

MUSINGS

# Arundhati Roy and Our Reality

YASIF AHMAD FAYSAL

Some days ago, a friend of mine who stays abroad, sent me a gift. Since he is very special to me, I was extra-eager to open the box and find out what it was.

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness.* My friend thought that the best way to make me happy was to send me this book written by Arundhati Roy, an Indian writer who by now has become an international phenomenon. My reaction was a mixed one- happy but not too thrilled since I already had one copy myself; and I have seen people 'overdoing it' literally, expressing wild excitement over a book they haven't really read. It only shows how the writer herself in the age of social media, is an epoch-making profile with millions of followers across the world, and the fandom seems to cover every possible range of readers: professors, paramedics, housewives, cultural activists, to name a few. I saw even a class-seven boy posting a Facebook status with an image of *The Ministry*. A big name among the writers today since the publication of *God of Small Things*, Roy stands out among the contemporary Continental writers as one who passionately advocates the rights of the common people. She is a fearless critic of things that happen in the name of democracy. Often prone to controversy; her writings on Kashmir, the 9/11 attack on the Twin Tower, the discursive politics behind the so-called development agendas have made her a household name throughout the world.

Personally, I do not seek justification of what she says in her prose-works or fiction, nor do I have the scholarly caliber to do so; but she gives a highly perspective, critical if you like, to decode and demystify the socio-



political realities of South-Asia and Africa. Her writing is full of pointers even for a layperson to connect the missing dots and close gaps within his/her geopolitical consciousness.

In my case, I still remember my first visit to Dhaka from one small south-western town of the country; I was excited of course. I was sitting sandwiched between my parents in a bus at Aricha ghat, sweating like a dog in the stewing heat of summer. We were waiting for a ferry; it took us twelve hours to reach Dhaka that day. Two years ago, I rode a BRTC bus from Barisal and waited for hours at Mawa ghat just to board the ferry. The river is big; she challenges anyone who dares to cross her.

The challenge will be no more once our much-cherished Padma Bridge is constructed.

Weeks ago, I was travelling to Shimulia Ghat en route to Dhaka. At Bhanga of Faridpur, I paused only to be surprised-Bhanga is now a hub for a

massive construction- work of an enormous intersection leading to the construction-site of the Padma Bridge. Trucks, dredgers, bulldozers are working there all day long, pulling and bending massive iron bars like some juggernauts. The atmosphere is incredible: people are hopeful, one can sense that money is flowing about in plenty here; Bhanga, once a drab and dusty place is now magically transformed, and apparently, this is what our future looks like (?)

As I reached Shimulia, I felt thirsty; I hurried down the bus and looked desperately for two-wheeler carts selling green coconuts. There were many of them.

"I have lived here my whole life and I owned lands; now I live in the colony set up by the organizers of the bridge," said Mainuddin, a sixty year old man who handed me the biggest coconut of his cart. I was busy swallowing the delicious juice, but I knew there was one sentence missing from his account of himself- "I am a complete destitute now."

The construction of the bridge has proved to be a 'gold rush' for many. Lands at the construction-site are being seized aggressively by wealthy people with the long political arm; properties are fenced with barbed wire, with august signs bearing names of owners; ordinary people these owners.

People like Mainuddin who was born here and owned properties are evicted out on the street; they are strangers in their own land; you can see them vending food to passengers, working at bridge-construction sites on a daily basis. They are a floating people at the very site where the country claims

to be making millennial progress.

Any compensation for such Mainuddins, you ask? A slip of land with a tin-shed structure. That's all. It is amazing to think how so many people, in the name of progress are made homeless, stripped off lands and dumped in the trash-can of history! No statistical reference, no official record at all! Meanwhile, the landscapes of the ghat areas are changing: iron and concrete structures are filling up spaces that used to be the dwelling-places of people who lived, and then died by the riverside.

Arundhati Roy, here, of all people, would understand this situation best. Every time I crossed the site, I was reminded of her. She is one of the few original thinkers who were vocal against the idea of Narmada river valley, being used for billion-dollar building projects sponsored by foreign donors. She knew that people need water; but dams will drown more people than save. This truth was completely lost on a corrupt caste of politicians and bureaucrats.

For me, there is a parallel- Our kaptai dam was constructed in 1962 at the command of Ayub Khan; there was a huge outcry from the indigenous people protesting against the building. There was serious environmental and demographic fall out. But the dictator would not listen. He had the corporate backing from the west.

For many people negotiating ideological concepts like democracy, progress and religion from locations in the third world, Roy is an important reference point. She speaks for people who are unable to speak for themselves or afraid of doing so. There is integrity in her words when she says that

nationalism and development are "unimpeachable twin towers of modern free market democracy."

As Roy says, "democracy is demon-crazy." Bad things happen when it goes "demon-crazy"-plundering of national resources, farming of global terrorism, fueling of sectarian religious sentiments, concealing unequal social systems. In the name of humanitarian concerns, the demon destroys everything. That is why I find Roy's writing- fiction and non-fiction, very illuminating on some strategic failures in our context. We need a Roy to speak up against the persecution of our religious minorities; we need a Roy to defend the linguistic autonomy of the people of the hill tracts; we certainly need a Roy rising tall to stop crazy people inflicting ecocide on Sunderbans, our last environmental lifeline.

People who are happy to make a show of reading her books do not understand her. Roy wants her book to be acted on as she takes her stand against the vicious complex of corporatism, political tyranny and doctrinal orthodoxy. She has stories to tell, and if we don't have time to listen to them, we risk misjudging her.

From the marketing point of view, Roy's latest fiction is a global success. One may wonder what Roy, a great critic of modern free market economy, might say about the overwhelming popularity she enjoys worldwide. Honest as ever, Roy tells us what she thinks- celebrity-hood makes "a heck of a noise like a tin can attached to a cat's tail."

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Star

REVIEWS

## The Bones of Grace: Rewriting History

REVIEWED BY NATASHA AFRIN

Tahmima Anam. ISBN 978-1-84767-977-2. London: Canongate, 2016

Tahmima Anam attracted an international readership when her debut novel *A Golden Age* (2007) won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book in 2008. After this splendid arrival Anam added two more novels to her credit: *The Good Muslim* (2011), which was shortlisted for the 2013 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature, and her latest *The Bones of Grace* (2016), the final fiction of her loosely-knit Bengal trilogy.

*The Bones of Grace* revolves around the story of Zubaida Haque (a third generation member of Haque family and adopted daughter of Maya Haque, the protagonist of *The Good Muslim*) who unhesitatingly reveals to her audience the fact of her adoption at the very onset of the novel. The revelation, undoubtedly, is intertwined with the question of belonging and identity, which constitutes one of the core thematic concerns of the novel.

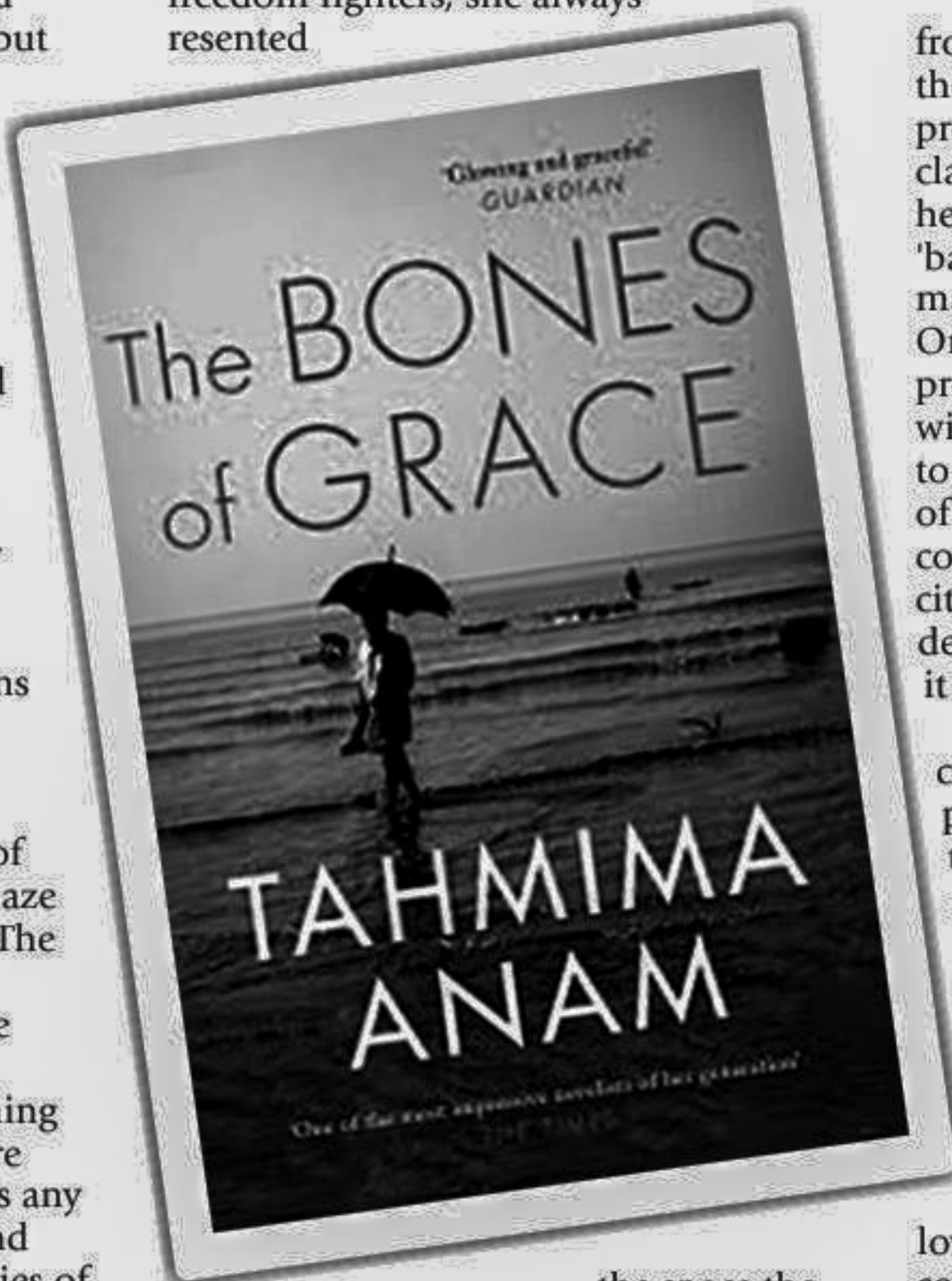
Zubaida is a marine palaeontologist, studying at Harvard, and is about to leave Cambridge for the archaeological dig in Pakistan where she wishes to retrieve the fossils of *Ambulocetus natans* – a rare type of walking whale which is attracted to the "lure of the seas and the comforts of land" (20) – from the sediments of the ancient Tethys sea. On the eve of her departure, she meets Elijah Strong – a Harvard graduate who has recently dropped out of a doctoral programme in Philosophy – at Sanders Theatre, and feels a deep emotional connection with this blue-eyed American. These two youngsters from disparate worlds seem to share an emotional bond which is immediate and intense. This cross-cultural relationship, however, scripts a tortured footnote to a fairytale of 'living happily ever after' when in an emotionally vulnerable moment Zubaida faces a public failure near the Tethys and decides to marry her childhood sweetheart Rashid after she returns from Pakistan. It was Zamzam, the son of the local chieftain, who discovered the bones of *Ambulocetus*, and hailed them as the bones of grace that will "rewrite everything we have known about our history" (57). The recurring image of the fossil, Diana, and the

metaphor of digging, altogether, function as reminders that Zubaida's odyssey entails a search for her identity, her roots, her past which is mired in hidden truths, and a quest to rekindle the embers of a seemingly dead love, a pursuit to re-penetrate the consciousness of the man whom she had loved and lost. The narrative, here, is structured in the form of a letter, addressed to this invisible stranger and visitor from across the 'seven seas.' The letter, however, not only recounts the saga of the unbearable sadness of unfulfilled longings and happiness of a singular character, but also it carves space for marginal voices.

In "The Testimony of Anwar," the readers are allowed to penetrate the psychology of a Bengali labourer, Anwar, who migrates to Dubai leaving behind Megna, with the girl whom he had loved and impregnated, as well as Shathi, his dark-skinned unconsummated bride. Together, they search for a better future only to discover themselves utterly crushed under the dehumanising and debilitating working conditions of that country. Set across diverse cultures and climates, Anam's narrative thus brings forth the contemporary global experiences of labourers who are caught in the maze of the "machinery of modernity." The episode named "Prosperity Shipbreaking" delves deep into the darker and harsher realities of contemporary Bangladesh unearthing the tragic scenario of a world where workers are forced to function sans any safety precautions while cutting and striping away metals from the bodies of ruined/decommissioned ships in the dark and gloomy beaches of the Chittagong port. "Shipbreaking is important for Bangladesh. We need steel," contends a character, referring to child-labour, lack of enough supply of food and proper sanitation system for the workers- the sufferers of exploitation and low-payment, injustice, marginalization and discrimination.

Anwar's deeply disturbing tale bears a

significant weight in unwinding and then winding back the story to its satisfactory end, because he is the missing a "link in Zubaida's broken chain." Zubaida's existence is not tethered to a great cause; as no great war has defined the moral/ethical perspectives of her generation as it did her parents,' she hardly shares her mother's desperate desire to see the war criminals hanged. Zubaida does not bear the burden of avenging her country's humiliating past; though she feels proud to call her parents freedom fighters, she always resented



the space the liberation war took up, creating an unbridgeable gap between them. If Zubaida is in thrall to anything then it is her individual past, the riddle of her birth which she must solve. And finally, when she has been able to piece together all the disjointed parts of the fossil as well as herself, she feels confident enough to place her heart in the immortal pages of history, hoping that one day Elijah, the love of her life, will

come back.

One of the commendable features of *Bones* is its nuanced prose, although at times it seems to lack brevity and precision. A flatness of tone pervades the first 120 or so pages. Anam's language is at its best and replete with lyricism when she offers detailed descriptions of Diana, or the decommissioned ship, named *Grace*. Her metaphors and images are pictorial where the fossils, for instance, "like fairytale crumbs...began to emerge from the rock". (67)

In this book, Anam's characters hail from diverse strata of society, possessing their distinct shortcomings and prejudices; for example, Zubaida's upper-class mother-in-law Dolly does not hesitate to condemn Zubaida's origin as 'bad background,' once her post-marriage affair with Elijah is revealed. On the other hand, Anwar's mother pressurises his son to divorce his 'darkie wife' since she has not begotten any heir to the family. These insular mindscapes of the characters, here, parallel the condition of the post-independent cityscape where despite Ghulam Azam's death, the country remains "troubled as it has ever been." (402)

Finally, the title, I must say, is carefully chosen as it reminisces the predominant themes and concerns of the novel. It is the bones of Diana, the remnants of the shattered ship (*Grace*) that eventually led Zubaida to the discovery of her 'self,' her origins. They appear in Zubaida's life with unparalleled grace, offering her insights into the intricacies of human relationships and histories: "that's what happens . . . when you fall in love . . . suddenly there is a thread connecting your life and all the lives that went before you and all the lives that will follow" (403). Thus in the end, Zubaida is able to imagine an alternative notion of belonging, assuming her life not as a frozen entity, rather as a continuum of things that are past and at the same time, present.

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POETRY

SABRINA BINTE MASUD



### Muse

"How do I make you understand,  
What falling means, for eternity?"  
Said the grand rapids,  
To the poet,  
Who is born each day at the peak  
Of a yellow mountain, who  
Eats the sun,  
Confining an ocean in a fist full  
Of snow, lords over wanderlust,  
Shepherds the quizzical mists.  
To the fall,  
Who is born each time cradled in words  
Of a lover, a devotee of sorts, traced in  
Infatuated, flickering rhymes,  
Teetering faith, sulking over seasons,  
Then ends devotion, anchored by  
The lips of a stormy eyed maiden,  
A fertile womb, tussling in  
The rainbow sault,  
Day and night, day and night.

### Nostalgia

a kiss lips locked on lips  
longing of a mist  
texture of the touch  
as if finger tips  
dredging the stardust  
in the belly of a comet  
few words borrowed  
mundane like love and love  
fits the puzzle unequivocally  
and I wish just once in this life  
a kiss would be a kiss and it will  
live in a moment of shy retreat

Sabrina Binte Masud is a regional winner for the international BBC radio drama competition and a Fulbright scholar. She is also the coordinator of creative writing groups called Brine Pickles and Golpo-Kotha.