emotions along with themes of love, caste, colonial medicine, and resilience. It is a sweeping and lyrical story forged out of collective memory and healing, coupled with a sacred relationship to water that binds lives across generations.

How Beautiful We Were by Imbolo Mbue (2021)

In the fictional African village of Kosawa, this tale is about a community resisting against an American oil company that is destroying their environment. Narrated through multiple voices, including that of a brazen little girl, Thula—who grows up to spearhead the resistance—it furnishes a powerful indictment against colonial exploitation, corporate greed, and the price of resistance in a sick world.

When We Were Birds by Ayanna Lloyd Banwo (2022)

Rooted in Trinidadian myth and oral tradition, the novel chronicles the lives of Emmanuel Darwin and Yejide St. Bernard, a Nazarene grave digger and a girl with the power to lead departed souls to the afterlife. The two lives converge in this city of the living and the dead. Poetic and spiritually rich, it navigates through death, ancestry, love, and the sacred relationship between worlds.

The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis by Amitav Ghosh (2022)

Ghosh calls out the colonial violence inherent in the global climate crisis, with the bloody history of nutmeg standing as a symbol of extractive capitalism. Mix history, politics, and myth with his critique of Western narratives of progress and you get a call for indigenous, decolonial ways of being with the Earth. Urgent, poetic, and incisive, it is a profound ecological reckoning.
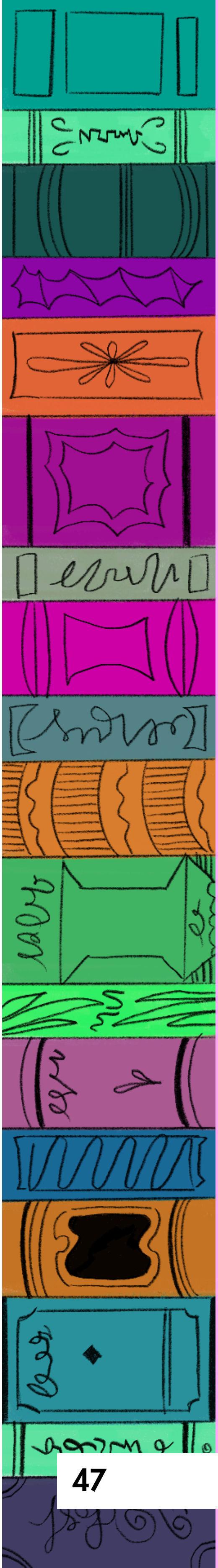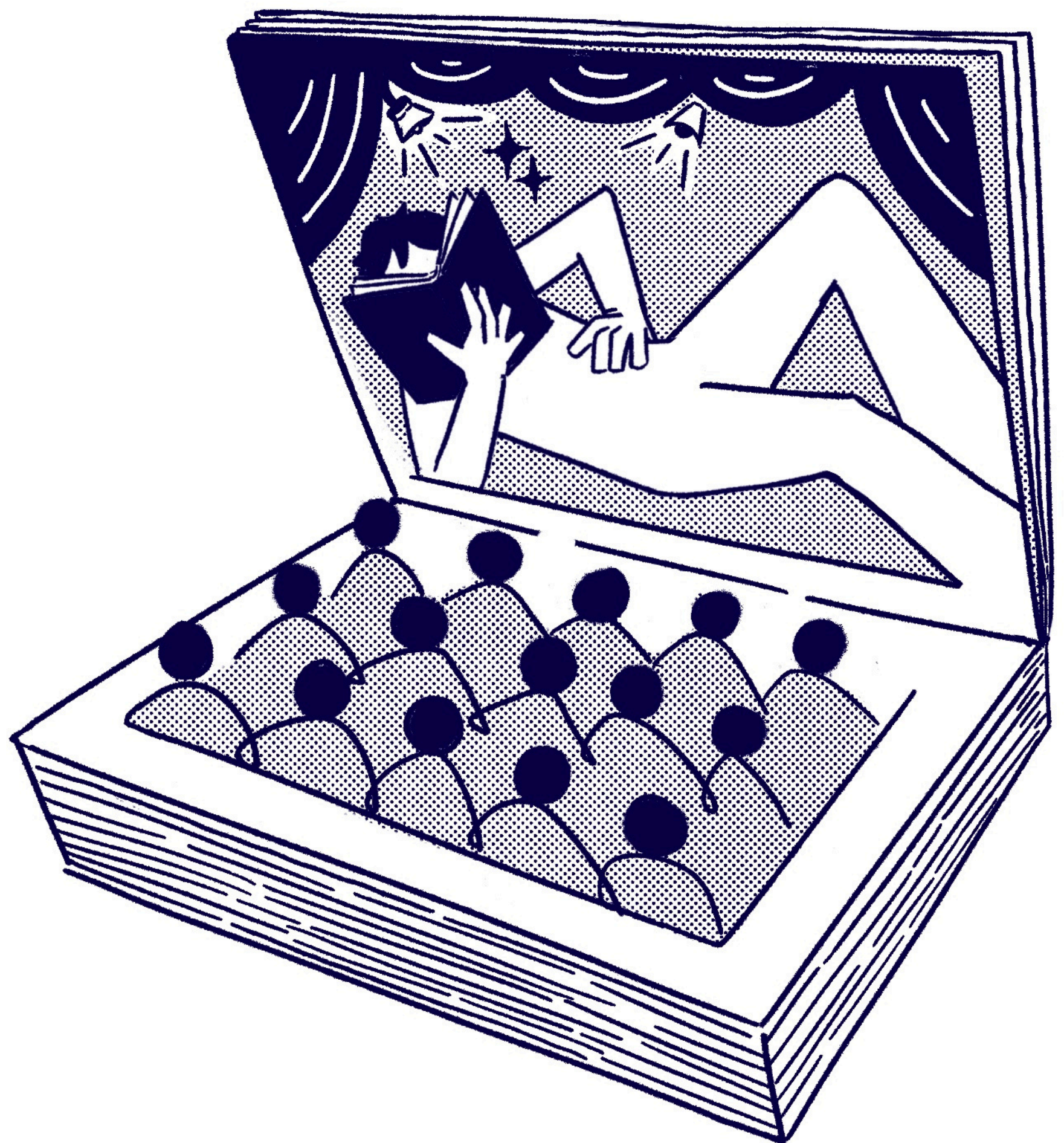
READS FROM AUGUST

Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison (1977)

As Macon "Milkman" Dead uncovers his ancestral roots, this novel reveals how heritage and memory influence personal growth, creating a powerful coming-of-age narrative grounded in history and kinship. Through familial bonds and by setting the novel in the late stages of the Harlem Renaissance to the early years of the American Civil Rights movement, Morrison exposes the weight of social structures fed by racial oppression, depicting how they shape, and often distort both familial and individual identity.

Environmental Warfare In Gaza: Colonial Violence and New Landscapes of Resistance by Shourideh C. Molavi (2024)

Human rights scholar and Israel-Palestine researcher, Shourideh C. Molavi, provides a thorough academic study of the environmental warfare being waged in Gaza. Genre bending between academic writing, journalistic chronicle, and poetry, Molavi covers everything from orange iconography to eco imaginaries in media to detailed accounts of chemical warfare backed by empirical evidence and reframes the environmental conditions of war torn places from side effects to intentional, carefully planned, and crucial parts of colonial violence.

READS FROM AUGUST

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe (1958)

Things Fall Apart follows Okonkwo, a proud and successful warrior from the village of Umuofia, who offends a deity and is banished from his village for seven years. Set in pre-colonial Nigeria, the story takes place while Christianity is being introduced into Africa and is a commentary on the immediate effects of colonialism on communities, families, and individuals. When Okonkwo returns to the village of his father's people, to find it has changed, we watch not only the unravelling of the things, but of the man himself.

Service Model by Adrian Tchaikovsky (2024)

In a climate-ravaged post-apocalypse, a robotic butler named Charles murders his master, and goes out into the world in search of meaning. The novel depicts a dystopian society that has grown overly reliant on machines, whose sole purpose is to serve them. Tchaikovsky delves into the philosophies of Kafka, Orwell, and Dante among others, as the robots gain sentience and try to discover new meaning.

Small Things Like These by Claire Keegan (2021)

In this small but breathtaking story, Keegan examines a small Irish town in the lead up to the Christmas of 1985. It follows the moral mission and psychology of Bill Furlong, a coal merchant. After a disturbing discovery unveils to him the depth of the cruelty of the Magdalen Laundries, he grapples with the corruption of the Catholic church. Billy must decide: will he act against injustice or stay silent and be complicit in stifling it?

Fundamentally: A Novel by Nussaibah Younis (2025)

If you're after something sharp, funny, and thought-provoking, try *Fundamentally* by Nussaibah Younis. It follows Nadia Amin, an academic running a UN deradicalisation project in Iraq, where bureaucratic chaos and a fiery former IS recruit force her to confront her past. With biting satire and real tenderness, it's a brilliant debut about identity, belonging, and redemption that will make you laugh, wince, and think.
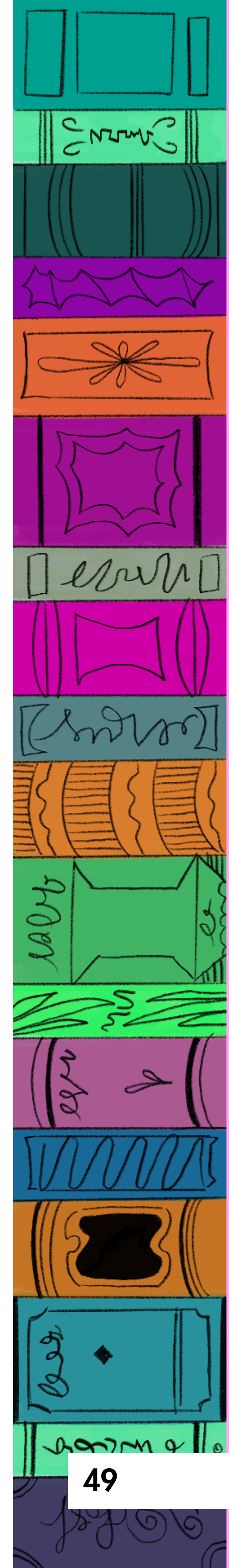
READS FROM AUGUST

Let This Radicalize You by Kelly Hayes & Mariame Kaba (2023)

Community organiser and prison abolitionist Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba offer a practical guide for activists and organizers looking for hope and strategy in tough times. Drawing on lessons from the COVID-19 era, it walks through lessons on mass protest, mutual aid, and community care as ways to confront state violence and the climate crisis. Through reflections, interviews, and actionable advice, *Let This Radicalize You* pushes us to imagine and build inclusive movements while sustaining collective action for justice.

My Friends by Hisham Matar (2024)

My Friends follows the lives of three Libyan friends living in London as they navigate the Gaddafi regime's political reach all the way to the UK. The novel is set in the period and follows the events of the 1980s all the way to the Arab Spring in the 2010s.

Illustrations by Sura Sharma
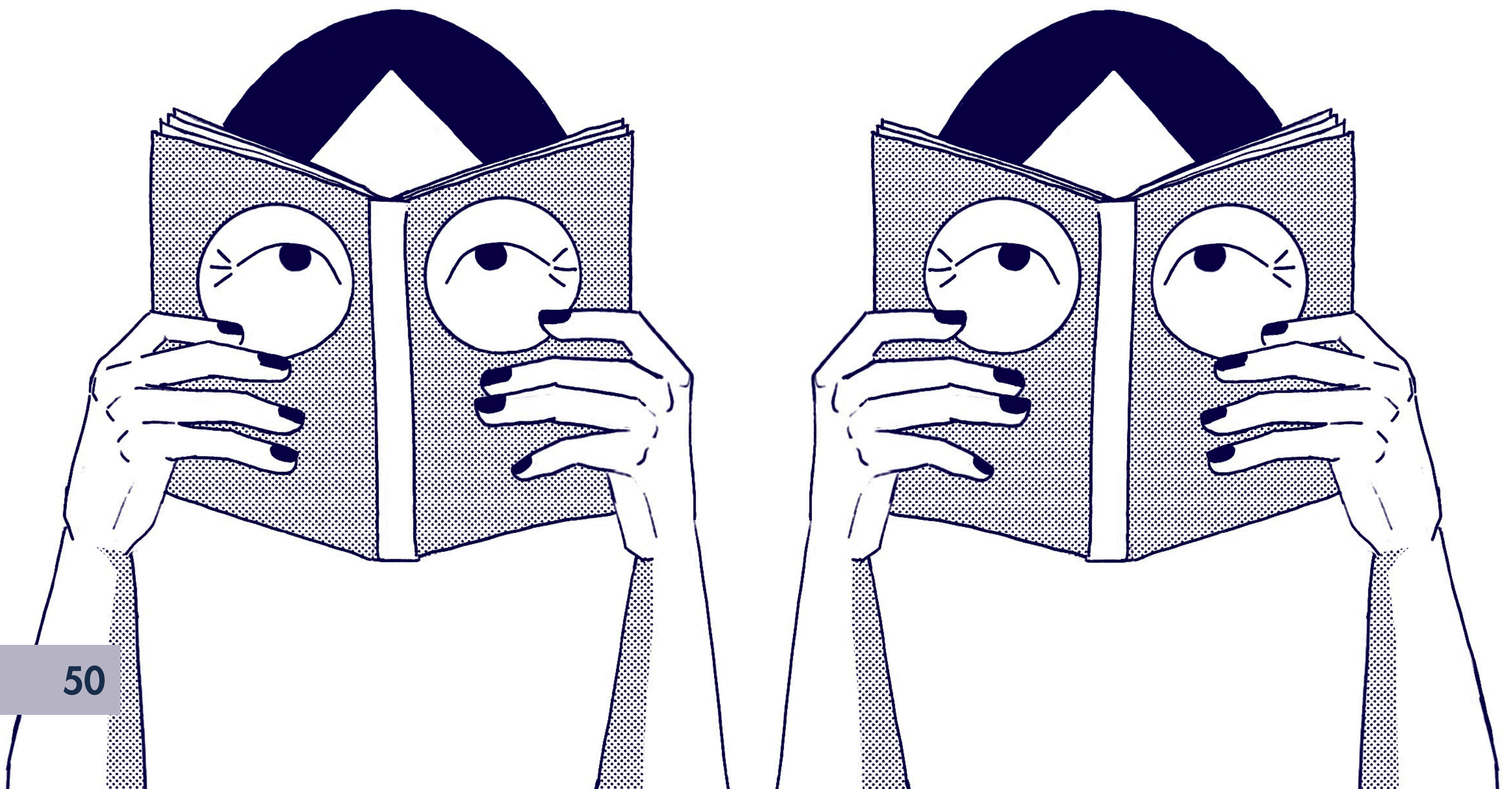
THE PEOPLE VS. AMAZON

By Tatenda Dlali

On 8th November 2022, the Western Cape High Court in South Africa lifted an interdict. The interdict, filed by the GKKITC and the Observatory Civic Association, had halted the construction of a 700,000-square-meter development at the centre of which is tech-giant Amazon's new Africa headquarters. The construction, which started in 2021 on a 14.7 hectare plot of land in Cape Town, was contested by the Goringhaicona Khoi Khoin Indigenous Traditional Council (GKKITC), who claimed that Amazon had not sufficiently consulted with indigenous people before beginning construction.

The Khoisan people are the indigenous people of South Africa, and linguistically and genetically one of the oldest people groups in the world, according to Kunnie, acting director and associate professor of Africana Studies at the University of Arizona. They are made up of the Khoikhoi and the San tribes among others, who share an ancestry but differ in cultural practices. Khoikhoi (or Khoekhoe) means 'men of men' or 'the real people', and have historically been nomadic pastoralists, while the San have been hunter-gatherers. Even though the presence of the Khoisan in Southern Africa can be traced back tens of thousands of years, over time, they have been pushed to the periphery of South African politics, culture and society, and economics.

According to Chebane and Dlali, the Khoisan were a linguistic minority and hunter-gatherers during a time when other language communities lived differently and had settled down after Bantu migrations. Because of this, "they were easily subdued and exploited by other language communities for cheap and serf labour." By the time colonisation officially started, they had already begun to bear the burden of linguistic, social, and economic isolation and marginalisation.

The development of the Amazon Africa headquarters is the most recent event that reflects a long history of cultural disregard. The land on which the development is taking place is considered historically significant by the Khoisan, partly stemming from the 1510 Battle of Gorinhaiqua in which the Gorinhaiqua Khoi battled against and prevailed over Portuguese traders who had tried to steal their cattle. It is also at the confluence of the Liesbeek and Black rivers, which are sacred to many Khoisan.

Partly, this is due to their witness to Khoisan resilience over the centuries. However, the Khoisan have been present in Southern Africa for a long time before they had to be resilient and the sacredness of the rivers comes from a deeper place. Like many indigenous communities across the world, the Khoisan never viewed land as something to be owned, but rather something to be shared—a gift from nature, alive and capable of healing. To the Khoisan, natural elements such as rivers are not just part of the landscape, but active members of their spiritual and community lives.

The site would continue to be the venue of many battles over the years. After the Battle of Gorinhaiqua, it would be the beginning of the Khoi-Dutch war in 1659 and the battleground on which the Khoisan people would recurrently fight against dispossession and socio-political and economic erasure.

Today, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) reports that the Khoikhoi and San groups make up approximately 1% of South Africa's 60 million-person population (now 64 million). Moreover, Khoekhoe languages are spoken by only 200,000 people across Namibia, South Africa, and Botswana, according to language researcher Josephine Campbell. While no definitive data exists on the matter (a tell-tale sign of the neglect of Khoisan communities in research), the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung notes that "the Nama and San people are some of the poorest population groups in South Africa."

To be clear: Amazon is only the most recent adversary in the Khoisan's long battle against cultural, socio-political, and economic erasure. By the time the interdict was lifted in 2022, the Khoisan people had been fighting for the memory and cultural significance of their language and their land for centuries.

Both Amazon and the judicial system of South Africa have acted as neocolonial powers, employing colonial tactics to further dispossess the Khoisan people. In this case, Amazon as neocolonial infrastructure is supported by the divide and conquer strategy and by the South African post-apartheid legislature and judiciary, which ensures the systemic erasure of the Khoisan people.

Expansion and Gentrification

Amazon is already under public scrutiny for multiple pressing issues, including its exploitative labour practices, contribution to environmental degradation, and complicity in the ongoing ethnic cleansing and apartheid in Gaza.

However, Amazon positions itself as a neocolonial power in more ways than just these. According to *Marshall Education*, Amazon Web Services (AWS) controls 32% of global cloud infrastructure, providing services to many businesses and governments, which are predominantly in the Global South.

The new development in the Capetonian neighbourhood of Observatory is a physical manifestation of Amazon's constant expansion, and we have to be clear about this expansion and its very real implications. The cloud is not abstract—it runs on water, land, and energy, and cloud expansion is physical.

This consistent monopolisation is not a new trend from Amazon. According to *The Washington Post*, African Americans made up 21% of Seattle's population when

Amazon established its headquarters there in 2010. Nine years later, black people made up only 15% of the population. Meaghan O'Neill reports that "Once Amazon salaries begin averaging $150 000 […] longtime locals are at risk of being forced out."

We've seen gentrification before: as large corporations and people and families of high income move into an area, people and families of low income are priced out of their neighbourhoods. It results in the displacement and increased homelessness of individuals and the closure of small local businesses. As a result, Seattle, which was once relatively affordable, has experienced a 41.7% increase in the rental rate in seven years, as reported by Robert McCartney for *The Washington Post*.

What does this trend mean for the Khoisan, who have already been forced into the margins of politics, society, economy, and geography and now live at the very edges of the country?

Divide et Impera

It is important to note that in the GKKITC's fight against the development, opposition has come not only from Amazon but from other Khoisan groups. The First Nations Collective (FNC) is in support of the new Africa HQ, stating that "it could become a world-class heritage site".

Environmental journalist Onke Ngcuka reports that the development will include a medicinal herb garden, amphitheatre, and a media centre. The FNC maintains that "the First Nations will be empowered" in the facilities.

The leaders of the two factions, Tauriq Jenkins and Zenzile Khoisan, have had bouts of public disagreements and have exchanged unpleasant words with each other, accusing each other of mimicking apartheid structures and disingenuousness. The

infighting has fractured trust among Khoisan leaders and damaged unity among Khoisan communities. For the broader public, it has raised questions around who truly represents the Khoisan. Having splintered centres of authority dilutes and, to an extent, delegitimises Khoisan representation.

Divide and Conquer is not a new strategy to us. It is tried and tested military and political tactic previously employed by the Roman and British Empires. Esther Claudette Gittens writes for *The Immigrant Journal* that "the strategy involves breaking up large groups into smaller, weaker factions." When the University of Minnesota's College of Liberal Arts explains *divide et impera* concerning the Rwandan genocide, they assert that "[…] the Rwandan Genocide must first be seen as the product of Belgian colonialism. It was during colonial rule that Rwanda's ethnic groups, Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa, became racialized. It was the rigidification of these identities and their relationship with political power that would lay the foundation for genocidal violence."

So, that these two factions are divided is almost to be expected. It is a necessary tool for colonial expansion and the upkeep of neocolonial infrastructure.

But Amazon's particular business model doesn't just divide and conquer tribes; it also divides and conquers classes. In their essay "The Blur: Amazon and the Alienation of Labour", Amazon workplace organiser Raya Dee writes that "the alienation of labour is the process by which workers are removed from control of our work, disconnected from the things we produce, and separated from each other."

As the working class spends $24.1 million on Prime Day in the United States alone, the workers at Amazon warehouses across that country and many others are expected to work at incredible speeds. Packing, unpacking, loading, unloading, delivering for 12 hours, an unpaid break, and possibly some injuries.

The strategy works, disconnecting us from our work and each other.

Part of the preamble says *"We [the people of South Africa] […] adopt this Constitution as the Supreme law of the Republic so as to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights"*.

South Africa, like most of Africa, has long been plagued by the theft of land and resources and, as previously mentioned, the Khoisan had already started to experience dispossession and marginalisation to an extent when Bantu tribes migrated from central Africa, according to writer and anthropologist Willa Boezak.

Colonial contact intensified this reality, with Khoi and San land being permanently grabbed and demarcated, Khoi and San people being forced into labour systems, and cultural suppression and mobility restrictions through language, healthcare and labour policies such as the Hottentot Proclamation.
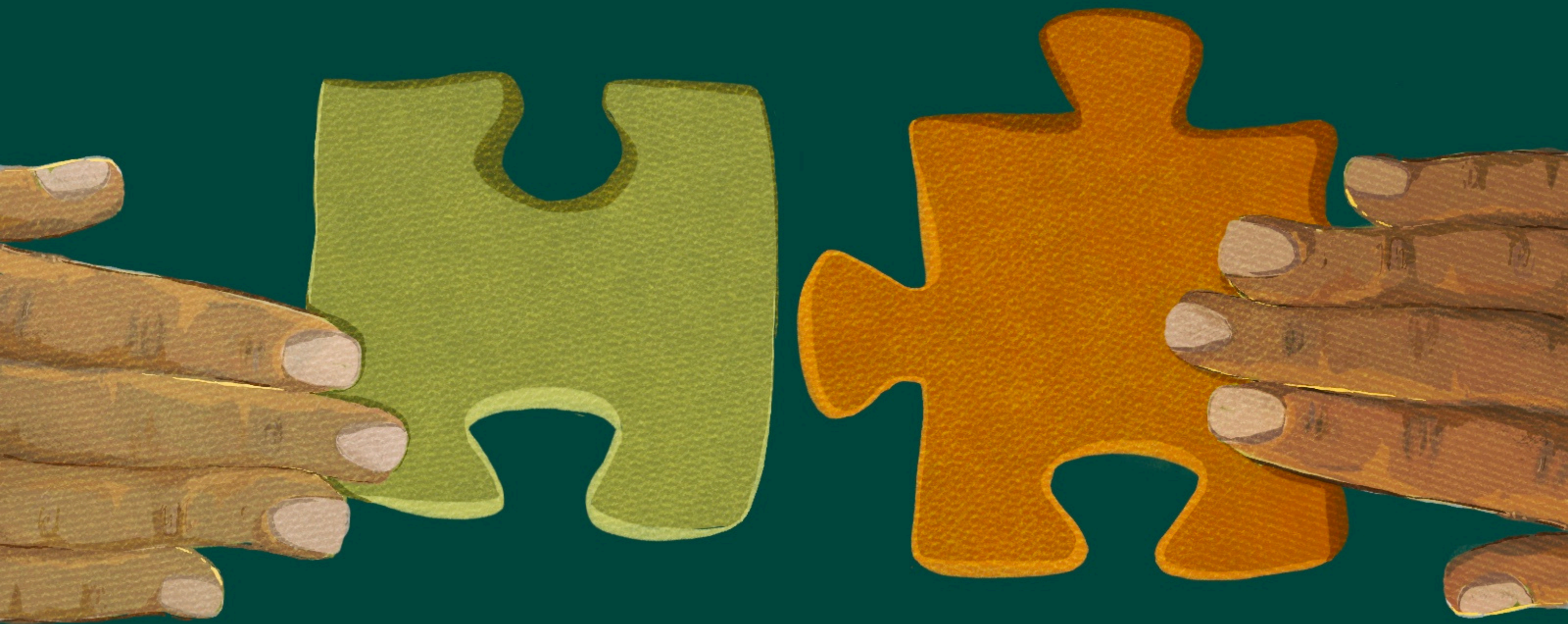
Initially dubbed the Caledon Code, the Hottentot Proclamation stated that 'Hottentot servants' (derogatory) were to "have a fixed place of abode" and were not to move from this place without a pass, which they could be required to provide at any time, according to Wayne Dooling of the University of London. The Caledon Code was passed in 1809, 149 years before the apartheid regime used the same tactics to restrict the movement of black people.

In 1913, the Natives Land Act was passed, prohibiting black people from buying or renting land in areas designated as white, which was then and still is now 87% of the land. This only further exacerbated the Khoisan struggle for land rights.

By the time apartheid was enshrined in the South African constitution in 1948, the Khoisan were almost a forgotten people. Yet, South African apartheid was so precise and thorough in its cruelty that the racist constitution managed to further oppress the Khoisan people by categorising them as "Coloured".

The Population Registration Act of 1950 categorised people into three racial groups, namely: Black, White, and Coloured. Anyone who was not

ethnically African or of European descent was Coloured, including the Khoisan. This forced Khoisan tribes to assimilate and further erased their distinct identity. The Population Registration Act was crucial in deciding where people could live, work, and access social services such as healthcare and education, but also other services such as grocery stores.

Currently, four laws govern Khoisan land rights in South Africa: the Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1994, the Transformation of Certain Rural Areas Act (TRANCRAA), the Traditional and Khoisan Leadership Act of 2019 (TKLA), and the Expropriation Act of 2024, all of which fall short in providing justice to the Khoisan. The Restitution Act offers restitution to "persons or communities who were dispossessed of property after 19 June 1913". Since most dispossession of Khoisan land occurred well before this, the indigenous people groups face a historical exclusion clause and cannot use this Act to get their land back.

The TRANCAA recognises 23 rural areas across four provinces as rightfully belonging to the Khoisan. The land is held in trust by the Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development. According to *Land Portal,* "TRANCRAA enables land to be transferred to municipalities or a land-holding entity such as a Communal Property Association, controlled by the members."

The process of implementing TRANCAA has been incredibly slow, so much so that the progress is negligible. Land Portal also states that the TKLA has amassed critiques, as it "allows traditional councils to enter into deals with third parties without consulting the people" — an obvious deviation from its restitutive purpose.

Lastly, the Expropriation Act is for "marginalised people" and is not Khoisan-specific.

The lifting of the interdict against Amazon's development on sacred Khoisan land is proof that South Africa's transformative constitutional ideals, designed to reshape

society to move away from the injustices of apartheid, have somehow forgotten its most historically oppressed peoples. It is this discord between policy and practice that has allowed the judicial system to maintain a neocolonial relationship with the Khoisan.

Amazon has certainly taken its place as a modern-day colonial superpower, employing monopolisation, extractive expansion, divisiveness, and environmental racism to accomplish the accumulation of wealth, and the South African judicial system is complicit.

In the wake of Amazon's continued, seemingly infinite expansion, we find ourselves face to face with a sick double entendre: "The People vs. Amazon" refers both to the Khoisan people's fight against tech-Goliath Amazon Inc. and the climate warfare waged by corporations such as Amazon Inc. against more-than-human species and populations such as those housed in the Amazon Rainforest.

More than just land is at stake; the Khoisan war against the erasure of their history, cultural memory, and sovereignty. This development exposes just how easily neocolonialism slips into spaces, even those designed to work against it, and that the current iteration of progress is not accessible to nor is it meant for everyone.

Until we hold corporations like Amazon accountable for their global footprints—literal, digital, and environmental—and force our governments to stop being complicit in indigenous erasure and dispossession, we will continue to witness the replication of colonial violence disguised as innovation.

Illustrations by Swetha Prabakaran

IN OTHER NEWS

The Polari Prize 2025, awarded for the best book representing LGBTQ+ experiences written by authors from the UK or Ireland, has been cancelled due to comments made by *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and *Earth* author John Boyne triggering a mass callout. A self-described 'TERF', Boyne defended J.K. Rowling for her trans-exclusionary ideas and claimed that she was being demonised. With more than 800 publishing industry professionals signing an open letter challenging his nomination to the longlist, the organisers ultimately chose not to award anyone this year.

IN OTHER NEWS

The International Day of World's Indigenous Peoples was observed on 9th August, 2025. The theme for the same was 'Indigenous Peoples and AI: Defending Rights, Shaping Futures'. The theme aimed to increase the input of indigenous people in the creation of AI tools and related processes, and address the problem of data centres being built over indigenous land and through their resources without their active involvement.

A LOVER'S NOTE TO UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS

Cleopatra and Frankenstein Reviewed

By Harnoor Kaur Uppal
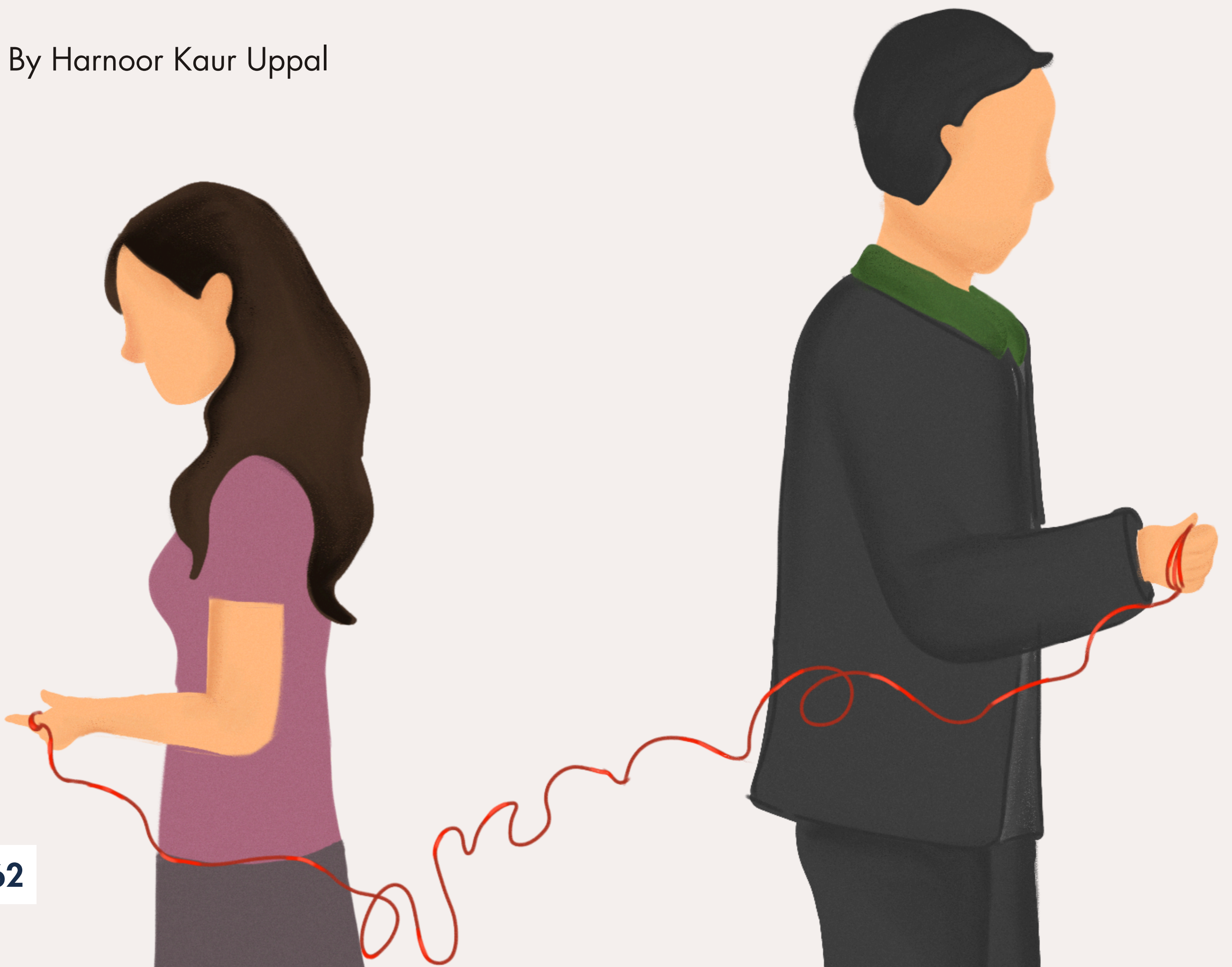
Often, it is the books chosen on a whim that linger with you the longest. That was my experience with *Cleopatra and Frankenstein* by Coco Mellors. It was the bittersweet and painful portrayal of modern, aspirational life that refused to let me leave it unfinished.

Coco Mellors' debut novel, Cleopatra and Frankenstein, centres on two main characters: Cleo—a beautiful 24-year-old British artist with an expiring student visa—and Frank—a charming 45-year-old advertising executive with emotional baggage. The two meet in an elevator on New Year's Eve in New York City.

Cleo's beauty and allure initially attract Frank, evidenced by a line in the book, "And it was a performance, her face." They date for a few months, and those months lead to a hasty marriage—as Cleo's student visa is nearing expiration and she needs a green card—which the rest of the book grapples with.

Mellors' rich and descriptive language elevates her character-driven narrative. For example, Frank's wedding vow was nothing short of poetic: "When the darkest part of you meets the darkest part of me, it creates light."

Mellors' work builds on the literary lineage of the "New York novel", leveraging the style and preferred setting of renowned authors like Joan Didion, Jay McInerney, and

Sylvia Plath *(The Bell Jar)*. However, her genre of work is more closely associated with contemporary authors like Sally Rooney *(Normal People)*, Ottessa Moshfegh *(My Year of Rest and Relaxation)*, Rachel Cusk *(Outline)*, Hanya Yanagihara *(A Little Life)*, Raven Leilani *(Luster)*, and Zadie Smith *(White Teeth)*. Mellors combines Sally Rooney's evocative writing and Zadie Smith's sharp social observation to produce a broad commentary on society, structures and culture.

The essence of the book is perfectly encapsulated within a conversation between Cleo, Zoe (Frank's half sister) and Audrey (Cleo's close friend and former roommate). Zoe recalls a story about a man falling into a hole and several people—a Rabbi, a priest, a politician, a psychiatrist, a nihilist, a spiritualist—urge the person to get out of the hole through their understanding of life. To this, Cleo says, "The hole is loneliness [...] You can't stand above someone and tell them to get out of it. Or teach or preach it out of them. You have to be in it with them [...] That's why it's a riddle. Someone else being in the hole with you means you're no longer in the hole."

A Love Letter to Reality: Themes Reviewed

Nathan Englander, author of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, reviews the book as "a love letter to New

York", but that description only partially captures its thematic breadth. Though the choice of the city accelerates—and celebrates to a certain extent—the anxieties and aspirations of the characters, it may be more befitting to read the book as a love letter to the reality of human connection and longing.

Cleo's struggle with loneliness, depression and belonging amidst a foreign land digs deeper scars for her. Mellors writes, "That was the real inheritance from her mother, she thought, more defining than any facial feature or mannerism. They both wanted to disappear." Personal grief, coupled with cultural displacement, is what triggered Cleo to seek shelter from a man twenty-something years older than her. The line, "He became the hook upon which she hung her whole self", aptly describes her dependence on him.

Quentin, a Polish-American and Cleo's best friend, also struggles with seeking his own identity. His relationship with Cleo builds on shared experiences and understanding since they both have complex familial relationships and his charismatic and protective nature provides her solace.

Quentin and Audrey, Cleo's bold, loyal friend and former roommate, provide Cleo with support and camaraderie.

Frank, too, had a complicated relationship with his estranged father and emotionally unavailable mother. The burden of being a provider entails heavy responsibility and expectations, which he struggles to cope with. Alcohol provides temporary respite but permanently damages his relationship with his wife.

Additionally, Zoe, his 20-year-old half-sister, is emotionally and financially dependent on him, similar to Cleo. Zoe navigates personal autonomy and self-worth in the dynamic urban landscape. In her search for stability and autonomy, she turns to sugar dating as a means of survival after being financially cut off from her family.

Zoe's introduction to Jiro—a man she meets on a dating website—prompts her to rethink her choices and priorities. Jiro's wisdom and care towards Zoe are exhibited through this painfully enlightening dialogue: "Who knows what you will be? You are still becoming."

Through Eleanor, Mellors sheds light on the struggles of mental illness and ruthless beauty standards. Eleanor's relationship with her body is very aptly described through a line in her section of the book: "Finally, I stand in front of the mirror, and I see…soft belly, coarse hair, thin lips, thick waist. I am a Jewish man in drag."

Each character's amplified pain ripples outwards and affects their social groups, an example of how trauma and pain are connected in communities.

Constructing the Modern Love: Power Dynamics Reviewed

Love may be liberating or imprisoning. For Cleo and Frank, it was marked by a perpetual tension between Cleo's fierce independence and Frank's desire to provide for her.

The power dynamics between the duo are established in the initial chapter. The big age gap combined with the material imbalance poses pertinent questions about authority, control and boundaries. Additionally, Frank's refusal to disclose his age, understood through these lines, foreshadows his problematic tendencies:

"I'm older than you. My generation had to memorize these things in school."
"How old?"
"Older. What's your name?"

Frank's—nicknamed Frankenstein—emotional volatility, alcohol addiction, paternalistic tendencies, material dominance, and unresolved trauma bring him to the verge of personifying the monster his nickname conveys.

Cleo stands in a weaker and more vulnerable position in the story in comparison to her husband. She finds herself frustrated with the pressure to conform to assigned roles of being 'Frank's wife' or 'the beautiful muse. '

Her desire to reclaim power and shape her narrative is seen through acts of self-exploration, resistance, and even self-destruction.

This novel challenges a pertinent assumption surrounding heteronormative relationships: that they are the ultimate form of attaining meaning, comfort, support and love. She charts out various non-romantic connections (through the supporting characters in the story) that offer Cleo the same level, perhaps more, of connection, love and intimacy.

The City as a Character: New York's Role Reviewed

The novel is set in New York City, which plays an active role in mimicking the characters' emotional chaos. Mellors' fast-paced, aspirational, 21st-century New York highlights deep social fragmentation and alienation.

New York City serves as an echo-chamber of emotional turbulence, highlighting the city as a site of financial inequality, social fragmentation and hyper-competitiveness. For example, Zoe's choice of engaging in sugar dating highlights the commodification of love and the insecurity of survival in neoliberal cities. Additionally, Eleanor's thoughts mimic the emotional instability, which is magnified by the city:

"I need to make money. I need to write today. I need to clean the bathroom. I need to eat something. I need to quit sugar. I need to cut my hair. I need to call Verizon. I need to savor the moment. I need to find the library card. [...] I need to develop a relationship with a God of my understanding."

The promise of 'reinvention' offered by the city—through stories like *Play It As It Lays* by Joan Didion, *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney, or even the *New York Trilogy* by Paul Auster—becomes about survival in this novel and not self-actualization as intended.

Cleo's precarious visa status and immigration into the country are a poignant reflection of the uncertainty of belonging in today's world. Her apprehension reflects the anxieties of millions of others around the world living on borrowed time and borrowed papers.

New York exposes the struggles of identity, success, and purpose, which are emblematic of the 21st-century metropolitan experience.

Love, Loss and Last Words: Final Reflections Reviewed

One can love someone deeply yet not be good for them. Coco Mellors' debut was a sobering reminder of the humanness of life. Cleopatra and Frankenstein blend intimate emotional battles with dominant cultural forces, highlighting the struggles of loneliness, vulnerability and estrangement amidst the merciless churn of capitalism.

While the numerous perspectives of Mellors' ensemble provide nuanced perspectives on gender, trauma, and mental health, the shifts diffuse the emotional intensity, making the secondary characters serve mere symbolic purposes.

Mellors' refusal to provide a satisfying conclusion places the book in the theme of raw realism, rarely offered in genres of love and romance.

This book is a must-read for people who are passionate about literary fiction rooted in urban realities. I found Mellors' debut to be a balanced blend of social commentary, isolation in the urban sphere and emotional depth.

Her writing style is characterised by complex, vibrant and intimate characters by employing multiple perspectives. Her works are politically and socially conscious, inclining her towards the genre of realist, contemporary and modern themes. I highly recommend this book to young adults and adults who prefer reading realistic books over those with fairy-tale endings.

Ultimately, Coco Mellors' debut, Cleopatra and Frankenstein, is not just a love letter to love and loss, but a confrontation of uncomfortable truths and the messy realities of life. Though this novel centres on love, it also addresses all that love must withstand to sustain: difference, decay, connection, and change.

Illustrations by Mukta Nitin Desai

THE AUGUST VINYL

Isitifiketi / Jabulile Majola

Dunya / Mustafa the Poet

City Song / Everything Everything

Heavy / The Marias

Soldier, Poet, King / The Oh Hellos

Favourite Daughter / Lorde

Paranoia / The Marias

Malibu 1992 / COIN

midsummer pipe dream / Guitarricadelafuente and Troye Sivan

Somewhere in Western Europe / Sehajpreet Singh

THE AUGUST VINYL

If She Could See Me Now / Lorde

Friendly Fire / Sid Sriram

Self Control / Frank Ocean

Supersad / Suki Waterhouse

It's Amazing to be Young / Fontaines D.C.

David / Lorde

Romance / Fontaines D.C.

Think Twice / Donald Byrd and Kay Haith

Carry Me / Nubiyan Twist

When You Finally Return / Six Organs of Admittance

WHEN CAMERAS CAN'T SEE

By Aisha Doshi
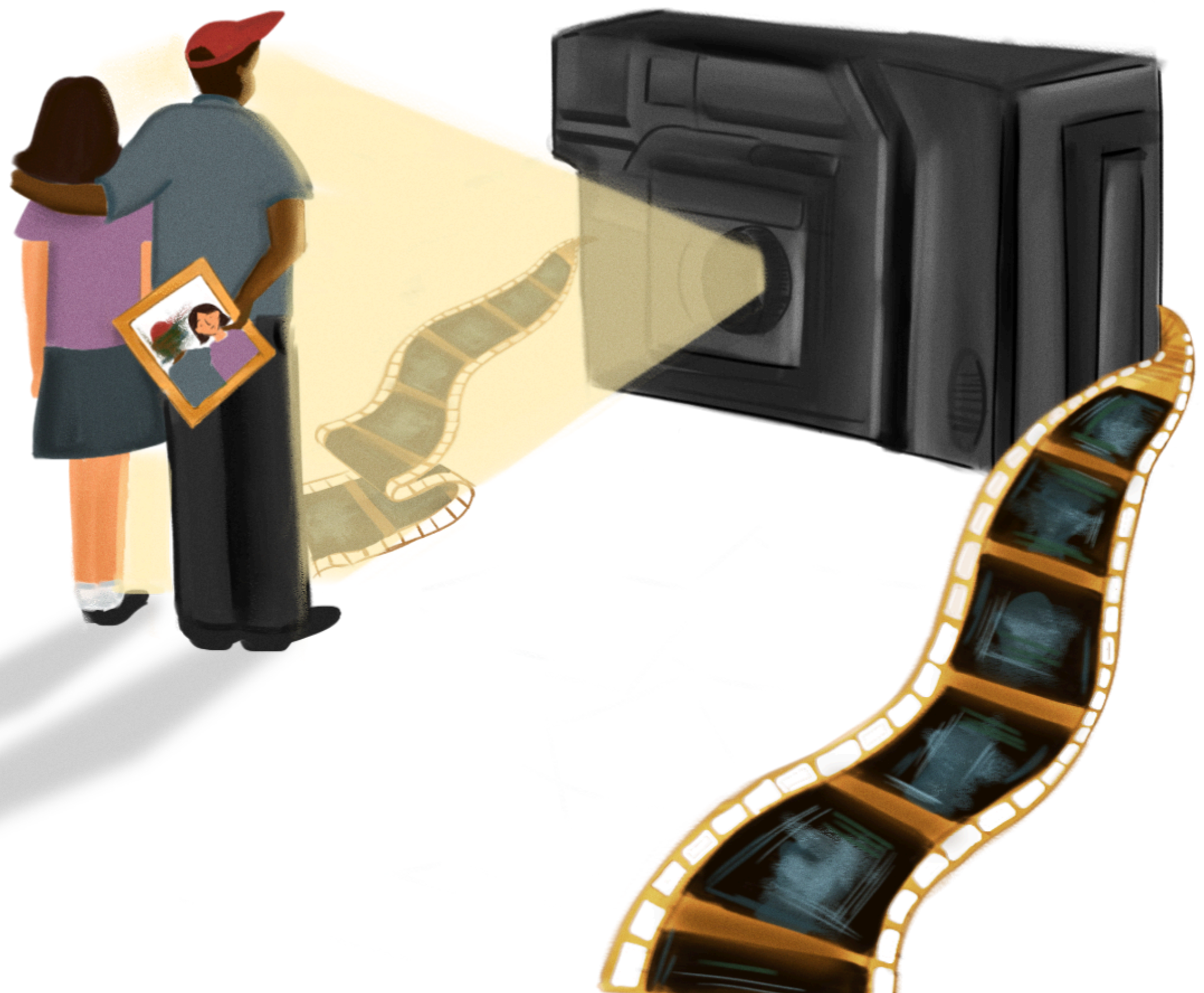
Today, you can flick through various filters on your device and use presets like 'Retro'or 'Soft glow' to enhance your image or adjust the saturation, contrast, and brightness to best suit your liking. However, when colour film in cameras was first invented to truly reflect reality, it failed to accurately capture the features or skin tone of brown-skinned individuals.

Going through her childhood album, Syreeta McFadden, photographer and scholar, stopped cold. She noticed her skin appeared "black-blue" in those images despite her natural brown complexion. She could barely recognise herself. This was not an isolated incident—it was part of a bigger failure built into the DNA of color film, and many such distortions were experienced around the 1950s in North America. Soon, photography didn't just entail distortions in photo albums, but extended into systems of power and control.

A critical examination of the integrity of the colour film production proves necessary to uncover the racism embedded in the process of this technology and the cultural use of cameras to reinforce racial hierarchies.

The roots of this phenomenon lie in the introduction of Kodachrome, the first coloured film introduced in 1935 by Kodak, which revolutionised photographic technology. It was designed to capture light-skinned individuals, as they were the larger consumer base at the time.

As the popularity of photography and the demand to print coloured images grew, photo labs needed faster and more standardised processing methods.

Thus, to achieve a quicker printing process, the Shirley Card was born. This card was a reference image, featuring only a few colour swatches and a picture of a white woman named Shirley Page. It would then be shipped across North America, guiding photo technicians to compare and adjust all printed images according to the color balance of the Shirley Card, ensuring that they would look correct.

The fallout from this development is foundational to the socio-cultural embedding of colour biases in photography. Over time, several versions of these cards were produced featuring women with similar light skin tones, often dressed in contrasting coloured garments like red, to aid calibration.

Scholars like Rosa Wevers refer to this tendency as the "Normativity of Whiteness," suggesting that Shirley Card reaffirmed light skin as the default or the 'standard.' These cards have slowly cemented a narrow visual benchmark that lasted decades.
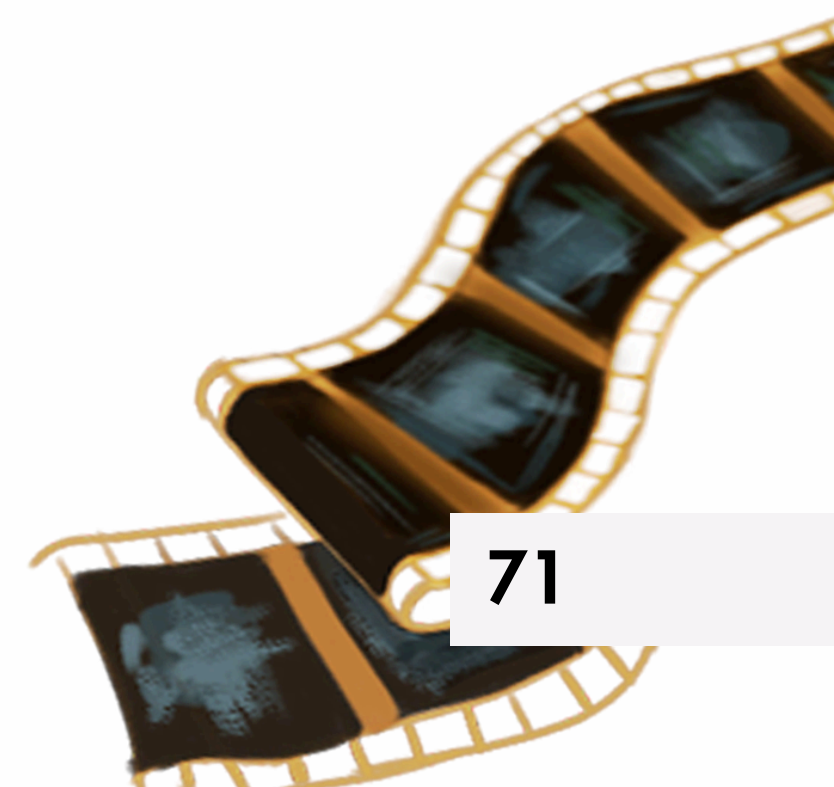
Later, in the 1990s, Kodak's introduction of an improved and dynamic product range was sparked purely by the interest of commerce, with no regard for its cultural implications. It wasn't the diversity of skin tones that was the catalyst for change; rather, it was the chocolate and furniture industries, such as the *Mahogany Association Inc.*, that became the trailblazers, pushing for corrections in the technology. They were deeply disappointed with how the rich tones of brown tones of their products were depicted as dull or indistinguishable in photos. Soon, they filed a complaint with Kodak. The company had to adapt before it lost its business with these industries and introduced films like the *Gold Max.*

Direct interviews by Lorna Roth, a researcher of Shirley Cards, with the Kodak engineers and managers were enlightening. In these interviews, Kathy Conor, a Kodak executive, implied that the need for change was not seriously acknowledged until the complaints began to threaten Kodak's business relationships.

In effect, this acknowledgement implicitly marginalised a significant portion of the consumer base during the development of this product. This is also revealed by the fact that efforts to expand its dynamic range in the 90s were not driven by concerns of skin tone accuracy, but by profit motives and complaints filed by these companies.

While examining the cause of these issues, technical limitations must also be considered, such as the film's limited dynamic range of colour balance and emulsion, designed to respond to mid-tones and, in turn, the white skin tone of individuals.

At the same time, it's helpful to look at the historical and social context in which colour film technology was developed. Together, the combination of the consumer market and technical requirements shaped critical decisions about its design and calibration. These choices have contributed to the underpinning of racial biases in photography.

What seemed like technical and design shortcomings soon translated into distortions of those photographed.

Brown skin was often printed as green, blue or sometimes even dark grey. Whole faces and striking features were blurred, disappearing into the shadow. What was lost wasn't just the colour of the images, but also the details of beauty and personality that were lost with colour. Essentially, cameras with these films were unable to fulfil their fundamental purpose: to reflect reality.

Film-maker Jean-Luc Godard even refused to use Kodachrome film to shoot in Mozambique because of how racist he found it to be.

In the world of visual culture, commercials predominantly featured subjects with lighter skin, the racist DNA of cameras being one of the leading causes. Light-skinned individuals were better exposed to the light to be captured by the film, reproducing their features accurately. And while these decisions can be attributed to the objectivity of photography technology, what stands out is how this ultimately contributed to the vicious cycle of social exclusion, perpetuating stereotypes and cementing negative social attitudes towards diverse communities.

The normativity of whiteness was also constructed on the foundations of racial structures shaped by centuries of slavery and colonialism. Colonial powers portrayed individuals with dark skin as less developed to justify exploitation, while making whiteness a social ideal.

And what began as a social standard in advertising and cinematography soon transcended into a tool of power in politics, where cameras not only set the marks for beauty, but were also used to control populations.

During the apartheid in South Africa (1948-1994), the Polaroid ID-2 camera was used in the process of state control. This camera had a 'boost button' to increase the flash and make darker skin tones visible in photos. The very presence of a boost button is indicative of how the original model was never designed with darker-skinned subjects in mind.

The images were then used in documents called 'Pass Book', which was a tool used to monitor and restrict the movement of black South Africans. These documents were required to be carried everywhere, recording

and dictating the movement of those individuals to limited-access areas. Cameras were silent witnesses to this, being instrumentalised to maintain racial systems.

This bias did not stop at North America and South Africa. In other parts of the world, the technical shortcomings of the camera intersected with the pre-colonial legacies that privileged lighter complexions over darker complexions.

India in the 1950s imported its colour film from companies like Kodak and Afga. These film stocks' tonal ranges optimised subjects of lighter skin, and generally had a part to play in selecting subjects with lighter skin tone for the TV screen. This played a crucial role in solidifying whiteness as the unspoken benchmark for beauty in the Indian visual world.

Decades later, the legacy of Kodak's Shirley Cards and cameras like the Polaroid ID-2 still lingers. Since photography at that time rewarded light-skinned subjects with accurate representation and made them the standard, the result was a media landscape of advertisements and movies where that skin tone became synonymous with beauty and aspiration.

Presently, this legacy shapes the decisions of cosmetics and beauty products such as Fenty Beauty and its *Pro Filtr Foundation*, which challenge these old notions and cater to a broad spectrum of skin tones. A single filter in editing apps does more for skin than decades of Kodak innovation ever did too.

Even as practical constraints play a role in shaping who and how we photograph, photographers around the globe recognise beauty in all subjects, embracing their diversity and subverting old practices by using adaptive lighting and careful editing.

However, remembering this legacy matters because an object as mundane as a camera is assumed to be apolitical and purely functional. A camera is supposed to capture the truth, yet it was also a technology that helped perpetuate racial biases in culture.

By unpacking something as ordinary as the creation of the colour film and the myth of its neutrality, the camera is exposed for what it was: a tool that helped decide whose features matter and who it would misrepresent.

Since the objectivity of technology helped set the stage for beauty standards and racial inequalities, which remain contested, the sharper question to ask is: if cameras were developed to capture every skin tone from the start, would we still chase fallible standards of beauty rooted deeply in race, or would the very 'image' of humanity have looked entirely different?

Illustrations by Mukta Nitin Desai

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