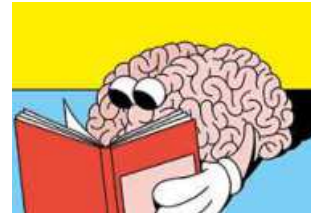


THE DEFINITIVE  
**YOUTH**  
MAGAZINE

# SHOUT

DHAKA THURSDAY AUGUST 19, 2021, BHADRA 4, 1428 BS

A PUBLICATION OF *The Daily Star*



WHY IS IT DIFFICULT TO  
REMEMBER THINGS NOW?

PG 3

INTERNATIONAL  
COLLABORATIONS WE  
WISH WERE POSSIBLE

PG 4

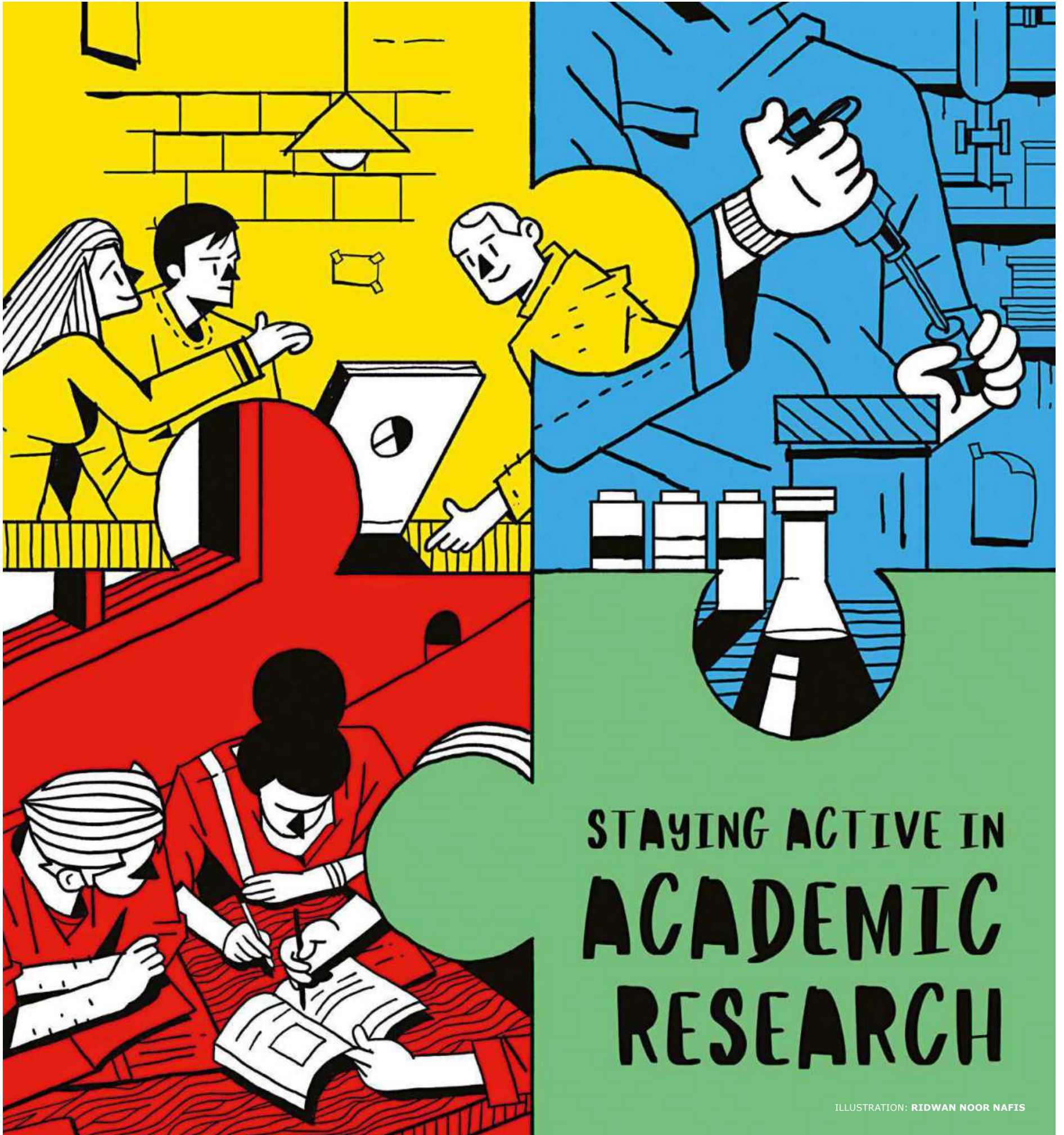


ILLUSTRATION: RIDWAN NOOR NAFIS



# EDITORIAL

Last May, I completed my undergraduate thesis. A year's worth of hard work had finally reached its conclusion. No longer was I going to have to spend sleepless nights trying to fix my code, or have mental breakdowns every time I faced an error. Life for me just became a bit easier.

Sadly, however, the peace didn't last long. Me and my teammates began searching for a proper conference or journal to get our work published. There were plenty of options out there, but not all of them were legitimate. Many of these academic conferences and publications are notorious in the sense that they exist only to exploit students and young researchers.

Predatory publications have been around for quite some time, and even though people are aware of their existence, these publications still manage to attract thousands of submissions every year. But why is that? Why are people so invested in them even though these publications have nothing good to offer? And how else do we enter and stay active in the academic research scene?

– Faisal Bin Iqbal, Sub-Editor & Digital Coordinator, SHOUT



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## PLAYWATCH

### MUSIC



# Gojira, Metal and Environmentalism

## SABIH SAFWAT

When the Duplantier brothers initially chose to name their band "Godzilla" (later to be changed to, and presently known as, Gojira), they felt that the atomic monster from the 1954 film was a fitting representation of their sound. In their own words, "It was in our heads a symbol of devastating power," and the sheer amount of power is exactly the first thing you notice about their music.

The French metal quartet combines elements from the metal subgenres technical death metal, groove metal and progressive metal into a sound filled to the brim with energy and aggression. Confrontational, yet somehow compassionate at the same time, the band presents us with songs about life, death, change, and the necessity for the right kind of strength.

Gojira's songs are based on heavy, jarring guitar riffs, down-tuned to the depths of the abyss. The guitars growl and wail while the vocals scream the simple yet passionate lyrics. Joe Duplantier packs one of the harshest and most hard-hitting vocal tones I've ever come across.

However, the element paramount in their individuality is Mario Duplantier's virtuoso at the instrument, his technically complex and fiery souled, drumlines. Uncommon song structures are common in their discography, with the band often putting the instrumental sections on focus. This trend especially prevails in their albums *The Way of All Flesh* and *L'Enfant Sauvage*; their finest works in my opinion.

Despite the destructive monster that Gojira had initially named themselves after, they chose to use their influence for something completely contradictory

to the sentiment of violence. From their early days, Gojira has been involved in environmental activities. This mentality stemmed from the Duplantier brothers witnessing the rural area they grew up in slowly being polluted over time, the life forms and their lifestyles forced to change.

The notable first step towards environmental activism was their album *From Mars to Sirius*. The whole album was created based on the theme of climate change and the possible ensuing crisis. A story about humans depleting the earth's resources and having to evacuate to Mars is narrated throughout the tracks, to serve as a reminder of the consequences humanity's lack of consideration for the environment may bring about.

Similar warnings come up recurrently in their later albums through songs like, "Toxic Garbage Island", "Wolf Down the Earth", "Another World", and "Amazonia".

Aside from raising awareness, they've also taken actions through fundraisers and showing support for environmental protection organisations, such as the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and projects like Boyan Slat's "The Ocean Cleanup".

With the launch of their new album *Fortitude* in April 2021, Gojira has launched a fundraising event to fight the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest. They're more determined than ever to make a change, a spirit that should be shared by us all.

*Sabih Safwat is always up for trying new music. Send him songs to listen to at [sabih-safwat@gmail.com](mailto:sabih-safwat@gmail.com)*



# WHY IS IT DIFFICULT TO REMEMBER THINGS NOW?

**SABIBA HOSSAIN**

Lately I have been having trouble remembering recent events.

At first, I didn't give this much thought and soon forgot that I was forgetting things. But then, things started getting worse.

I would go online to search for a certain topic, only to forget what I was looking for as soon as I started typing in the search bar. I would open my book and forget why I opened it in the first place. As someone who likes to boast about her strength in focus, this realisation shook me to the core.

Turns out I wasn't the only one.

Memory loss has become a global phenomenon during the pandemic. According to neurologists, stress and anxiety resulting from uncertainty, trauma, and isolation are accountable for our foggy brains.

Lack of social interactions creates a negative impact on our brains, which affects our ability to remember things. Even if one isn't accustomed to social gatherings and enjoys solitude, repetitive schedules and boredom create the same effect on the brain. Because we're deprived of a change in a scenario, our brains' hippocampus region, which is responsible for learning and memory, has started to decelerate.

Similar to a muscle losing its flexibility after being left unused for a long period, the hippocampus region loses its dexterities if not exposed to stimuli like new ambiances or experiences regularly. The lack of proper stimulations from this region is why we fail to focus and remember recent events.

During anxious situations, the sympathetic nervous system gets activated, releasing stress hormones like

adrenaline and noradrenaline. This phenomenon is known as the "fight or flight" response which helped us survive through the ages. But during the pandemic, this occurrence is doing us more harm than good.

The constant release of stress hormones alleviates one's stress level which is directly related to mental health disorders. According to the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* of June 2020, 40 percent of the adults in the US reported to have been struggling with their mental health.

Drawing the line of connection is easy; as we continue to live in stress, we fall into depression and anxiety, our brains take the toll, and our memory cells get destroyed.

To avoid forgetting things, changing one's day-to-day scenarios could be helpful. Take a walk outside, or try to change your interior and move your workstation every once in a while. Make sure every day doesn't seem or feel the same. Take notes so that you don't forget about important tasks.

Experts suggest that this phenomenon of loss of memory and focus is likely to disappear once we succumb to the normal situation. Till then, keep your mental health in check and take a long, deep breath.

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2. The New York Times. *Feeling Scatter-brained? Here's Why.*

*Sabiba Hossain is a Hufflepuff who plans on going into hibernation every winter but never succeeds. Send her fantasy book recommendations at [fb.com/Sabibastro](https://fb.com/Sabibastro)*



## The Real Cost of Beauty

**BUSHRA ZAMAN**

Beauty seems to have ever-changing standards.

You might think this only applies to people influenced into believing that they need to change things about themselves to be perfect, but that is not true. You could be absolutely content with how you look until you discover there are simple ways, seemingly in your budget, to slowly change your appearance.

This could be an insecurity you always had, or you could simply be bored and be trying to experiment with new looks for a sense of freshness. You could even be doing so because you want to learn to take better care of yourself, and maybe want to try out a different skincare routine.

Sometimes such changes require upkeep or making continuous additional changes and you do not just end up with more bills to pay, but this also takes an additional emotional toll on you.

Nowadays, there are hair colours to match seasons, nail colours to match moods, different skincare routines for morning and night, and so many different lipstick shades that you may find yourself owning more lipsticks than clothes, with each one being just different enough to warrant a purchase. Beauty products offer so many benefits you may want them because you want to take good care of your skin, as a way to relax after a rough day, or simply to feel luxurious.

What usually results is an overwhelming sense of dependency on beauty products, not necessarily for others, mind you, but to meet your own set of standards for yourself. Or even a need to ensure that your skin receives as many benefits as possible, and the bills for this can add up faster than you think.

Soon, before you know it, you may not feel comfortable enough as you did before to go out bare-skinned, and could even be considering making permanent changes to use makeup less – but even that is costly. Even DIYs with varying results require you to buy extra, say, lemon halves to add sugar to and exfoliate. Bills for beauty products can be expensive or start out as small but add up due to maintenance. You could end up spending more than you initially thought would be required. There is nothing wrong with spending lavishly on things that make you happy if you can afford it, but there are certain things to be kept in mind.

First, variations are what makes you unique. If everyone looked the same, no one would have any individuality in terms of looks or a way of identifying their own beauty. Second, you may absolutely spend on beautification for yourself, even if that means permanent changes, but you should keep a separate budget for it, one that preferably does not hinder other aspects of your life so you can spend guilt-free.

Third, if you'd rather not spend at all, that is absolutely fine as well. It all depends on what you want and not the standards that others set.

May the cost of beauty not be a burden but instead, an option for change should one choose to opt for it.

*Bushra Zaman likes books, art, and only being contacted by email. Contact her at [bushrazaman31@yahoo.com](mailto:bushrazaman31@yahoo.com)*

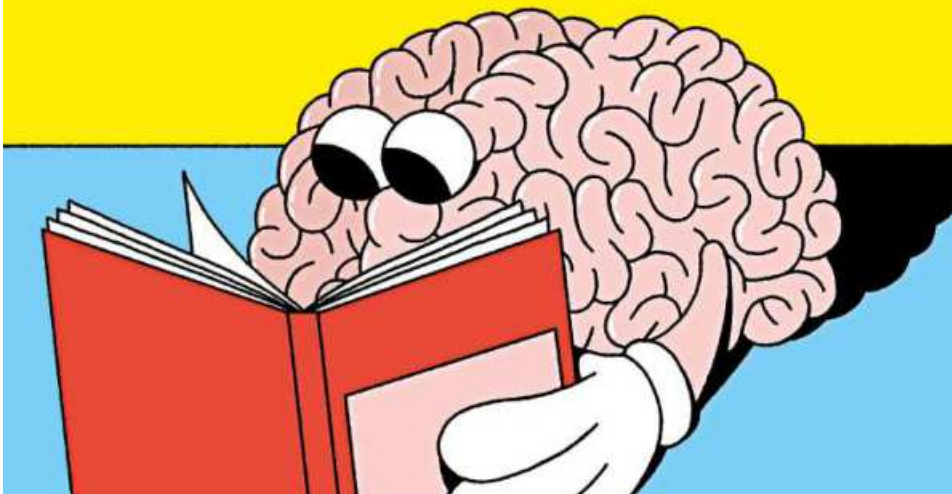


ILLUSTRATION: **GEORGE(S)**



# International Collaborations We Wish Were Possible

ABIR HOSSAIN

Have you ever wondered how it would be if a Bangladeshi artist could have their album cover designed by Tekashi Murakami? Or maybe a graphic novel done by Neil Gaiman and Ahsan Habib? Perhaps even a musical collaboration between Arnob and A.R. Rahman?

In the contemporary era of pop culture, the lines of diversity are celebrated and embraced. So, we begin to wonder about the endless possibilities that excite us.

With that in mind, here are a few international collaborations we would have loved to see.

**Bibi Russell x Andy Warhol**

Pioneers in their own rights, Bibi Russell and Andy Warhol never failed to push the limits of self-expression.

The two are characterised by exuberance, glamour, and playfulness with ornamental patterns finding their way into a good portion of their work. Where creatives attempt to shy away from the mundane of everyday lives, Russell and Warhol found inspiration in the supposed dullness of regularity.

Bibi Russell, who had just stepped into the world of fashion, experimented with all sorts of fabrics and styles. However, it wasn't until she began to instill her love for local textile that her designs took a life of their own and launched the handicraft artisans of Bangladesh to a global scale. With the integration of *khadi*, *jamdani*, and *gamchha*, her designs were a breath of fresh air in the scene all the while being eco-friendly.

Warhol, on the other hand, sought to reimagine familiarity and attempted to find beauty in something as regular as a can of soup. Safe to say, he succeeded. "Campbell's Soup Cans" is an instantly recognisable piece that helped pop art become the epicentre of the art movement in the early 60s. The illustration was initially met with indifference from the general public but went on to create waves in the art scene later on. It helped consolidate his signature style of "mass production" and silkscreen printing.

Both Warhol and Russell loved juxtaposing colours and mediums, and showing a part of themselves in everything they created. This duo would amalgamate their commercial prowess and boundary-pushing creativity to produce perhaps a fashion line that embodies the spirit of the subcontinent as well as the boisterous nature of pop art.

**Satyajit Ray x Hayao Miyazaki**

Lush green meadow imperceptibly swaying against the gush of wind while the protagonist, young and naive,



Satyajit Ray started his career as a commercial illustrator and printmaker. In fact, it was Ray himself who illustrated the cover for the novel *Pather Panchali* by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay. He found himself deeply entrenched in the world of cinema, writing screenplays, being the founder of a film society, and a regular at the theatre. His work hinges on the innocence of being a child and the perils of parenthood.

Much like Miyazaki, Ray explores the conflicting nature of tradition and modernism. With coming-of-age themes, versatile storytelling, and a musical score moulded solely for Ray's films, we can see how it can fit right amongst Miyazaki's magical creatures.

On the other hand, Hayao Miyazaki's films are veiled under multiple layers of meticulous craftsmanship, each playing their part to make the drawings feel alive. Similarly, Ray and his crew were renowned for developing new techniques of filming. The two also love to personify the elements, giving nature the ability to wreak havoc as well as love. Both auteurs are distinctly influenced by the humane aspects of their characters. While one of them engulfs their characters in a magical universe, the other wants their characters to deal with the world head-on.

It is their differences that make them exceptional. However, one can't help but wonder how Apu would befriend Totoro or Feluda solving crime alongside one of Hayao Miyazaki's wonderful companions. It is a thought fuelled by the very essence of the films the two of them have given us. And although it might be impossible now, we can surely let our imaginations wander.

**Jalali Set x BROCKHAMPTON**

Youthful, rambunctious, and borderline manic – hip-hop, as a genre, is braggadocious and all about the hustle. However, with the rise of young crews, the rules of hip-hop

have been bent, and non-conformity is now the norm.

Jalali Set burst onto the scene embodying an anarchic spirit. They sought to represent the chaos that looms large in Dhaka and pack it into songs that sound nothing short of implosions.

Equally proud of their identities are Texas boy-band Brockhampton. Formed on the internet over a Kanye West forum, this exciting crew is the sound that has come to define a generation. With R&B influences and pop sounds scattered all over their discography, the group has proven to venture out and not be defined by a single genre.

While Jalali Set presents the audience with piercing verses, humorous one-liners, and comical ad-libs, their prime objective is to conspicuously show off what it means to be "puran Dhakaiya". Most of their lyrical content is riddled with the vernacular of the area and about the come-up (as well as survival) of the streets. Their beats sound almost menacing and once paired with a classic drum loop, help their mischievous aesthetic come through.

Brockhampton, while musically more diverse, also has a chaotic feel to it. The relentless verses switch from bars to melody almost effortlessly without ever sounding out of sync. Each member contributes a different theme, spanning from identity, trauma, as well as questioning the status quo.

With a blend of sub-continental nudge combined with a sound that has garnered an obsessive global fanbase, it holds the potential to either be a beautiful mess or the next big thing. Kevin Abstract's punchy vocals and MC Muggz's knock-out deliveries over a beat rummaging with multiple influences sounds like a head nodding magnum opus.

*Abir Hossain is a failed SoundCloud Rapper. Tell him you too can't find anything to rhyme oranges with at fb/abir.hossain.19*

# STAYING ACTIVE IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

HIYA ISLAM & FAISAL BIN IQBAL

Anyone can write a research paper as long as they have a good understanding of how research publications work. However, it is not just the writing and publication of a paper that will establish your presence in the academic research scene.

To cement your position as a regular researcher or a research enthusiast, you need to stay active within that community. Hence, it is vital that you keep in touch with other researchers, especially those working in your field.

For this article, we will take a look at how you can stay active in the field of academic research and connect with other like-minded researchers. We will also look at the importance of staying away from predatory publications that are only there to exploit you.

**CONNECTING WITH OTHERS AND MAKING YOUR WORK MORE ACCESSIBLE**

Staying updated with the latest research is pivotal for both young and experienced researchers. This is where ResearchGate comes into play.

ResearchGate was created with the intent to amass science enthusiasts from all over the world and let them share their discoveries. It is a social networking platform for researchers and scientists that enables them to share their conference papers, posters, research articles, preprints, and any other projects.

Additionally, you can find and follow other researchers given they already have an account. Creating an account is easy, free, and requires an institutional email in most cases.

What's more interesting about ResearchGate are the personalised stats, scores, and other analytics it offers to users every week. Users are notified when they have been cited in a paper and get to view their total citations and h-indices. Other users have the option to follow certain research projects as well as recommend them.

You can also interact with each other via a Q&A blog. Here, you can start a discussion, ask questions on troubleshooting, find potential collaborators and so forth.

"The platform allows students to follow works of professors and scientists and can also help them grow an interest towards a particular field," says Md Asad Ullah, a Biotechnology and Genetic Engineering graduate student at Jahangirnagar University, and Chief Research Officer, Community of Biotechnology. "I have published around 20 articles, and ResearchGate has been integral in this journey."

The platform itself is not enough, however. Researchers also need to be good communicators.

Good communication practice starts with the paper itself. While using scientific language in your paper is considered as standard, you should at least use simple language while preparing the research summary. That way, others can easily get the gist of your work.

Selecting keywords for your paper is also important to make sure that your paper is visible in the search results. Choose keywords from the reader's perspective; use words and phrases that readers will use to search for papers. Avoid single word keywords as they might lead to false matches.

**PREDATORY PUBLICATIONS AND WHY THEY ARE BAD**

Predatory publishing is a form of exploitation. It is an academic publishing business model where authors are able to publish their papers for a certain fee without having their articles checked for quality and legitimacy. In most cases, predatory publications will publish your work with minimum or zero peer-review or editing services.

High quality journals or conferences take longer to publish your papers because they have to go through a long and extensive peer review and editing process in these publications. This is done to ensure quality research and make sure that authors are being credited for their work, and not just because they paid a hefty fee.

Despite the clear red flags, many researchers and research enthusiasts, mostly

and conferences.

"All kinds of research should be avoided from being published in such journals," says Fahim Kabir Monjurul Haque, PhD, Assistant Professor at the Department of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, Brac University. "The promise of quick acceptance can also motivate students to submit their work. These publications lack a proper peer-review process which is evident in legitimate journals like Nature, Scientific Reports, PLOS One, etc."

Predatory journals are hard to detect. However, there are some tell-tale signs which give away their true identity.

Professor Haque suggests checking out the members of the journal's editorial board along with their contacts and seeing if these journals are using their own email domain. He also advises to check if the tar-

from submission fees paid by authors.

Predatory publications, especially conferences, have been on the rise during the pandemic. Rafeed Rahman, lecturer at the Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Brac University, says that the new interest is due to the conferences being held virtually. That means there is no expense made for visa and travel apart from the participation fee.

"Conference publications are faster compared to journal publications and the submissions can later be extended and readied for a journal," adds Rafeed.

However, an all-virtual event also means students are more vulnerable to fall prey to predatory conferences and thus he asks students to always go for *Core-Ranked* conferences which can be accessed through the website [www.core.edu.au/conference-portal](http://www.core.edu.au/conference-portal). It



gazes at the marvel of a train or an airplane passing by. If this imagery reminds you of either Miyazaki or Ray's films, you are not alone.

There is no doubt about the brilliance of the two filmmakers. Their cinema possesses an unforeseen sense of universal love evoking all of our senses to unravel before us a masterpiece each time.



students, keep sending papers to these publishers. As far as they are concerned, their work is being recognised and published in "international" journals and conferences, whereas the reality could not be more different.

A 2017 research suggests that Bangladesh is one of the top 20 countries in the world with the highest contribution (211) in predatory journals. India tops that list with the highest contribution (16,720). And these predatory publishers are not just publishing papers on their own make-believe journals and conferences, but are also getting them indexed on different renowned scholarly databases according to a 2021 report by Nature.

With the pressure of "publish or perish" in academia, students and researchers often fall in the clutches of predatory journals

get journal is indexed in reputed indexing agencies such as Scopus, Index Copernicus etc. There are also lists available online that regularly update which journals to look out for such as the Beall's List (which has been discontinued in 2017 but has successors continuing its work).

Predatory publications are somewhat fuelled by the scientific community itself. For job-holding researchers, having a certain number of published articles is necessary for career growth. As for students, having their works published in journals puts them at an advantaged position when seeking higher education.

However, such publications rarely do any good. The main motive of the organizers who host predatory conferences and publish illegitimate journals, at the end of the day, is the financial profit which comes

is a good guide to choosing conferences for students from computing disciplines.

There are other ranking lists for other majors as well, but since these databases are usually scattered across the internet, it is always a wise decision to seek help from your research supervisor regarding this matter.

Getting a paper published is important, but one should also focus on staying clear of predatory journals and conferences. No matter how much effort you put into it or how ground-breaking it might be, the moment it is presented in a predatory journal or conference, its credibility plummets.

*Reference*

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ECHOES BY  
ASRAR CHOWDHURY

# My first encounter With *Cinema Paradiso*

**I**  
Rafael, my housemate at Huntingdon Road, Cambridge, asked me one day if I had watched *Cinema Paradiso*. When I said no, Rafael looked at me in silence for a moment. "Tomorrow's the last day, they're screening Cinema Paradiso at the Arts Theatre. Do watch. You'll like it."

I decided to go for the afternoon screening. Rafael didn't give me any details. I also didn't find out about the cinema before watching. When I reached, there weren't more than ten people in the hall. I chose a seat. Then I silently waited for the lights to go out.

**II**  
Toto, a little boy from a small village in Sicily, is now a big movie director in Rome. After many attempts, his mother managed to convey the message to Toto's girlfriend via phone that Alfredo passed away recently. His funeral will be held the following afternoon. Toto has to attend the funeral.

And thus, the movie starts in flashback. We're transported to a little village in Sicily, just after World War II, and before the advent of television. The life of the villagers centres around the local cinema hall, the Cinema Paradiso. The local priest comes frequently and makes Alfredo, the projectionist, censor each explicit scene.

Toto's father had perished in war. Cinema Paradiso becomes the centre of Toto's universe. Alfredo, who has



no child of his own, soon takes up the void left by Toto's father. The movie moves from one plot to another, as Toto grows up and enters his teens, where he meets the love of his life, Elena. All the time though, young Toto's eyes remain fixed on Alfredo's basket of all the censored clips.

**III**  
The better cinemas are the ones that center around one or a set of universal themes. When themes are universal, they touch across generations. This makes a cinema timeless. Following Toto's journey as a child and then as an adolescent, reflected universal experiences I went through, and

probably many others did too. The best stories are always those that reflect our own self through the characters and the plot of a film.

The best cinemas have an extra dimension that resonates with people. That, in this case, was the soundtrack. I was watching *Cinema Paradiso* in an almost empty hall. I was spellbound. My full concentration was on the cinema. Whatever silence there could have been was filled up with the mastery of Ennio Morricone's compositions. A recurring 4/4 piece came back at the right moment to send shivers down my spine. That recurring 4/4 piece haunted me throughout the cinema till the last scene where the composition returned to make the romance of cinema rhyme.

**IV**  
Sadly, like all movies, Cinema Paradiso ended. The lights slowly came back on. The few people who came to watch, slowly made their way out. I remained seated. I was unmoved. The experience was sinking in. A few minutes after everybody left, I was still seated. A thought went through my mind. I did something for the first time. I went downstairs to the ticket counter. I bought a ticket for the last show.

*Asrar Chowdhury teaches Economics in classrooms. Outside, he watches Test cricket, plays the flute and listens to music and radio podcasts. Email: asrarul@juniv.edu or asrarul@gmail.com*

satire.

## "Money cannot buy happiness."

*Says man hoarding generational wealth*

**NUZHAT HASSAN CHOWDHURY**

The world of exorbitant wealth can be confusing to those who are not a part of it. While most people turn to the simple things in life to cheer themselves up and believe in mantras such as "brownies cure frownies," members of the one percent club turn to something a bit more extravagant, such as a small loan of a million dollars from their parents.

Although the lives of the ultra-wealthy can seem seamless, they too have their own struggles because that loan eventually runs out.

Samia, a teenager that grew up surrounded by luxury and privilege, had been feeling down lately. To cheer herself up, she placed another online order this week. The last fifteen times did not do the trick, but she was convinced that the sixteenth time's the charm. The cause of this sudden wave of sadness was still a mystery to her.

Feeling rather confused, she turned to her father for guidance.

After several hours of searching, she finally tracked him down by their mansion's pool. "Dad, I've been feeling really down lately and I don't understand why," Samia admitted to her father.

"I knew this day would come," he said



as he took a deep breath. "Today is the day I teach you an important lesson – money cannot buy happiness," her father continued.

"You see, Samia, with more money comes more responsibilities and these responsibilities take up a lot of time. I need to work every day. I haven't been on a proper vacation in 20 years because I cannot afford to relax," he said as he soaked up sunshine at the poolside and the butler served him coconut water.

"Tell me more," Samia inquired.  
"As income increases, so does the difficulty of managing it. You have no idea what a hassle it is to find an accountant that can stomach the mental gymnastics of it all," her father replied.

"Another downside to being born into wealth is that people constantly undermine your accomplishments. I worked incredibly hard to earn an executive position job at the age of 23, but nobody ever gave me the credit I deserve. This often saddened me,

but I persevered," the father complained.

"Wasn't grandma the CEO of the company you worked at?" Samia asked curiously.

"Yes, why do you ask?" Samia's father asked obliviously, prompting the butler to hopelessly look into an imaginary camera as if he were in an episode of *The Office*.

As the father-daughter duo were chatting, they suddenly heard the loud rotating of helicopter blades. Within no time, they were surrounded by half a dozen helicopters that carried men equipped with protective gear. One such man popped his head out of the helicopter and spoke through a megaphone, "WE ARE NOT HERE TO HURT YOU! WE JUST WANT TO TALK ABOUT YOUR DELAYED LOAN REPAYMENTS!"

Upon hearing the message, Samia's father yelled over the noise "SEE? US RICH FOLKS ARE CONSTANTLY ATTACKED!!"

He then quickly grabbed Samia's hand and a pre-packed suitcase and sprinted towards the airport to take a trip to Canada, for completely unrelated reasons.

*Nuzhat enjoys baking but simply cannot find the required ingredients. Tell her about your favourite baked goods at nuzhatchowdhury07@gmail.com*



# GAAN

**SHOUNAK REZA**

I have evaded wreaths of venomous, moving flowers that have invaded the dilapidated manor, writhing and sliding up and down the walls like snakes, ready to strike any moment. I had to tread carefully down the corridors, staying as far away from the walls as possible.

When I first saw the dark blue monsters, emitting the ghastly smell when the old adventurer brought me a vial of juice squeezed out of the petal, I felt like I could never make my way past them and reach the attic. But I am here at last – here next to the feathery box the adventurer described to me. It looks light and supple and so blue that it hurts my eyes. There isn't a flower in sight. Maybe they are hiding somewhere, waiting to strike the moment I ready myself to open the box.

For years after Gaan disappeared, I spent all my time trying to visualise the many texts he sent me in the last months. I played his voice clips over and over again, trying to smell the ghastly smell he talked about by some supernatural means, trying to develop a sixth sense to know how he felt. Now that I am so near him, now that I have finally managed to track him down, I know exactly how he felt when the flowers hunted him down and, after haunting him for six months, took him away.

The stench hurts my nose. A part of me wants to run far, far away from this manor. To never look back. To never think about it again. To forget the nightmares.

But how do I forget Gaan?

I make my way towards the box... the

box that might put an end to my existence in a matter of minutes.

Before I saw Gaan, I heard his voice.

It came floating from the playground, as gentle as a breeze that catches you unawares and relieves you, for just a moment, of the many worries that plague your mind. As if entranced, I walked towards the voice, finding him sitting under a tree, singing to himself.

That was his first day in school.

I stand in front of the box, holding the vial in my left hand. If the old adventurer is to be trusted, this grim adventure will end in just a few seconds, and after that... What will happen to me after that?

Somewhere, beyond the walls, over the ceilings, under the floor, the flowers are waiting to snap.

Taking a deep breath, I move my right hand over the lid. *Bad decision*, my mind says before I feel it.

I feel myself grimacing as pain spreads from my hand to my shoulder. I can feel my hand getting moist from the blueness of the lid, and the stench, moving its way up, up, up, overwhelms me.

*I will probably lose my sense of smell pretty soon*, I remember a voice clip from Gaan.

By the time he sent me that clip, he had forgotten how to sing.

I was the one who nicknamed him *Gaan*: Song.

Little by little, as I sat beside him for hours and hours every day, as he sang softly into my ears, competing with the songbirds that flew over us, I started feeling less like the corpse that years of being bullied had turned me into, and more like the person I

truly wanted to be: someone with dreams, with aspirations.

We all stood awestruck whenever he opened his mouth to sing, wondering how someone so young had mastered the art so beautifully. For this one skill, he was admired by everyone: by every student, every teacher.

And then the flowers came for him.

It takes only a moment for the lid to disappear when I pour the juice from the petals over it. As it turns to smoke and surrounds me from all sides, I cough and cough, engulfed by the blueness of it, blinded by the smoke, finding it impossible to breathe as the remains of the lid enter my nostrils, as they block my nose, my eyes, my ears.

Is this the end? Did it end this way for Gaan as well?

Coughing, I lean closer to the box, squinting through the blue mist, trying to get a glimpse of the one I have struggled for so many years to find.

And I see him.

It began with a single petal.

And then petals constantly kept wafting to his room, carried by the air from an unknown place, accumulating in his room. The stench was unbearable and made it impossible for him to even breathe properly. They somehow found their way into the room even through closed windows. Gaan didn't know how.

Strangely, other people could never see the petals that were making it so difficult for him to function.

Nobody believed him as he slowly lost his ability to sing. His voice, even when

he spoke, became hoarse. He was now ignored and mocked by the very people who had once feted him. He had nothing left to offer.

He begged me, again and again, to believe him. I received texts after texts from him as he described how the petals had taken the shape of flowers that took over his room, filling it with stench, the blueness making him feel like his eyes had been torn out.

Everybody laughed at him. They could not see the monsters that had overtaken his life. When he tried telling his parents what was bothering him, they scoffed at him, thinking it was just a whim of his to escape the bright career in music that awaited him. From everything that would make his – and their – name.

*Stop coming up with stories!*

It went on for months.

And then, one day, he disappeared. They looked for him everywhere but couldn't locate him.

His last text to me: *Blue flowers. I can't.*

Through the blue smoke, I see Gaan lying in the box, his face pale but peaceful. I want him to wake up and sing me a song that would cleanse my mind of the bitterness and tragedies that cloud it.

But I know my wish will never come true.

Struggling to breathe, barely managing to see anything, I put my arms around Gaan and as I finally give in to the blueness, I hear a creak. Squinting, I see a large blue flower crawling towards me – towards us.





# Evolution of a Slob to a Neat Freak

ZIBA MAHDI

There's nothing wrong with being a slob. As long as you can find your stuff in your dumpster of a room, who is your messiness actually hurting? (Your mom doesn't count). Besides, with a pandemic going strong, it's not like you have to worry about someone coming over and witnessing the pigsty you live in.

Research has actually found that there are some advantages to being messy (look it up yourself, I'm not enabling your laziness). However, for the sake of personal development, here's how my somewhat unwilling transformation from slob to neat freak went.

Day 15 of Quarantine: The desk could do with some cleaning. After all, HSC will take place soon. A clean desk might prepare me for the boatloads of studying I'm about to do (ha, ha). Three hours later, the desk actually resembled a desk and I felt like a new person. Sounds hard to believe but I actually found exam scripts from Class 8 in there. Throwing them out was pretty satisfying, I'll admit.

Day 32: My designated clutter space, a.k.a the top of the cupboard, is starting to overflow with random items. I should probably keep the clothes inside the cupboard instead of on top of it. Might free up some space to keep other junk in. So, the designated clutter space turned into an organised clutter space full of neat piles of books, papers and art supplies. All the clothes obscuring the furniture have been unceremoniously stuffed where they belong.

Day 41: There's no point in doing things half-way. Might as well organise the inside of the cupboard. Thanks to Pinterest, I already had a couple of organisation tricks up my sleeve. No more losing my mind trying to find a specific



article of clothing. On closer inspection of the room, the bookshelf would look much nicer, arranged according to colour and size. It still wouldn't be Instagram-worthy, but much better than its current set-up.

Day 65: The messy cables near the TV are starting to look like the electric poles that glamourise the Dhaka skyline. Better tie 'em up. It seems like a good time to experiment with minimalism. Anything that hasn't been used in the last 5 years goes in the trash and anything unused in the

last 5 months will go to the storage room. It would be tough for a hoarder like me, but there is no success without sacrifice.

Day 73: There's a pen on the desk. On. The. Desk. Not in the pen-holder where it's supposed to be. It's ruined my day.

Ziba Mahdi is your resident pessimist. Cheer her up at [www.facebook.com/ziba.mahdi.735](http://www.facebook.com/ziba.mahdi.735)

# Looking for a YA Protagonist

FATIN HAMAMA

*BookKaren was waiting impatiently at her desk when she finally saw Othergirl rushing through the entrance of the YA Literature Agency. She was relieved at the fact that the girl seemed to indeed have brown hair and green eyes, a prerequisite for female candidates for a YA protagonist role.*

BookKaren: Good morning! I'll be interviewing you today for the role of the protagonist in our upcoming young adult book. Please take a seat.

OtherGirl: Thanks! However, just to clarify, I'm NOT like other girls.

BookKaren: Perfect. Now, to start off, we're looking for a high schooler who's an outcast amidst peers and can be singled out as the weird kid. How can you contribute to those criteria?

OtherGirl: In most cases, I like being unnecessarily mean with people, because it makes me look "savage" and strong headed. Also, I strongly believe that no other person my age can relate to the things I do, as in watching art films and listening to niche indie bands. Couple these up with a lousy backstory as an excuse for my behaviour, and boom! I'll be the face of your new bestseller.

BookKaren: Mmhmm, okay. I think you'll make a wonderful one-dimensional Manic Pixie Dream Girl in that case. Mr. John Green would love to collaborate with you!

OtherGirl: That'll be really nice. However, I'm really interested in playing a part in the YA Dystopian genre. Are there any



**Michael**  
@mike\_booklion

YA protagonist:

you like

my hair

gee thanks

I just just chopped it all off myself in a moment of angst

openings right now?

BookKaren: It all comes down to your consent to being part of a supposed love triangle that contributes nothing to the plot, and only prolongs it.

OtherGirl: Of course! I'm in as long as one of the other two is a childhood best friend who's a sensible, sweet person and another is an idiot, which is okay because they're pretty and popular.

BookKaren: Let's see, we'll also need to choose a proper sidekick for you. Would

you be okay with it if we choose someone who only ever acts as a prop to your vapid personality and has no character arc to themselves at all?

OtherGirl: Absolutely. The more their lack of character development shifts the limelight to me, the better. It doesn't really matter if the readers think they should've been the protagonist instead, what with all their unexplored potential.

BookKaren: Great! Now, do you think you can cope with being the *Chosen One*

if we decide to feature you in a YA fantasy fandom? It's not like you'll have to struggle to be on a pedestal. We'll make sure to shape your destiny way before you're even born.

OtherGirl: If all other characters can constantly keep cleaning up after the mess I make every time I make a questionable decision without asking for anyone else's opinion, I totally can.

BookKaren: Now, the most important part. No matter how trivial it might be, it's compulsory that you give us full permission to profit off of romanticising your mental health issues — if you have any.

OtherGirl: Uh...

BookKaren: Look, it's absolutely necessary that we glamourise such serious issues in a way that always gives off the wrong message to our target demographic. What's more, we can even assign you an aesthetic based on that!

OtherGirl: No... I think that'll be crossing a line.

BookKaren: Oh.

OtherGirl: I think it'll be far better if we just—BookKaren: Get out.