An intriguing audio clip where one set of listeners swears it can hear ‘Yanni’ and another swears it’s ‘Laurel’ has become the Internet’s most contentious topic since the famous gold-or-blue dress war that erupted in 2015. The New York Times has chipped in with an online tool to show how shifting the audio to higher or lower frequencies can change what you hear. For the record, I hear ‘Yanni’ and it doesn’t change even when I move the slider to the extreme, ‘Laurelest’ left. Scientists and audiologists have explained the phenomenon as an auditory illusion comparable to visual illusions such as Rubin’s vase, where people see either a vase or two faces in profile.

Ignoring nuances

While these illusions are fascinating in themselves, what is striking is the ambiguity they represent. As each individual insists she hears ‘Laurel’ or ‘Yanni’ and nothing else, the audio clip becomes a flawless demonstration of how life actually plays out on a wide spectrum of realities; each ‘reality’ appearing absolute from the particular perspective we choose to embrace.

That such demonstrations of ambiguity should be repeatedly spawned by the Internet is beautiful irony when you consider how the online space single-handedly works to convert all opinion into strict binaries. A quick scroll down a Twitter or WhatsApp timeline is ample proof not just of how much opinion there is floating around out there, but also how much of it is certain opinion. Whether it’s poll alliances in Karnataka, women in combat roles, or the Rohingya refugees crisis, each comment is insistent, admitting no differing opinions, not even shades of meaning or the various interpretations possible of an action or its demonstration to look for shades of meaning or the various interpretations possible of an action or its demonstration to look for shades of meaning or the various interpretations possible of an action or its demonstrations to look for shades of meaning or the various interpretations possible of an action or its demonstration. The Internet is beautiful irony when you consider how the online space single-handedly works to convert all opinion into strict binaries.

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Whether it’s poll alliances in Karnataka, women in combat roles, or the Rohingya refugees crisis, each comment is insistent, admitting no differing opinions, not even shades of meaning or the various interpretations possible of an action or its demonstration. Rapidly, conversations become arguments and arguments become mud-wrestling.

Rubin’s vase or ‘Laurel’ represent what is known as a multistable perception phenomenon. It occurs when an image or sound is so equivocal that human sight or hearing is unable to come up with just one possibility of a common ground recedes further.

When all opinion is converted into strict binaries, the possibility of a common ground recedes further. And it’s impossible not to recall Yeats: “The best lack all conviction/ While the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”

VAISHNA ROY

The outragers

One of the fallouts of the age of certainty has been the phenomenon of ‘moral outrage’. In an interesting essay written for the website, ‘The Conversation’, psychologists Zachary K. Rothschild and Lucas A. Keefer try to understand the motives behind moral outrage, which has taken on near epidemic proportions given how rapidly the Internet allows indignation to be broadcast.

Of course, the desire to serve justice is an obvious motive, but the definition of what is ‘just’ differs as dramatically as ‘Yanni’ and ‘Laurel’. Often, it’s merely symbolic — for instance, Americans outraged to rename French Fries to Freedom Fries to protest France’s stance on the Iraq war. So, what are outragers really doing? Beyond sheriff duty, they are sending out signals to the community about their social and political stances; broadcasting ‘virtues’ to reinforce their public standing; or simply reaffirming their moral righteousness to themselves. And here, the researchers found that people with some hidden guilt were often louder in expressing outrage.

But Is Junot Diaz, raped at age eight, a victim? Or a culprit whose damaged adult behaviour harmed many women? Or is the truth much harder — that he is a bit of both? Why have mere WhatsApp forwards been conclusive enough for mobs to lynch men?

As we forward and repost, and as TV anchors proclaim the ‘truth’ every evening at nine, there is less and less time and inclination to look for shades of meaning or the various interpretations possible of an action or phenomenon. People situate themselves on either side of these Yanni/Laurel divides and the possibility of a common ground recedes further. And it’s impossible not to recall Yeats: “The best lack all conviction/ While the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”

vaishna.r@thehindu.co.in