REFLECTIONS

Exploring the modern concerns in 'Homer's epic' in light of Nolan's adaptation

ILLUSTRATION: **MAISHA SYEDA**

ZARIN JUNAINAH ANAM

My love for the *Percy Jackson* series transformed reading *The Odyssey* from an academic obligation into an act of curiosity. The internal and physical battles, the poetic descriptions, and the vivid imagery sustained this interest. Composed in the late eighth century BC, Homer's epic follows Odysseus as he struggles to return to Ithaca, a journey that takes 10 years after the Trojan War. Meanwhile, his wife Penelope fends off suitors vying for her hand and the throne, while their son Telemachus searches for news of his missing father. Today, this classical mythos has reentered modern discourse as anticipation grows around Christopher Nolan's forthcoming adaptation of *The Odyssey* (slated for release in 2026), raising questions about whether his reimagining will remain faithful to the heart of the story.

Nolan's style of storytelling is often fragmented, as he explores themes of memory, identity, and the passage of time. This approach resonates with Homer's use of medias res and flashbacks, which bring Odysseus's trials into focus and reestablish his strength as both warrior and strategist. These flashbacks do more than narrate his fall from divine grace; they also evoke the post-traumatic memories of the Trojan War, positioning the epic as a meditation on loss and isolation rather than a straightforward heroic voyage. Similarly, Nolan's films, renowned for their cerebral complexity, often chart the psychological depths of a protagonist across long stretches of time. Yet, as in Homer's epic, intellectual engagement must remain balanced with emotional resonance, which is inseparable from the divine and unseen forces that shape the narrative.

The beauty of *The Odyssey* lies in the dynamic presence of the Greek gods, who intervene in Odysseus's life while still leaving room for human choice and consequence. Athena's guidance and protection contrast sharply with Poseidon's vengeance, which is provoked when Odysseus blinds his son, Polyphemus. The hero's arrogance in taunting the Cyclops heightens this tension between predestination and free will. A film adaptation that leans too heavily toward mythic determinism or human agency risks collapsing the ambivalence that lies at the core of the story.

This concern extends to Nolan's cinematic techniques. His long runtimes and large-scale format seem well suited to capturing the grandeur of an epic, yet his preference for realism and minimal CGI may undercut the mythical creatures and fantastical landscapes that define *The Odyssey*. The poem is not only philosophical and intellectual but also a tapestry of imagination, and downplaying its chimerical elements would diminish the folkloric traditions that enrich its narrative.

Beyond imagery, *The Odyssey* also foregrounds cultural codes such as xenia, or guest-friendship, which functions as a moral test. The Phaeacians' generosity secures their role in Odysseus's safe return, while Polyphemus's cannibalism brands him as uncivilised. Yet, Odysseus's invocation of Zeus to demand hospitality from the Cyclops reflects a colonial mindset, as he projects his own cultural norms as universal truths. A literal translation of this episode risks portraying him less as a clever strategist and more as an ethnocentric figure blinded by hubris.

Equally significant is the portrayal of women in the epic. While figures such as Athena, Calypso, and Circe wield considerable power, mortal women remain confined to the margins of the narrative. Penelope, though praised for her intelligence, is celebrated primarily for her chastity and her role as the faithful wife to be reclaimed by Odysseus. Even her weaving trick to delay the suitors functions as evasion rather than authority, and her true moment of intelligence occurs only within the domestic sphere, when she tests Odysseus's identity. Strikingly, she is entirely absent from the climactic battle, comically asleep while violence unfolds around her. Nolan's history of underdeveloped female characters raises the question of whether he will reinforce this masculine focus, reducing women to passive figures or objects of voyeuristic pleasure.

Ultimately, *The Odyssey* is not solely the story of Odysseus. Its epic quality emerges from the breadth of its poetry, shaped by an omniscient narrator and multiple perspectives. While Homer's structural devices align closely with Nolan's stylistic techniques, the filmmaker's treatment of the epic's philosophical, religious, and mythical dimensions will determine whether his adaptation succeeds in honoring the spirit of the poem or reduces it to a spectacle stripped of its depth.

Zarin Junainah Anam *is an English Literature major and a day-dreamer. She also writes at Cha-time with Junta on Substack because life's always better with a little drama, a little bit of sarcasm, and far too many cups of tea.*

WHAT WE'RE READING THIS WEEK

MAISHA SYEDA

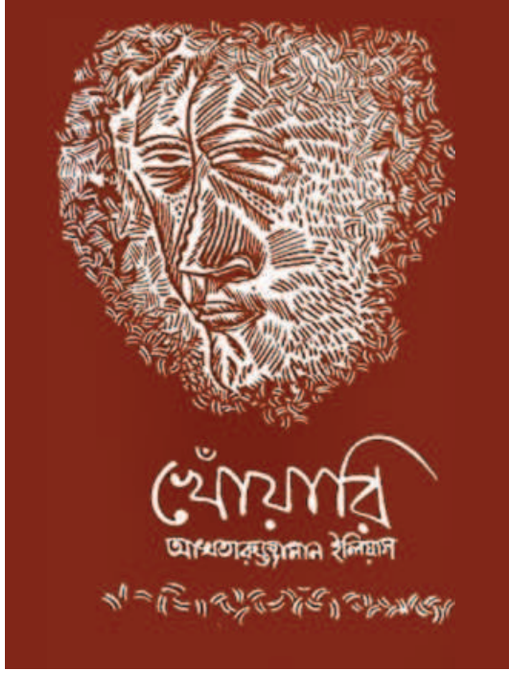
***Khoari* (first published in 1982) Akhteruzzaman Elias**

Akhteruzzaman Elias needs no introduction. *Khoari* is an anthology of four short stories by the prolific writer of novels like *Chilekothar Shepai* (1987) and *Khwabnama* (1996). In this collection, the writer explores not only universally resonant and time transcendent themes like sexuality, old age, lust, and death but also postcolonial ones like race, occupation, displacement, and sense of belonging. The titular story "Khoari" revolves on a house of a local Hindu family in old Dhaka, which was looted and grabbed by the Biharis in the war of 1971. The occupants then disappear after the Pakistan army's defeat, but soon after, a new conflict emerges: the liberation forces who had led the war to turn their attention to the same house, attempting to seize it from the family under the pretext of supervising the area "properly."

In the typical style of Elias, he uses colloquial language and hones in on intricate cultural connotations in the collection to bring forth the horrors of human life, especially in the context of occupation and war, with little to no resolution to these conflicts.

At a time when genocide is unfolding across Palestine and Gaza remains under occupation, the world watches—some helplessly, and others, complicit in benefiting from the atrocity. In this moment, *Khoari* feels especially resonant, reminding us of the urgency to take a bold and unambiguous stand against the oppressors.

Maisha Syeda *is a writer, artist, lecturer at North South University, and sub-editor at Star Books and Literature.*



BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Is this the end of growth as we have known it?

Review of 'Growth: A Reckoning' (Penguin Books, 2024) by Daniel Susskind

THEODORE GRIFFIN

The world only began to experience notable economic growth in the late 19th century. Even then, it was the reserve of heavily industrialised nations. Thanks to the mercantilist policies of Europe's empires, this meant that territories like the Bengal weren't merely prevented from industrialising, but deindustrialised.

Meanwhile, sooty corners of northern Europe and America steamed ahead, eventually spewing their expansionist economic systems onto the rest of the world. Yet measurements of gross domestic product wouldn't appear until almost a century later. The boom-and-bust years of the 1870s-90s came and went with nobody any wiser as to their causes. Whether our economies were growing or shrinking, we simply had no clue. Having a means to calculate GDP had therefore become desirable.

Even as late as the Great Depression in 1929, world governments still lacked any means to measure GDP. American President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was largely a statistical groping in the dark. In fact, the American economy wouldn't fully recover until 1942, when investment and production soared to meet wartime demands.

It was during the Second World War that precise methods to measure GDP were established. At this time, John Maynard Keynes in his book *How to Pay for the War: A Radical Plan for the Chancellor of the Exchequer* (Macmillan and Co., 1940) began to define the way we would do so for years to come.

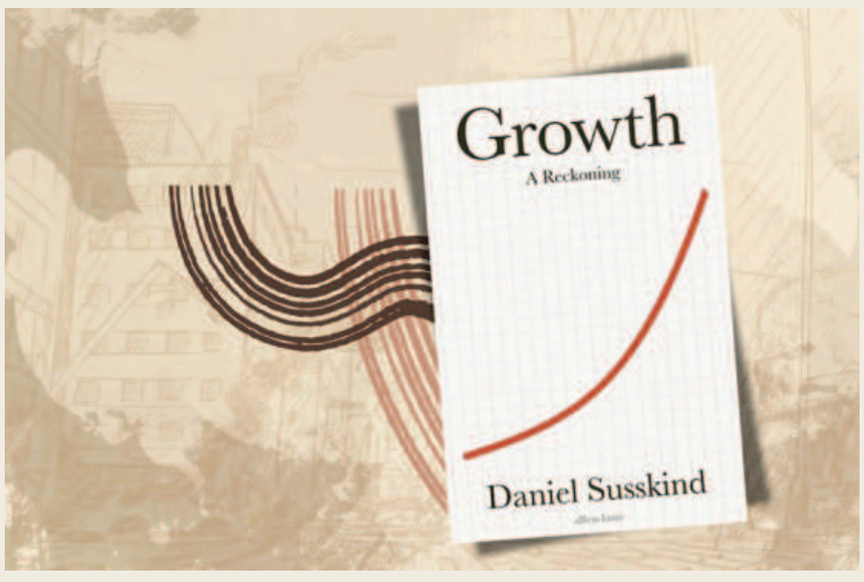


ILLUSTRATION: **MAHMUDA EMDAD**

The Cold War, too, was as much a race of production as it was a scramble to out-spy and out-contain hostile ideologies. Nikita Khrushchev declared in 1956 that it was the USSR's imperative to eclipse the world's capitalist nations in per capita output. The Marshall Plan, which lifted America's allies from their post-war squalor, stipulated that recipients must calculate and report their GDPs. This placed growth centre stage.

The immense growth that followed postwar reconstruction in Europe coupled with the Keynesian statism shaped in their wartime economies. This led to the creation of expansive welfare, healthcare, and education systems.

But now that it is faced with the longest period of stagnation since the beginning of the postwar period, the rich world is scrambling for answers that may keep its expensive social models alive.

King's College London's Daniel Susskind duly enters the debate with *Growth: A Reckoning*. In it, he reminds us that growth has been associated in every country with higher living standards and longevity. benefitted least from growth are also the most vulnerable. This truth overshadows any celebration of the reduction in world poverty that we have achieved over the past few decades.

In 1950, two thirds of the world lived in extreme poverty. Now only one tenth does.

Yet economic growth is also bringing upon us an ecological disaster of Biblical proportions. The imposition on certain developing countries of free market policies has encouraged cash cropping and, at times, stagnation. Highly globalised economies have also seen disruption to their traditional communities. As economist Joseph Stiglitz said, "in the quest to increase GDP we may end up in a society where citizens are worse off."

One toted solution is that of 'degrowth': deliberately shrinking the economy. But Susskind states that this would involve plunging the vast majority of the world's population into poverty. Current provisions of healthcare and education, already deemed globally inadequate, would necessarily shrink. For Susskind, this amounts to throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

After all, those who support degrowth believe that there will be an eventual recession anyway, due to the excesses of current growth. It's dissonant to then claim that we need to instate it now, Susskind argues. The difference, a 'degrowther' might respond, is that their scenario tries to steer us away from systemic ecological collapse. The alternative doesn't.

It's the enormity of the climate crisis that *Growth* frustratingly fails to address. In its very short history, vast economic growth has already set us on a path of utter self destruction. The nations who have

For Susskind, though, there's no reason to believe that future economic growth needs to be associated with greater emissions. Many countries have managed to grow their economies while reducing emissions, including the United States and many European states. But that is not to say that their economies have become remotely sustainable.

By extension, why should we believe that the 'decoupling' of emissions and growth can surpass the point at which we are able to avoid climate catastrophe? Susskind admits to there being a trade-off. Tackling the USD 1 trillion the world spends on subsidising fossil fuels could be a start.

Growth is a comprehensive guide that initiates the reader into the silently existential issue of our age. Making sense of the dilemmas levied in the book will be key to our survival.

Susskind writes in an approachable way. He guides uninitiated readers through important contemporary ethical problems related to growth, its history, and potential future. This should be considered required reading for all those struggling to understand where the climate crisis, social problems, and world's economy intersect.

Theodore Griffin, *a student of philosophy, languages, and politics, splits his time between France and Scotland.*