

A book's plea for a better internet

ZIHAD AZAD

"Happily, the Web is so huge that there's no way any one company can dominate it," wrote Tim Berners-Lee, the man who invented the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1999. In retrospect, this statement might seem naïve. But early adopters—both developers and users—truly saw the internet as a decentralising and democratising force, while traditional media at the time scoffed at it as nothing more than a hipster sub-cultural obsession. That being said, was that utopia ever within grasp? What if the internet was never a post-racial, egalitarian space to begin with, and only recently did its many problems balloon out of proportion due to its pervasive presence in our lives?

In *Lurking: How A Person Became A User* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), author Joanne McNeil prods at this question as she charts a history of the internet from the early days of AOL forums and CompuServe chat rooms to today's Facebook and WhatsApp, from the vantage point of an early user.

As a 'lurker' in the early 1990s—which in internet parlance is a silent observer who explores the conventions and norms of an online community before deciding to actively engage—McNeil witnessed the internet when it was compartmentalised like walled gardens,

and the primary objective of AOL (the first ever ISP) was to keep its users engaged solely with its own content. Back then, a person's identity online was plastic. Tethered only to a username, the chance to reinvent one's image on the internet seemed limitless.

However, after the dotcom crash paved the way for surveillance capitalism to become the *modus operandi* in Silicon Valley, online visibility was forcefully tied to the user's real-life identity under the guise of authentication. But authenticity, taken to its logical limits, becomes an act of totalisation. Google has assigned a user identification number to every single human being on earth. Facebook, in classical Orwellian fashion, refuses to acknowledge those who do not use its platform by calling them "unregistered" users. And with visibility on the internet now fastened to a person on the ground, cases of online harassment and exploitation are skyrocketing.

This book is notoriously difficult to pigeonhole. At times it reads like an autobiography; other times it is historical, socio-political, and philosophical, all the while providing a critique of the internet. It tries to shoehorn so many things into its 300-page breadth that several key points were

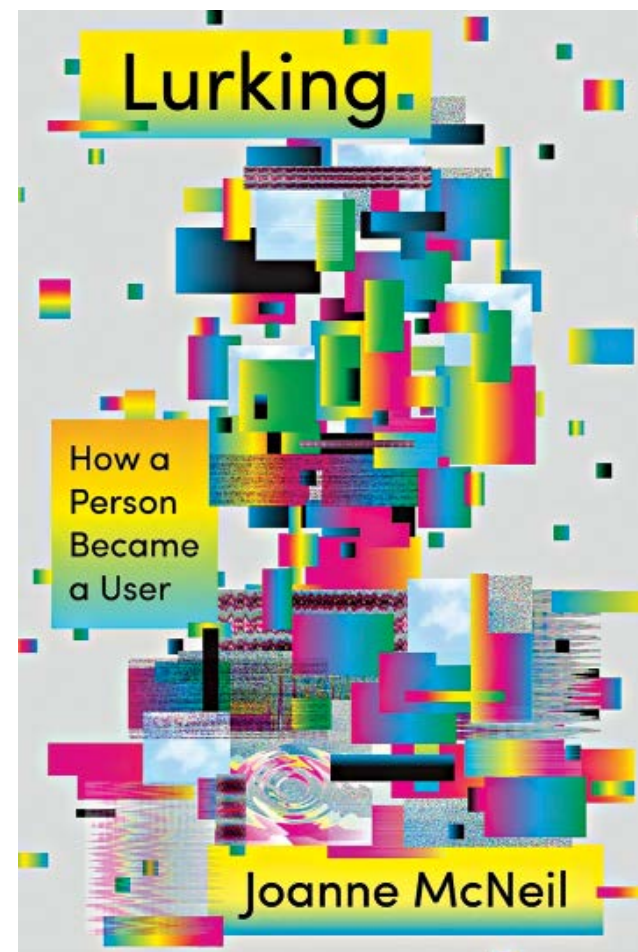
bound to suffer from under-analysis. The author exacerbates the problem by constantly employing '90s East Coast metaphors, and not the ones accessible to a larger global readership, like *Seinfeld* or *Friends*.

However, as she volleys past Friendster and Myspace in the early 2000s and arrives at present-day internet, she hones her critical tone to a near-perfect pitch. She presciently points out that stringent regulation can only accomplish so much when the individual shares such a lopsided asymmetry of power in favour of the tech giants. Similarly, promises of self-regulation by the Silicon Valley executives can only yield superficial changes rather than address deeply ingrained structural problems. Breaking up social media behemoths without de-commodification of the user can only serve as a stopgap, while nationalisation would augur a Big Brother-esque scenario in which government bodies like CIA would have access to users' personal data.

She occasionally gives vent to her resentment at the traditional media for not intervening earlier with sharp criticism of the Big Tech. But how much of the fault lies with the news media is open to debate. Any critical piece in, say, the *NY times* would have been

counteracted by scores of blog posts and *YouTube* motivational videos that slavishly celebrate the genius of the near-mythical "entrepreneur" (think of the millennial obsession with Elon Musk). In any case, it is unrealistic to expect hard-hitting analyses of Silicon Valley unicorns when the angel investors that back them also own all the major media outlets. These companies succeeded with their anti-competitive practices because proper regulatory bodies that could have checked them from the outset failed to emerge as surveillance capitalism rode the coattails of early '80s neoliberal economic policies. Blaming it all on the press reveals the obvious blind spots in McNeil's analysis. Her enduring achievement, however, is demonstrating that the present-day internet is basically the white cis-male monoculture foregrounded to the mainstream, especially after the dotcom crash purged all other alternative avenues like Café Los Negros. The meandering tone of the book might be an issue for the casual reader. Otherwise, it is worth a read.

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FROM PAGES TO PIXELS

'Shirley' crystallises the contested legacy of Shirley Jackson

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Shirley (2020), directed by Josephine Decker and adapted by Sarah Gubbins from the 2014 eponymous novel by Susan Scarf Merrell, interweaves fact and fiction into an imagined narrative about the time when author Shirley Jackson was writing her second novel *Hangsamen* (1951). Yet the film places it close to the end of her life, when the writer famously suffered from crippling agoraphobia. This is clearly intentional as Jackson's illness is easy to glamorise along with her existing reputation as a writer of gothic horror and psychological thrillers. The psychologically chaotic viewing experience of *Shirley* is a palpable embodiment of the experience of reading Jackson—suffocating and dizzying with its disorienting camera work and cacophonous background score.

Upon their first meeting in the film, Shirley serves their houseguest Rose with a long, searching look, saying, "No one said you were pregnant," while silent shock creeps into the latter's face. The narrative is heavy with such moments that revel in the imagined magical abilities of writer-witch Shirley. The hallucinatory quality of the film gradually builds in pace and intensity, and by the time the climax arrives, the viewer no longer knows what's real. Given that Decker's stated aim was to "[make] the audience feel like they [are] inside of a Shirley Jackson story," *Shirley* surely triumphs. But at a cost.

The heavily-researched Jackson biography *A Rather Haunted Life* (2016), authored by Ruth Franklin, focuses heavily on how Jackson as a writer, beyond "The Lottery", has rarely been recognised, even though works such as *Life Among the Savages* (1953)—a novelised collection of her experiences with motherhood and homemaking—contributed hugely to her creative development. In mid-1950s America, wanting both a family and a career made a woman "schizophrenic" in the eyes of society, as feminist writer Betty Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Yet here was Jackson, rearing four children while establishing herself as the primary breadwinner over her husband Stanley Hyman.

Hyman was an antagonistic figure in Jackson's life: he constantly criticised and belittled her as his own writing career plodded. He rarely participated in raising their children and was continually, openly

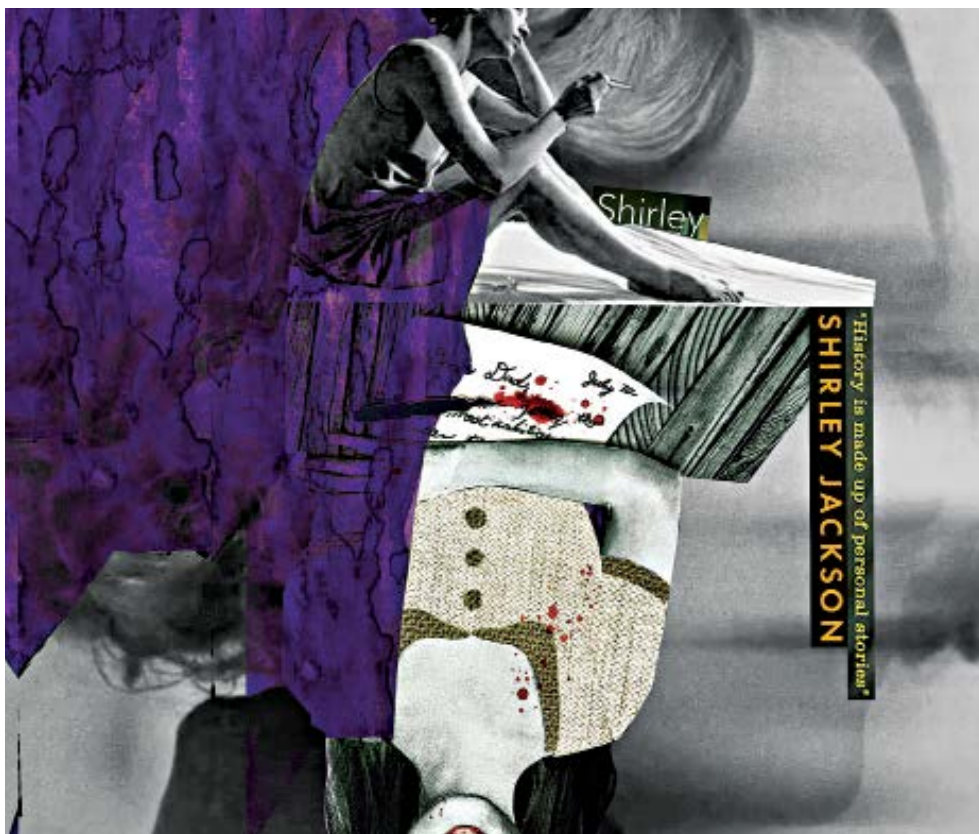


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unfaithful in their marriage. In her public life, Jackson was imposing, witty, and calmly self-possessed. Privately, she was cowed by her abusive marriage, and Franklin argues that Jackson's work became a crucial vessel for the distress this produced.

On such counts, *Shirley* is faithful: its primary thematic concerns are female suffering and ambiguous endings, both crucial ingredients across Jackson's works. But the liberties it takes do not do real-life Jackson any favours. A warm and loving mother is swapped for a witchy, almost malevolent Shirley in the film, and this polarisation—while easier to commercialise—destroys the defining multitudes she contained as an individual and as a writer.

For Jackson, human cruelty was a direct avenue into questioning and understanding how we structure our realities. Her protagonists were invariably female, be it *Hill House*'s desperate Eleanor, *Hangsamen*'s fractured Natalie, or the mischievous Merricat of *Castle*. The writer herself was an unhappy caregiver for her entire family who

succeeded in becoming an instrumental part of the gothic/horror canon. In this way, she has come to assume the form of a mythological figure.

Which is what artists will always ultimately be if we keep failing to separate them from their art. Despite Decker's claims that *Shirley* is not intended as a biopic, it undeniably functions as one. Where biographer Franklin argues for a diverse, multifaceted profile of Shirley Jackson, *Shirley* immortalises her as a "witchy" horror writer rather than an artist of unbounded versatility and character. As evolved consumers of increasingly complex art, we can—and should—do better to remember that artists are, at the end of it all, real people.

An extended version of this article is available online.

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Earth calls the soul in 'Inner State'

RASHA JAMEEL

"A poet's work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world, and stop it going to sleep."

It appears as though *Inner State* (Daily Star Books, 2020) takes the aforementioned Salman Rushdie quote to heart, with a similar sentiment echoed in the poems "A Scribbler's Insight" and "When Tears and Rainwater Unite".

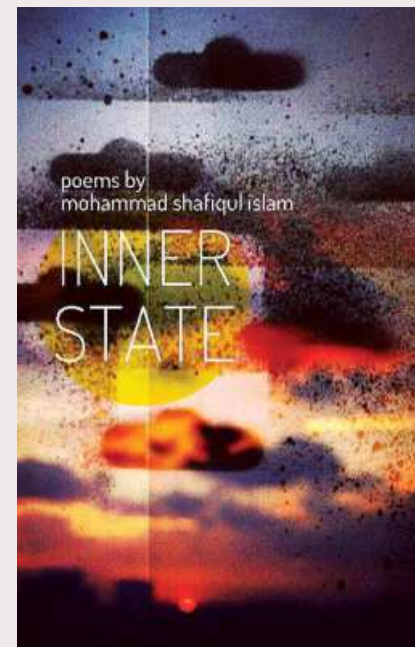
Mohammad Shafiqul Islam's collection of 48 poems is rather politically charged, and it doesn't apologise for being so. It offers an appeal for us all to pay better attention to our surroundings—little things like the presence of a beautiful woman adorned in a white saffron sari, and more pressing matters like global destruction via wars and climate change—everything counts. But amidst these subjects, the poems more deeply explore the Bangladeshi landscape in the aftermath of war, pollution, socioeconomic divides, and political corruption, as depicted in "Tabula Rasa", "Food for Thought", and "An Eye Opener".

War, despite being horrifying in its actuality, is often glorified in the name of patriotism, to encourage people to enlist in droves in service of their nation. But *Inner State* argues against the destruction that follows such phenomena. Mohammad Shafiqul Islam doesn't hold back when talking about mass rape, countless ruined childhoods, widespread famine, people being sentenced to a life of poverty, and the environmental damage, all of which constitutes a war-ravaged landscape. In "Shadow Lines", the poet paints an image of war at its most brutal, each word heavy with the trauma and horror experienced by those caught in the crossfire. The poem itself is a tribute to Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) which explores the implications of 'lines' that simultaneously draw and divide people. Islam's poem contains references to historical events like the Indo-Pak Partition and human rights issues such as racism, colourism, religious discrimination, and refugee crises, and in all these verses, the truth in his words are harsh, but necessary.

The book also dwells significantly

on humankind's relationship with nature. Islam repeatedly equates nature with innocence—such as in "Walking Barefoot On Grass"—and attempts to shake loose the ignorance that complicate the state of ethics in our surroundings and fuel humanity's unquenchable need for consumption.

Finally, the last few pieces explore the idea of personal growth through the poet's experience with love and anxiety. While the former can feel somewhat unrelatable, with the fine line between love and infatuation left undetected, the latter is illustrated with a certain degree of grace. "My Last Evening on



COVER ART: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Park Street" can be especially suited to a bookworm's sense of romance. Overall, this poetry collection expertly addresses all that it takes to be 'woke' in 2020, particularly in Bangladesh. Whether by choice or otherwise, we've all been deaf for too long. *Inner State* can be a fitting wake up call.

Inner State is available for sale at Bookworm Bangladesh, Bookends Unimart, Boipathai.com, and Rokomari.

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