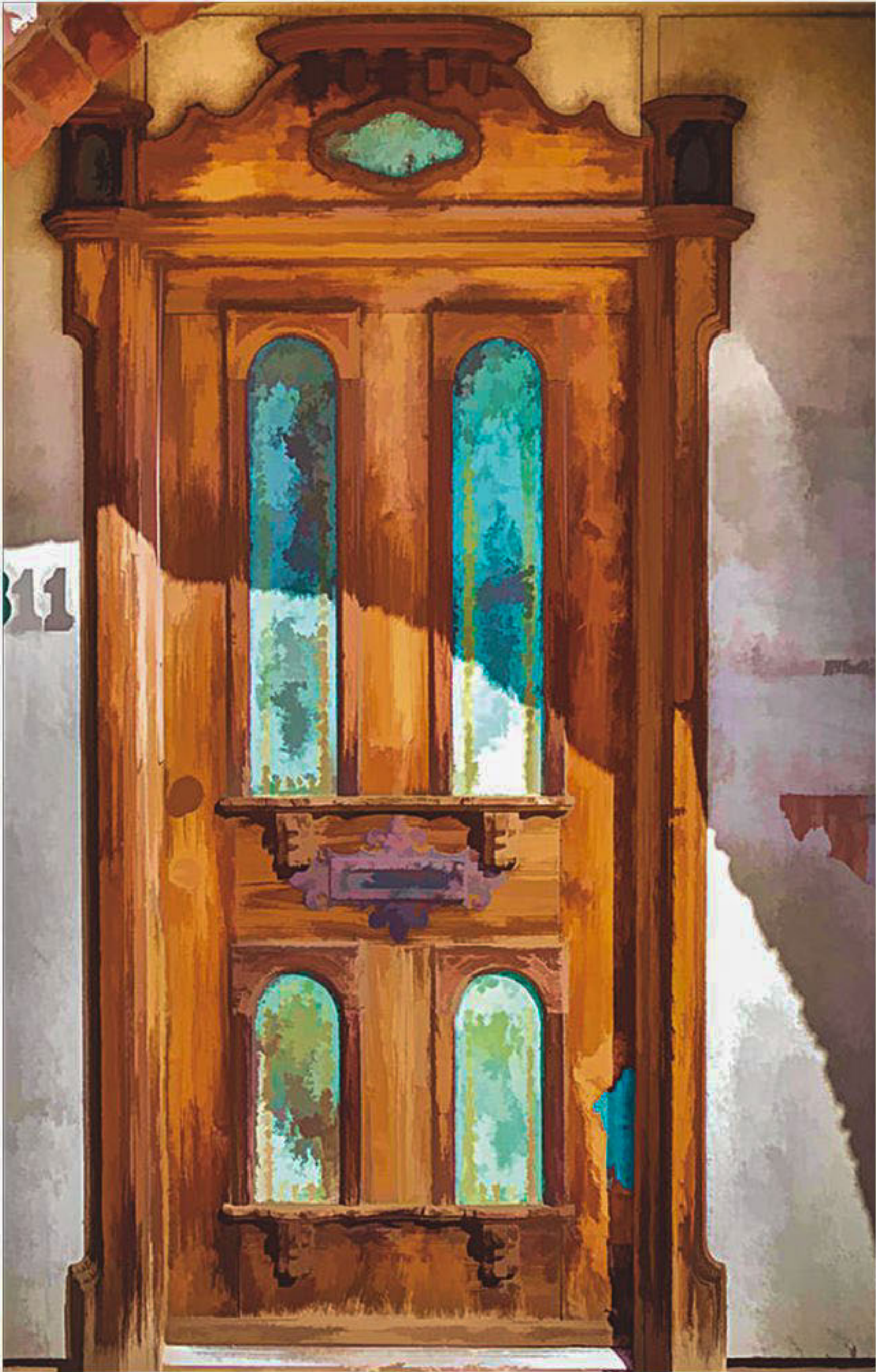




FICTION

The Door (Part 1)

TIASHA IDRAK



It all started with a door. Did it? Not really.

On a second thought, the door didn't start the whole mess. Rather it can be labeled as a witness, a milestone perhaps. At least that's what Aru thought as she dipped the paint brush in a bucket full of thick, dark paint.

"Never close this door," the old man had said as he gently caressed the large mahogany surface. His pale hand adorned with wrinkles, marking all the years he had experienced. "It connects us, bonds us...proves that we are a family," he used to say fondly.

The said door in question wasn't any lofty golden gate to some dazzling city. If anything, it was something very insignificant.

A door of a house. It was situated right in the middle of the said house. That's it.

The said old man was one of the owners of the house.

This story started a long time ago by the hand of a man who happened to be Aru's great-grandfather. The man came from an impoverished family. But he was ambitious, so he vowed that he'd climb up the socio-economical hierarchy. And so he did, he worked his way up, got married and became an established individual in the society. However, he felt that something was missing. He wanted a home. So one day, he decided to build a large house for his family and his descendants to come.

It was a rather pretty looking establishment. The whole building was only one storied tall but it was spread horizontally, taking over one third of the total area of an acre of land, which was quite a large size for a regular home. But the man had grand plans of making it the permanent residence for his clan.

With careful eyes he watched over as each brick was set, one after another. The "L" shaped building was surrounded by nature. After all, two-thirds of the area consisted of trees. On the front, there was yard with a few coconut trees which exist even today. A nice brick built path stretched from the gate to the main entrance of the house.

But the yard at the front was nothing, compared to the greenery at the back. A garden which consisted of vegetables and flowers - the properties would change from season to season. Starting from tomatoes and lemons to flowers like daisies - all were available.

Right beside the garden, there was a well and beside that was a small forest. Mango, Jackfruit, Banana- trees of different specimens grew haphazardly along with nameless wild bushes and flowers. The trees were high and the leaves were thick. Sometimes, even the sunlight had a hard time coming through.

Aru remembered how in her younger years she used to take shelter under the trees if it rained as the leaves shielded her like an umbrella. That was a long time ago.

After her great grandfather died the

ownership of the house naturally was passed on to his sons and daughters, who at the time unanimously decided to honour their father's wishes and preserved the house just the way it was.

Two of the brothers continued living there with their own families, each living in an equal half of the building. That way the privacy was maintained yet they wouldn't be called neighbours, for the door in the middle of the building was always left open.

On festivals or regular days, dinner dishes would be passed between the two families, children bounced across, calling each other to come out and play. The double door kept connecting them, silently.

Thus decades went by and it was time for the house to get new owners again.

This time however, most of the heirs were not enthusiastic about keeping an old house. It was understandable, most of them lived in the city and maintaining such a large house in a small town would indeed be quite a hassle. So the properties were distributed, lands were

sold. Some opted to wait, thus they built walls to ensure that no one could claim their lands. So bit by bit, the home slowly lost its pieces, its face constantly changing. All that was left was the L-shaped house. It was passed on to the son and daughter of the two brothers respectively. Both the sons of the older brother and the daughter of the younger one ended up getting the halves of the house just like their fathers did.

As an attempt to preserve the last bit of the original meaning behind their home, the older brother, before his death, begged his son and niece to keep the door open.

"It proves that we're a family," he had said.

However, Aru's uncle was not satisfied. To him, having a female cousin who had moved out to the city and obtained the same amount of property he acquired seemed thoroughly unfair. He was enraged and didn't try to hide it.

At first, it was bargaining. Then came the blackmailing, and after that the threats.

Aru's mother paid no heed to her cousin's anger.

"Inferiority often causes people to clutch at straws to make them feel relevant," she used to say. After all she, a professor, was above a small businessman in many ways. Naturally, that took a toll on the relationship between the two families. The young Aru realised that they weren't welcome at Tashu's, her cousin.

At first it wasn't obvious, but her uncle's smiles wouldn't reach his eyes, or the heavy atmosphere each time she tried to visit them, said it all.

The final straw however was the time when Aru, then a 9 year old, as a naive attempt to bond her uncle and mother, drew a picture of the families together and quietly slid it under the connecting door, passing it to her uncle's area. She was sure that her cousin would pass it on to her uncle. He would try to understand, right?

But when she found her drawing dumped in the trash can the next day, she realised a few things. First, perhaps the world of adults was far more complicated than a child's. Secondly, she was introduced to an emotion she wasn't aware of -- humiliation.

With that Aru figured that it wasn't her place to say anything. Time perhaps would heal them all.

Shortly after the picture incident, her uncle decided that having a connecting door with the enemy wasn't wise.

Aru carefully gave another stroke with her paintbrush.

"What are you doing?" A voice called.

Aru turned her head to see her younger sister Nifa.

"Drawing a door frame," Aru replied.

"But why are you drawing a door frame for a door that doesn't exist?" Nifa asked exasperatedly.

Aru blinked at her, and then looked at the door or rather what was left of it: a concrete wall to fill the cavity.

She remembered the day when it happened, how the double doors were unhinged, how with brick upon brick, she lost the sight of everything and everyone behind it. Now the gray, submerged wall looked more like an empty grave. She didn't like the sight, so she decided to draw door frames around it. Perhaps it was childish. But she didn't want to answer, so she settled with a "just because."

Nifa sighed, she really didn't understand what her sister was thinking. She stared at the jagged scar on Aru's left hand, the one she was holding the paint brush with. "How is your hand?" she asked instead. Aru gently massaged it, "A lot better now. I'm having a bit trouble in making fine movements but it's nothing intolerable," she smiled.

She received this scar a few months ago at her own university.

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POETRY

John Drew, mourning the untimely death of poet Riad Nourallah (1949-2018), comments: Riad's writing and teaching draw on the great humanist tradition of Islam. Best known for poems composed in the Arabic of his beloved Beirut, his works in English include *King*, a poetic novel evoking the pre-Islamic Arabia of the Mu'allaqat; *The Death of Almustafa*, a moving final volume to the story of Khalil Gibran's hero; an edition of, and comprehensive introductory essay on, W.S. Blunt's minor 19th century classic, *The Future of Islam*; *Beyond the Arab Disease*, a visionary road-map towards peace in the Middle East; and, for younger readers, *The Messenger: A Verse Narrative* and *Loving Letters: An Islamic Alphabet*. At his death, he was editing Blunt's *World War I diaries*.

(For Riad Nourallah)

Leavings

No-one to flatter us now
for our bad verses,
to leave a jar of honey at the door
or hold the world on its axis.

Your body they took to Damascus
to be buried there.
You shrug wryly at that:
too many buried already,
Syria made a cemetery by war.

How many refugees now
stumble above your head?
You too have been on the road:
Palestine, Lebanon, Syria,
all inscribed on your brow
as well as the Fen Causeway.

They took your father's house
and gave it a new country,
leaving you with a legacy
of elegance and elegy.
They chased the cedars of Lebanon
into the blood-dark sea,
leaving their fragrant idiom
piquant upon your tongue.

Dispossessed of house after house,
you carried the world in your heart,
coming to muse, an Almustafa,
among the fenland cows.
You raised a family on dreams.

And now we are dispossessed
of you. This is the true nakba.
Of course, of course we are multitudes
in Gaza as in our graveyards
but also we are singular.

Singular in your eloquence,
you too came as a messenger,
moving among us mysteriously,
perhaps one of the seven just men
who walk the world unknown.

And suddenly you are gone.
You leave a wife grieving
as Khadija never had to,
a house composed of empty rooms
and a rich picking of poems
prime as Medjoul dates.

Selamat jalan, Riad!
Continue to build Jerusalem
among the shades!

John Drew is an occasional contributor to The Daily Star literature Page.



MUSINGS

An Ode to Arundhati Roy

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI



Whenever I think of Arundhati Roy, I am reminded of afternoons on the rooftop with soothing breeze and neighbourhood pigeons circling the sky. I recall my time last year when I didn't have to deal with as much pressure as I have to now. As the sun beat down, having the whole neighbourhood awash in its glow, I would head out to the rooftop with one of her novels and entangled earphones in hand. I would be slowly pulled in to the pages while Kerala and a busy Delhi neighbourhood sprouted around me. What seemed like mere words at first would soon form a web, and solidify into scenes with people, riots, and emotions in them. Such is the power of words. They can form walls, skies, mountains, happiness, and sadness.

Ever since I was introduced to Arundhati Roy, I have wanted to read more and more of her works—both fiction and non-fiction.

Even her non fictional works carry a fictional storytelling that flows like water through the jungles of central India, disputed rural areas (big corporations VS the people), uprooted villages, and of course, Kashmir. My favourite non-fiction (an essay) by her is 'Walking with the Comrades,' which I found in *The Outlook India*. In the very first image, she can be seen

sitting on the bark of a fallen tree, with a red *gamcha* over her head and some rebels wearing khaki clothes. She is looking into their eyes in a pensive manner as she keeps her notebook and pen ready. The words spilling from their mouths would soon find themselves printed in the essay. Their stories would finally be out in the open. My love for the author has increased so much after I discovered that she has spent time with rebels in the forests, villagers affected by the dams. She interviewed them for her work, which truly reflects her concerns for the downsides of capitalism and its victims — the earth, the indigenous people. She does not hesitate to speak against the popular figures that are held high by the mass, showing the readers their fault-lines. If I never had the urge to read her essays online, I would never know of those crucial issues that threaten the people and the environment and yet fail to make the news. Despite her loud narratives often landing her in trouble, she never gave in. She reminds me of that one kid in class who will tell the truth irrespective of the scornful looks.

I had once asked a friend, "Name a book that changed your life." She had replied, *God of Small Things*. It was my first ever Arundhati

Roy book. Probably, I would never read her works if it weren't for that friend of mine. What started as a slow paced reading soon turned into a literary discovery. I was quite new to reading back then. So I used to dislike the book for its descriptive features which would make it too slow for my then self. Who would have thought that I'd end up being someone who re-reads some chapters to this day and never gets bored? I still associate 'Ayemenem' to a hot weather when the fan cannot work its charm and the sun makes it difficult to look up into the sky. It is probably because of how the book starts, "It was a hot, brooding month in

Ayemenem..." The fact that this language could be used so creatively surely tops the list. The sentence structures, the metaphors, the original techniques, they have taught me a lot about going beyond limits while writing. Here is an example of how she layers a matter with her own creative touch. "The sky was thick with TV. If you wore special glasses you could see them spinning through the sky among the bats and homing birds—blondes, wars, famines, football, food shows, coups d'état, hairstyles stiff with hair spray. Designer pectorals. Gliding towards Ayemenem like skydivers. Making patterns in the sky. Wheels. Windmills. Flowers blooming and unblooming."

After her semi-autobiographical *The God of Small Things* won her the Man Booker Prize in 1997, it took her some 20 years to publish another book of fiction and take place on the long-list yet again. Like the previous novel, it was nothing short of creativity and learning materials. For instance, it has given me glimpses of lives of the marginalized people, of tensions in the borders, of riots that divide a country, and of dicoflenac that kills vultures. The pensive beginning kept me hooked to the book despite the fact that I usually cannot contain too much sadness. It

was because of the writing, I am sure. No matter the content, I would never ignore her writing. I think I am still captivated, pardon me if I sound mad.

Once being asked if she believed writing was the most powerful way to resist, she said, "I believe in the biodiversity of resistance. Some write, some fight, some fast, some march, some sing...Why should there be only one way?" There is a unique charm to her replies. One should read more of her interviews to see the eloquent replies she comes up with at the drop of a hat. In an interview on *The Guardian*, she says, "...So being unreasonable is the only way that we can have hope..." In many ways than one, this is very relatable. I don't remember the last time I didn't derive hope from 'unreasonable' things when I was in dire need of consolation.

Arundhati Roy is a kind of person who shows readers the obvious facts, but in a poetic, beautiful, and rebellious manner. Even though many despise her works, her voice is important for this generation because of its beauty tinged with defiance.

The writer is currently a 12th grader in Birshreshtha Noor Mohammad Public College.