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Alongside and even independently of these events, the novel's popularity grows as more and more people subscribe to *The Handmaid's Tale's* TV show craze, not to mention its growing political relevance in a post-Trump world. All of this means that *The Testaments* was already smack in the middle of the literary and commercial spotlight. As a sequel to a cult classic, as a sequel to a popular TV show that speaks to our time, and as the latest creative output by Margaret Atwood, a writer being hailed almost as a cultural prophet, the novel would already have been the one book that most dedicated readers would read this year.

Upon receiving the award, Atwood shared in a press conference that she would donate her half of the 50,000 pound prize money to the Canadian Indigenous charity Indspire, and that she is "too old and has too many handbags to spend it on herself", as reported on *The Guardian*.

In comparison, Evaristo's share of the prize money, as she shared at the same press conference, will go towards paying her mortgage. Although already an esteemed writer, winning the award has opened her book to a much wider international readership than it could have accessed before.

"I've written eight books, but most people haven't read them," she declared laughingly on *Freedom, Books, Flowers & the Moon*, the *Times Literary Supplement* podcast. Now, they ask her "What else

have you written?"

Evaristo is also the first black woman and the first black British person to win the Booker prize. This means something beyond just token diversity, particularly given the title, form, and subject matter of her novel. The book's name declares, makes central, and thus officiates a black woman—an "other"—as a valuable presence; its singular form declares her specificity against the stream of forgetfulness and ignorance with which people of colour are treated in the West and women are still treated the world over. By tying this singularity with the voices of 12 characters, by giving them gracious space, in her novel, Evaristo accomplishes an incredibly heroic task.

"The impact on black women and women of colour and marginalised people and black people in this country and perhaps in other places will be huge," she shared on the *TLS* podcast. Out of the 1,000 or so books published in the UK each year, hers was one out of the two or three books written by and about black women, she pointed out. She further shared, "I've already experienced lot of people being very emotional about this prize—people I know, people in my writing community, people on social media saying they were in tears because I'm a black woman, and also because I'm 60! It's a sign that you can plow ahead decade after decade and then come away with a bit of a gift."

The book and its victory, therefore, means recognition, solidarity, and triumph for a vast demographic of readers

both within and outside of the UK who unfortunately still require one among them to write, paint, sing, or photograph them into the public consciousness.

Finally, both for these readers and others, especially those farther away from the UK, the Booker prize sheds light on literature that would otherwise not have been available, simply because it remains undiscovered. For instance, a book like *Testaments* would have appeared on the shelves here in Bangladesh regardless of its place on the Booker list. *Girl, Woman, Other*—had it won—would have stood a better chance of gaining currency as "the" Booker winner of the year; now it faces the risk of becoming "that other book that won alongside Atwood". For us, in a country that is already reluctant to widen its reading tastes beyond our fantasy, YA, romance, thriller, and classic favourites, one where most bookstores are forced to only order books that they know are already in popular demand just to stay afloat, the discovery of books like *Girl, Woman, Other*—more experimental and less traditionally South Asian or white Western-oriented—are especially vital. If only because they're so rare. One really hopes that Evaristo's works surf through these waves and reach all the eyes that they deserve, as have those of Atwood. Some of us are happy to read two, or even six or 11 or 25 of the best books produced in a year. But how many others do the same?

Sarah Anjum Bari *can be reached* sarah.anjum.bari@gmail.com

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PERSPECTIVE

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I know this to be true because of my past experience with mental health workers and therapists. It can be cumbersome, tiring, expensive and incredibly frustrating, especially when the options are so limited and catered to those who can afford it.

My journey to therapist offices and their clinics started years ago. Years before I found myself in Prasanta's room. My first brush with a mental health worker came in the form of a best friend's mother when I was both struggling to finish college and trying to balance my father's descent to madness. For a good year, she became a guide, a confidante and a therapist all at the same time. But somehow that journey ended far too quickly as she moved countries taking all her help and my best friend with her. I did not realise it then, but that would also be one of my first prolonged episodes of mental health illness. I somehow scrambled through college and ended up isolating myself completely from everyone, battling abandonment issues and not seeking help. Mostly because knowledge happened to be so limited in this sphere. It took me another few years before I found myself in a therapist's room. This time, it would be purely professional.

I paid a hefty Tk 2,500 for an hour with the therapist. I settled down on the couch and remember feeling uncomfortable sharing anything with her. There was a clinical quality to that session. We

barely looked at each other, did not share a laugh despite some stories being deeply funny, in my opinion, and I ended up leaving feeling more upset than when I arrived.

This would not be the end of my search though. I would make a few more visits, some costing up to Tk 3,000 for an hour with an expert, which ended up giving me more anxiety in return. I am a young professional and barely make enough to support myself. I live with my parents, use their car for commuting and try to pay half of my salary so that they can use it for the family. To dish out TK 3,000 for a one-hour session made me break into cold sweats.

It was no help either that the therapist was so quick to remind me as the clock struck the hour mark that my time was up! But, I had only just gotten to the juicier bits of my mad story. I was bummed out she did not want to hear how I spent every waking moment lamenting on Instagram and Facebook pages that compared my mental illness to a broken leg. Or how I always doubted myself on the bad days and on the good days, doubted everyone else. But if my time was up, then it was up, and off I went, never to return again to this particular therapist.

Mental health services are incredibly difficult to access in Bangladesh despite the recent change in conversation. I am also not quite on board with the current narrative on mental health issues. A

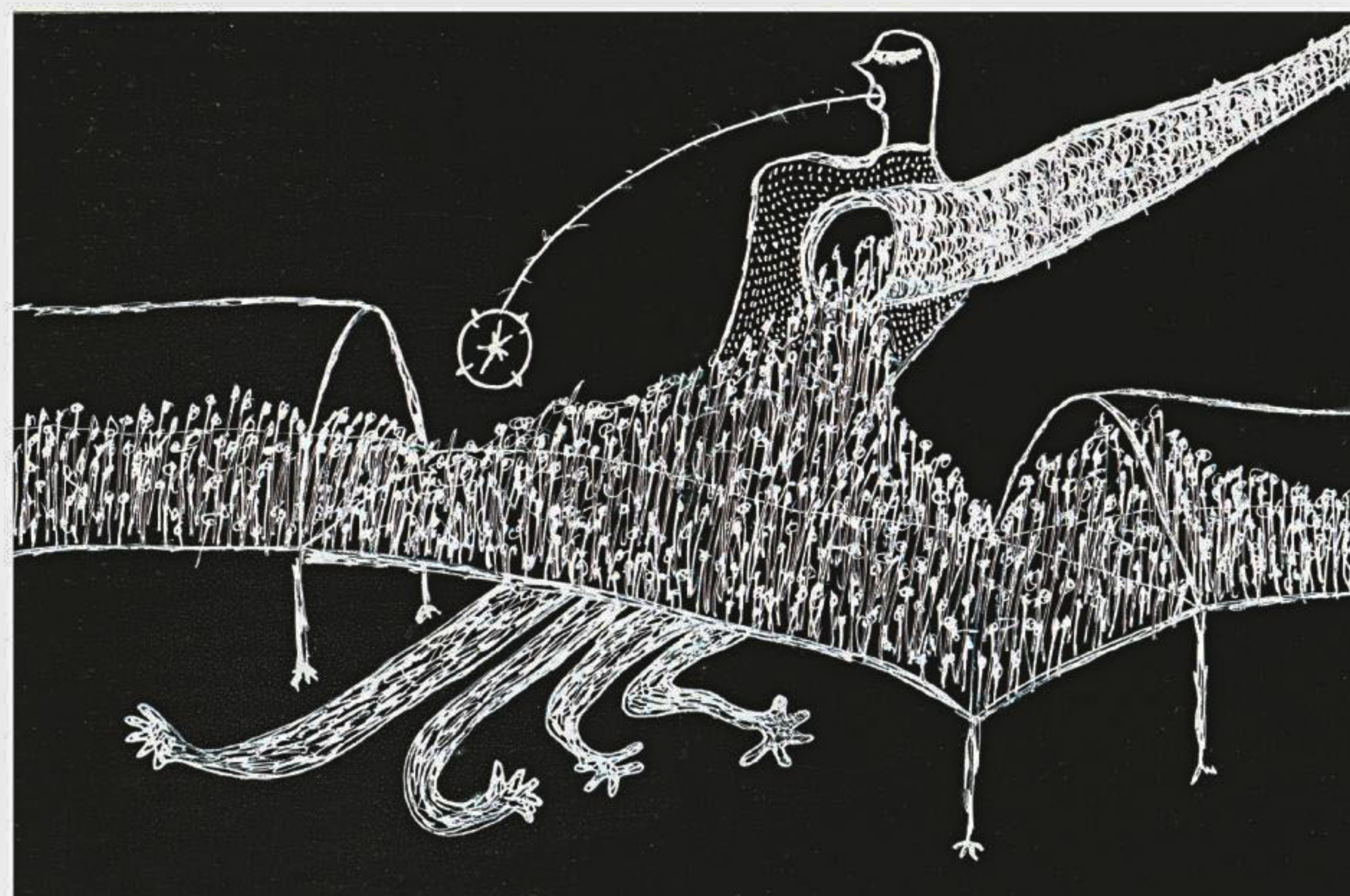


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

columnist of *The Guardian* wrote about it best: "The lack of stigma should be the same as telling people why your limb is in a cast. But you can't just put someone with a broken leg and an insane person side by side and expect people not to be able to tell the difference, like the Winklevoss twins or, can we be truly honest, Joanna Newsom songs."

I wish it were easier. I wish this one therapist would be my answer to these problems. But it is not. When I find myself in bed, contemplating how to be better or whether to give up altogether,

I am reminded yet again how difficult these services are to come by. I cannot call my therapist in the dead of the night. That stuff is not acceptable. But should there not be some kind of help for those in need in that ungodly hour?

I also wish I could have put my name on this article without fearing the stigma but I do. And I believe real change is still far off. Until it becomes inclusive, easy to access, free for those who cannot afford and until we stop equating poor mental health with mental illnesses, change will be hard to come by.