

Too serious to be ridiculous

RE READINGS

A monthly column on backlisted books that have much to offer in contemporary times

Naomi Klein's 2023 book is an excellent primer to understand the psychology and politics that fuels conspiracy theorists

Somak Ghoshal
somak.ghoshal@partner.livemint.com

If you want a one-liner to put on a T-shirt that sums up the spirit of the times we are living in, I bet you can't find a better one than this droll sentence from the late Philip Roth's 1993 novel, *Operation Shylock*: "It's too ridiculous to take seriously and too serious to be ridiculous."

I stumbled upon it in writer and activist Naomi Klein's 2023 book, *Doppelganger: A Trip into the Mirror World*, where this quote runs like a refrain, much like an anthem you may hum under your breath every time you are scrolling through the internet, especially if you are looking for news or information that is reliably true. The "mirror world" that Klein refers to in the subtitle is, in part, a reference to the world wide web, a domain where it is becoming harder each day to tell fact from fiction. Thanks to the flagrant manipulation of tech and AI, it is easier than ever to peddle any number of lies—from cures for chronic diseases to conspiracy theories that can pull entire democracies down.

In all this mayhem, the worst nightmare perhaps is the dread of identity theft—a central theme of Klein's book. The difference in her case is there is no actual stealing involved. Rather, it starts as seemingly trivial confusion—people on the internet mixing up Klein with her namesake, Naomi Wolf, best known, once upon a time, as a liberal feminist and author of



Jacob Anthony Angeli Chansley, known as the QAnon Shaman, at the Capital riots in 2021. GETTY IMAGES

The Beauty Myth, her critically acclaimed first book published in 1990, which triggered new conversations around patriarchy's manipulation of women's bodies and psyches. But that was in another lifetime.

Although Wolf was never known for the soundness of her research, as Klein shows through close reading of passages from her books (including her much-lauded debut), her career underwent a watershed moment in 2019. On a BBC programme, while promoting *Outrages: Sex, Censorship and the Criminalisation of Love*, the book she'd published that year, Wolf was called out by the host Matthew Sweet for making an egregious mistake in her thesis—a misreading of the term "death recorded" that amounted to her mixing up child abuse with persecution of gay people in Victorian England. (The recording of the programme, for those who have the stomach for cringe, is available online.) Needless to say, the controversy blew

up spectacularly, leading to Wolf's publishers deciding to stall the appearance of the book in the US as the online community had a field day. There was no way Wolf would have recovered from this shocking unspooling of her career and credibility unless she had sought help from the dark side. And that's precisely what she did by jumping on to the right-wing bandwagon, most notably on the one driven by Steve Bannon, US President Donald Trump's chief strategist (during his first term), who was sacked less than a year into his job.

Elevated to the high table of the far right QAnon movement, Wolf wasted no time in spinning conspiracy theories galore, especially about the efficacy of the covid-19 vaccines, which, as a self-proclaimed anti-vaxxer, she opposed vociferously. And so, as her star began to rise in the ecosystem of the ultra-right, Klein's life, ironically, took a turn south. Overnight, it was

no longer possible to shrug off the silliness of people conflating two Jewish women writers with the same first name and similar hair colour.

Instead, Klein's focus became salvaging and protecting her reputation as a writer from the political left, an image built through the decades of careful research, reportage and activism, cemented by world-changing books like *No Logo* (1999) and *The Shock Doctrine* (2007). It became essential to reclaim her identity as a committed environmentalist from the hands of climate-change deniers. In time, her efforts expanded to rescuing political discourse from unscrupulous "buffoons" parroting their opposition to Big Pharma and sounding uncannily like a double of the left.

By jumping into this rabbit hole of the right, Klein unpacks the single-point agenda pursued by anti-vaxxers and their ilk, driven by self-interest and exclusionary politics, their intentions poles apart from the left's wider agenda to bring about social justice for the masses. (It's another matter that the left failed to uphold its mission, and Klein is critical of her own tribe, too.)

For anti-vaxxers though, as Klein explains, the problem of common people being vulnerable to covid-19 wasn't one that concerned them. Many wellness gurus, who also live on the extreme right of the mirror world, sent out an overarching public message during the pandemic, Klein writes, "that individuals must take charge of over their bodies as their primary sites of influence, control and competitive edge... those who don't exercise that control deserve what they get."

This position is not substantially different from "a neoliberalism of the body, in distilled form," a problem of the so-called liberals, too. Case in point: air pollution. Liberals are perfectly satisfied with raising a storm on social media, but as long as there are air purifiers to protect them, they are unlikely to take to the streets and

demand better quality of life from the government for people who are economically weaker than them.

For me, the highlight of *Doppelganger* was being introduced to the concept of "diagonalism"—a term coined by political scholars William Callison and Quinn Slobodian. It describes the T a behavioural pattern widely familiar to us, be it the classic trope of the kebab-loving uncle, who, one fine day, began to bombard the family WhatsApp group with hate-laced forwards, or the lapsed journalist, who now spends her days in the studio extolling the cosmic power of faith while the poor are dying in stampedes.

It's worth quoting from Callison and Slobodian at length: "Both in part from transformations in technology and communication, diagonalists tend to contest conventional monikers of the left and right (while generally arcing towards far-right beliefs) to express (their) ambivalence if not cynicism towards parliamentary politics."

In this extreme avatar, diagonalists believe all power is conspiracy and conspiracy theories, as is well known, do not need the heft of reason and logic

to take flight. Case in point, once again, the anti-vaxxer's warped worldview. As Klein puts it: "Covid is a mild cold—chill out! Covid is a bioweapon (unleashed by China in collusion with Big Pharma)—freak out!"

Read *Doppelganger* not only for a guided tour into the topsy-turvy workings of the mirror world, but also to look into the mirror yourself, and recognise the demonic potential of social media to spawn monsters, among liberals as well as conservatives, who are deluded by the opiate of the masses: a sense of relevance given to them by likes, clicks and shares. Klein has a neat little equation to sum it up all: "Narcissism (Grandiosity) + Social Media Addiction + Midlife Crisis + Public Shaming = Right-wing Meltdown."

Now here's another T-shirt slogan, handy to gift a diagonalist close to you.



Medium Talk

More than small talk



Two images from Gauri Gill's show, 'The Village on the Highway.'



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY VADEHRA ART GALLERY

The highway in the gallery

Photographer Gauri Gill's ongoing exhibition in New Delhi brings the outside world into the white cube

Somak Ghoshal
somak.ghoshal@partner.livemint.com

In 2020, the Union government introduced three farm laws which were perceived by millions of farmers around the country as being biased towards big business and detrimental to their own interests. Soon, protests began to be staged all around, even during the pandemic, with a special intensity in the National Capital Region, where farmers from Punjab held a sit-down until the laws were repealed in 2021.

Photographer Gauri Gill spent all of 2021 documenting this showdown by the Punjab farmers on the highways leading into Delhi. Unheeding of the elements, changing seasons, outbreak of disease and, of course, the iron hand of the state bent on suppressing dissent, hundreds of men, women and children of all ages pitched camp outdoors for over a year.

This unique language of rebellion, charged with an unwavering spirit of community feeling, set a benchmark for civil opposition in modern India. Using

tractors, tarpaulin sheets, and makeshift bits and bobs, the farmers built what architect Prasad Shetty describes as a "full-fledged proto-settlement" in an essay accompanying Gill's exhibition, *The Village on the Highway*, currently on display at Vadehra Art Gallery in Delhi.

Taken with a large analogue camera, these photographs capture the material reality of the protests, with green and yellow sheets of plastic forming provisional shelters, homes built out of stationary trucks, with pieces of tin, wood, thatch and other fragments coming together to literally create "a village on the highway," as the title puts it. Except for the profile of a man lying, turned away from the camera, there are no human presences in the photographs, ostensibly to protect the identities of the protestors, which creates the aura of a ghost town. This clever compositional tactic also becomes an elegy to the fragility of public memory—the inevitable amnesia and erasure into which even successful models of resistance, staged for the greater common good, are swallowed up with time.

Gill's photographs, haunted by the absent farmers who put themselves in line for collective justice, assume a special resonance inside the white cube of the gallery. By bringing mementos from the protest site—bamboo partitions, plastic sheets, plywood boards—she disturbs the pristine space. The gallery is, by its very nature, an elite construct, meant to dis-

play and protect art, treating them as rarefied objects of admiration and value. To bring the ragged edges of the external world, the refuse and jilted squalour of life into this space, is to subvert and rewrite the rules by which art is accessed and experienced.

While it's impossible to recreate the urgency and livewire energy of the protests inside the sanitised interiors of a south Delhi gallery, Gill pushes the viewer to not only look at the photographs on the wall, but also to pay attention to the paraphernalia all around. She memorialises the relics that had played a critical role in the battle for rights as the humans who fought the good fight.

A year is a long time to be away from home, to be uprooted from the land that has been nurturing generations, and pitch tent on the metalled roads leading into an indifferent metropolis. And yet, as the photographs show—with clothes hanging on lines, makeshift air coolers and standing fans, scattered pot and pans, and even a patch of vegetable garden sprouting around the settlement—it isn't impossible to build a home away from home, among comrades united by a common cause. Gill's photos remain memorable for their ability to capture this frisson of solidarity, carrying it into lives that are far removed from those of these crusaders for justice.

On view at Vadehra Art Gallery till 4 March.

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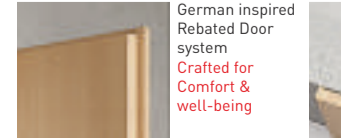
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