

ICON

# WHAT CAME BEFORE

After the Turner Prize nod, NAEEM MOHAIEMEN is all the global Contemporary art world can talk about. He tells JYOTI DHAR how Satyajit Ray novels and old magazines shaped his oeuvre



Vassilis Koukalani and  
Naeem Mohaiemen  
during the shooting of  
*Tripoli Cancelled* (2016)

DIMITRIS PARTHIMOS SHUTTERSTOCK.COM





*Detail from the video,  
Rankin Street,  
1953 (2013)*



“Do you notice anything strange about this photograph?” asks the ever inquisitive and quick-witted artist Naeem Mohaiemen. A small group of us have gathered at a philosopher’s home on our way back from a curatorial conference in Kolkata. Mohaiemen—whose practice often incorporates films, photographs, and installations—has ushered us into a room to analyse a black-and-white image of what we presume to be a family portrait of a mother and son; the woman is seated and the man is standing next to her. As we peer closely, looking for evidence of the uncanny, it becomes apparent that this is an example of ‘death photography’. The lady in the portrait has passed away; her corpse has been dressed and propped up, only to be recorded one last time. This momentary gesture of foregrounding and questioning the historical record, listening to the silence of an archive while asking what stories have been left untold, and appreciating the slippage between fact and fiction that both photography and film allow for, gives us a glimpse into some of Mohaiemen’s interminable preoccupations.

Though Mohaiemen and I reconnect some years after this evening—as he is in the middle of installing for the Turner Prize 2018 at the Tate Britain in London, for which he has been nominated—the conversation somehow circles back in time to Kolkata. The New York and Dhaka-based practitioner has a knack for conjuring up different excerpts from history, unpacking and layering them with detail and >





*Tripoli Cancelled* is based on the experiences of Mohaiemen's father when he was trapped without a passport in Athens' Ellinikon airport for nine days in 1977

insight, while narrating them sensitively—a feature which finds its way into much of his artwork. He tells us how his grandfather, Emdad Ali, was the first person to leverage education to leave his village in Patuakhali (now in southern Bangladesh) to finish studies in Kolkata. Ali joined the Imperial Civil Service, and later, after Partition in 1947, became Deputy Magistrate in East Pakistan. This re-telling reminds us of Mohaiemen's penchant for looking at major geopolitical events through the human lens. In this case he recalls how this trajectory affected his own childhood: "The experience of English language education as a path to upward mobility became really formative to my family, and also why I grew up surrounded by English books."

### HIT REWIND

Mohaiemen was largely raised on a diet of Satyajit Ray stories such as the Professor Shonku series of fantastical experiments and alien worlds. He explains that his family, which was incarcerated in Pakistan after the war, and finally repatriated to Bangladesh in 1973, then worked in Libya until 1979. Here, Mohaiemen would repeatedly read the few Ray mystery novels he had with him, starring Detective Feluda, and reconstruct scenes from them using Playmobil

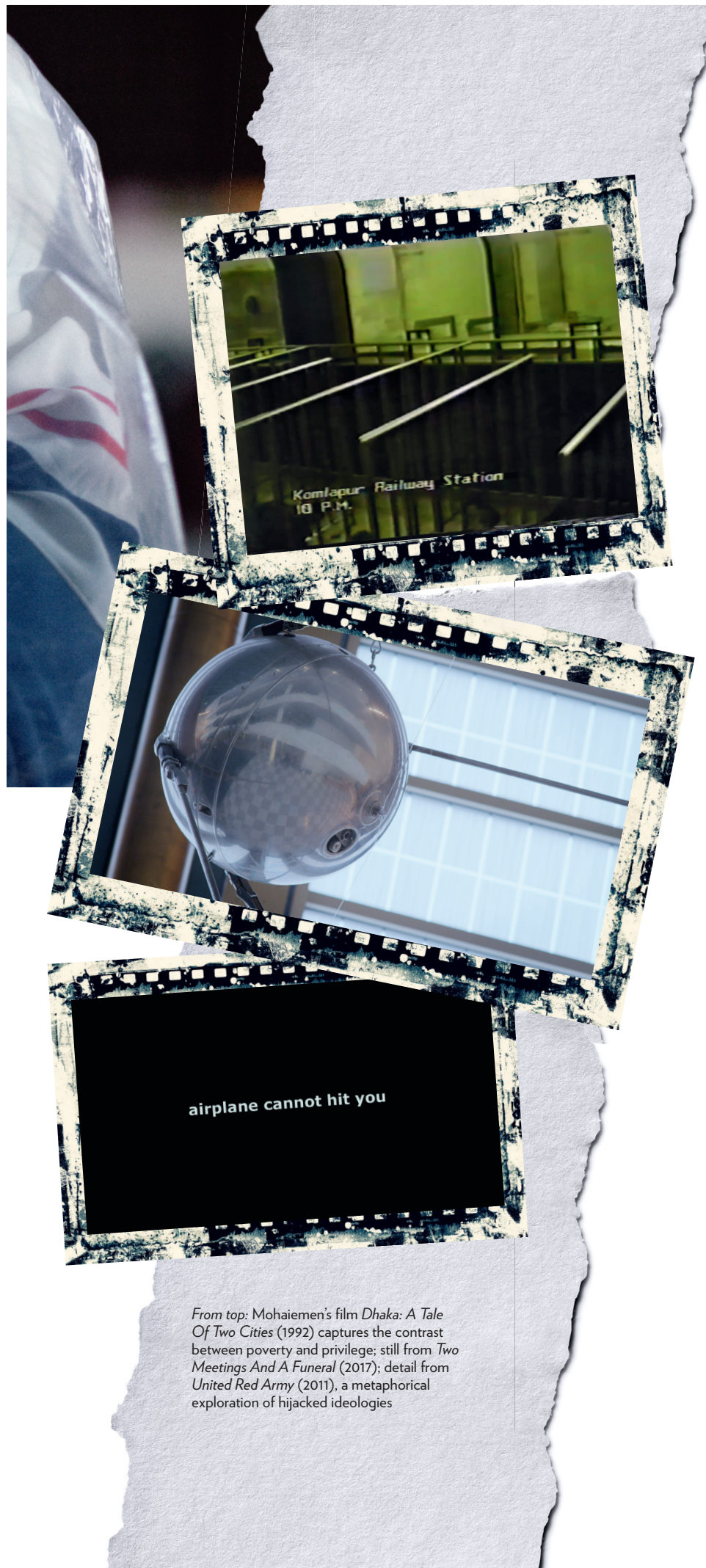
“THE  
EXPERIENCE  
OF ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE  
EDUCATION  
AS A PATH  
TO UPWARD  
MOBILITY  
BECAME  
REALLY  
FORMATIVE  
TO MY  
FAMILY, AND  
ALSO WHY  
I GREW UP  
SURROUNDED  
BY ENGLISH  
BOOKS”

figures. Some of these childhood memories crop up as clues in his later works (for example, the Martian language from Professor Shonku appears in the newspaper project *Dainik Kalponik* (2014)), but also point to his imaginative storytelling, at times inclusive of absurd elements, pop-culture and fictional touches. Similarly, he traces his love of photography to his youth, from reading *Popular Photography* and *American Photographer* magazines, to his father's initial obsession with the medium before becoming a doctor and joining the army. His father's camera reels, found when their Dhaka home was being vacated, are also referenced in his film, *Rankin Street, 1953* (2013).

In the film, Mohaiemen narrates that this was his father's first and only box of negatives; everything from 1954-1971 was lost during the war. When asked if the artist's focus on moments from the past intersects with an exploration or grounding of himself, he says that his work is a way of "rooting oneself again" after being part of a family which experienced "restless dislocation from location and class position". Even through the 1990s, which brought the collapse of the military regime and neo-liberalisation to Bangladesh, Mohaiemen shares that his family's "sense of self was continually shattered"—a phenomenon experienced by much of the

SHUTTERSTOCK.COM





From top: Mohaiemen's film *Dhaka: A Tale Of Two Cities* (1992) captures the contrast between poverty and privilege; still from *Two Meetings And A Funeral* (2017); detail from *United Red Army* (2011), a metaphorical exploration of hijacked ideologies

country's middle class. Some of these ideas surface in *Dhaka: A Tale of Two Cities* (1990), his first film. It contrasts people sleeping in Komlapur train station with the more privileged relaxing in plush gardens in Gulshan, images from Katabon slum with those from a banquet hall. There seems to be no space for the middle ground in this wordless witnessing of class discrepancies in Dhaka.

## FUTURE PRESENT

Mohaiemen shares that it was actually Ejaz Ahmed Khan Mojlish who mentored him during the making of this early video work, and also gave him his first job at *Video Guide* magazine. He feels that such references to the "early pioneers" in Dhaka, who guided many cultural practitioners and activists before the 2000s, are often overlooked. Even within Mohaiemen's own archive, there seems to be sparse reference to several of the initiatives he was part of in the 1990s in New York, including the South Asian Magazine for Action & Reflection and the Third Eye Film collective. Mohaiemen says that this is because many of these projects were informal, transient, and left little trace. It was only after he co-founded The Visible Collective and exhibited at the Queens Museum in 2002 that he began to work in a more sustainable way. As Mohaiemen began to move from more documentary-style forms and festivals, into the visual arts and museum space, he also felt less burdened by the idea of being representational of the histories he was researching. Rather, the absences, flaws, and contradictions within these movements and documents became unexpectedly liberating.

*United Red Army* (2011) is a great example of this, as a film about an actual hijacking in 1977, which like many of his works, becomes a metaphor for the hijacked ideologies of and pivotal moments within post-colonial trajectories of socialism, secularism and solidarity. "I try to look at the bravery, retreat, optimism, surrender, isolation, and refuge within these moments," he tells us. His latest films, *Two Meetings And A Funeral* (2017), and *Tripoli Cancelled* (2017), take the memories and myths of the Non-Alignment Movement, and his father being stranded in an airport, as respective starting points. The former has become a hot art-world topic of late, though Mohaiemen has admittedly always been more interested in the discourse and critique than the hype. Now he says he wants to slow down, and take time with arguments and ambiguity, though in the same breath he is quick to admit, "I've never managed to cover more than a fraction of what I wanted to." ■