



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Isabel Allende's 'Violeta'

A century of grief and introspection

Violeta's life is flanked by two global pandemics, the Spanish flu and Covid-19. Allende puts out a disorienting picture of the repetition of history.

MD. TAWSIF MOSTAFIZ

The lifespan of a century gave Violeta Del Valle innumerable memories, and she tells her story in Isabel Allende's new novel, *Violeta* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022). Writing to one named Camilo—someone she loves more than all others—Violeta recounts the saga of a hundred years. "I've witnessed many events, I've amassed a lot of experience, but either because I was too distracted or too busy, I haven't acquired much wisdom," she muses of her eventful life.

Violeta was born on a stormy night in 1920, in a fictitious country of Latin America. Her life is flanked by two global pandemics, the Spanish flu and 'Covid-19'. Allende puts out a disorienting picture of the repetition of history. States of emergency, mask mandates, misinformation and failed quarantines; all containing an uncanny similarity a hundred years apart. Violeta speaks of a time when the tumults and triumphs of her story were recurrent in her part of the world. It was a time of political turmoil, chaos and carnage, coup d'etats aided and abetted by distant superpowers fighting a cold war. Violeta recalls that turbulent juncture of her life, "They lit bonfires in the plazas and burned books, documents, and voter registrations, because

democracy had been suspended until further notice."

Countless people touched and shaped Violeta's life, like her brother José Antonio, who stood by her drastic life decisions, her Irish governess Miss Taylor, who became a part of her family, her love interest Julián Bravo, the fearless and conniving pilot, the Rivases, who took her in as a daughter, Torito, the simple giant wise in natural affairs, and many more. Oftentimes, the novel reads like a collection of life stories of other people, with Violeta's own story sprinkled in between to connect them as a whole. We get also a glimpse into the lives of the aboriginal people of the land. Their culture appears like a relic from the past, preserved and passed from one generation to another.

Sadness and suffering haunts Violeta throughout her life. Her childhood innocence is robbed by a family tragedy, dousing her family into abject poverty. She is abused in the name of love, and suffers in the death of friends and family. Allende creates a sense of stability in Violeta's life, that feels like the calm before the storm, only to shatter it with grief, breaking the serenity with new chapters of life, making space for new people with their own unique stories. She endures the most heart wrenching experiences, but her emotional upheaval is

often undercut by a flat tone in narrative, lacking poignant prose. Even the most tragic life events sometimes come out as bland and prosaic. Maybe some of the essence was lost in the English translation that I have come across.

Violeta bears the mark of a woman born in another time, when "politics and business" were men's prerogative, and women were supposed to talk about their "ailments and servants." Her late ideological redemption isn't enlightenment, but a forceful eye-opening when a cataclysmic tragedy shakes her world. She admits her mistakes consciously, "I chose not to see, hear, or speak up during the most critical years," confessing of her apathy during the reign of terror. She is sceptical in her faith, declaring equality in the eyes of God as a "fairy tale", and cynical in her worldview, believing cruelty is inherent in human nature.

"We move at a turtle's pace, but over my long life I can attest to how far we've come," Violeta concludes her story with a hopeful note. In the end, the eponymous narrator of the story becomes incarnate of the history of a nation, her own life intricately woven within.

MD. TAWSIF MOSTAFIZ is in his final year at Islamic University of Technology.

MUSINGS

Notes of a first-time English teacher

JAHANARA TARIQ

As the white hot sun pierced through the soufflé clouds on an afternoon a lifetime ago, my aunt and I leaned back a little too precariously on our rattan armchairs while talking about the allure of academe. My aunt recollected about her days as a literature student at Dhaka University. Though reciting Byron under krishnochura blossoms and highlighting Maugham handouts in shocking pink during lit theory's close reading sessions had its perks, she let me know that the best parts of the experience were, undoubtedly, the teachers. The best storytellers made the finest teachers, she said.

My aunt's remarks and a reading of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* in the dingy old corner of a computer room in fourth grade made me expect a Mrs. Honey as a teacher; somebody with whom I could have tea, with my pinkies up. My first literature teacher, however, was only keen on shooting us dagger eyes and assigning us to make sentences with the dullest possible words. But fiery headed Anne from the Green Gables decided ceremoniously that she wanted to become a teacher, and so I too thought that teaching would be a sure fire way to be in the company of books, to gently nudge minds into the cult of libraries and red eyes which stayed open way, way past their bedtimes.

As my O' levels neared, my school (now in a different district), which had little to no affinity with the arts, suddenly welcomed a "hipster" of sorts. Our teacher sported a stache which rivalled Ringo's during the Beatles' *SGT Lonely Heart Pepper* era. Fresh from Pennsylvania and in his early twenties, he was in Bangladesh for a mini project to teach us creative writing. He sipped



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

green juice from handmade bottles, wore corduroy trousers the shade of a dull tangerine, and often made us meditate while a deep, hypnotic, reverberating chant of "Om" played in the background. During one of his classes in the blaze of Rajshahi summer, while my back ached with sweat, he taught us to write using sensory details. I took that to heart.

When I enrolled in an English Department for my undergraduate studies, I finally found out just what my aunt had talked about. Our "History of England" classes ended during twilight hours. As the setting sun would cast the sky on fire, my classmates and I would be on our toes, voraciously taking in the stories our professor would weave—from *Beowulf* to Woolf, from the Viking conquests to the many exploits of the Tudor dynasty, from the making of Senecan tragedies to that of kitchen sink dramas.

Then, somehow, I was blessed with

the opportunity to sit on the other side of the table and teach as an adjunct faculty member in my own university. As I paraded through the halls in my mother's six yards of silk and got to control the temperature of the classrooms like a dictator, I felt I had reached the culminating chapter of my not too shabby bildungsroman. As the first week passed by in a haze of awkward introductions and queries which made me doubt the whole discipline of English Language Teaching, I drew upon a realisation. Even though I was benevolently hired to teach something that was equivalent to a condensed IELTS course, I was hell bent on injecting something from my own interests in it, to fill it up with poetic contemplations. This annoyed my students quite a lot.

Most students traced through familiar paths of Spark Notes and LitCharts to present their chosen text. But one particularly fit gentleman with

a pair of furrowed eyebrows chipped in, saying that he will only complete his assignment of reading only one novel for the semester, if I were to find him something relating to his passions. Enthusiastically I replied, "sure", and proceeded to ask him about his interests. He stood quiet for a moment before replying with a grumble: "I do love lifting, so yeah something related to 'gymming'". He later chose Coelho's *The Alchemist* and in his presentation, let me know that it was a book which talked not of the "gymming" of the body but that of the soul. I couldn't help but feel a little satisfied with what I had set in motion.

Then, during a speaking assignment in an 8 am class, a student of mine told me about how, if she had all the money in the world, she would open a bakery for her mother because her mum was like "a little fairy who loved to make cakes". Her tenses were topsy turvy, her adjectives unkempt, and her expressions a tad bit whimsical for the classroom, but it was heartwarming to say the least. Other students followed on different days to talk about the moments when they felt seen, the exhilaration they felt when they took a wicket in a neighbourhood game of cricket; how they preferred jewel tones to neon because it gave them joy or how they diligently embarked upon the journey of discovering a viable alternative to plastic. They all had their own moments which were slowly developing into beautiful narratives, and I was fortunate enough to bear witness to it. In those moments, I could not really tell my students apart from my teachers.

Jahanara Tariq teaches English at Independent University Bangladesh (IUB).

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

An invaluable resource on char dwellers of deltaic Bangladesh

ATM NURUL AMIN

In the contemporary discourse on Bangladesh, its cultural legacies have overtaken its identity as a land of six seasons or as a riverine country. A degree of euphoria is associated with both sets of images. Consequently, attention has been inadequate to the hard realities of the country's geographical, geological or geo-physical characteristics associated with its location in an active delta with floodplains, riverbank erosion, accumulation of sediments, formation of channels, morphological instabilities, plus landslides in its hilly region. This reality calls for geography, geology, and geomorphology as part of our education and research. The recently formulated Bangladesh Delta Plan (BDP) 2100, despite its grandiose scale, bears some potential to influence changes in the education system—it can make it easier to build safe settlements for residents, away from the vulnerable areas.

Meanwhile, a pioneering knowledge creation task has been accomplished in the form of a 2021 Springer book, *Living on the Edge: Char Dwellers in Bangladesh*, a compendium of 45 contributors including the book's two editors, Mohammad Zaman and Mustafa Alam. The five rivers and corresponding estuarine char regions

of Brahmaputra-Jamuna, Ganges, Jamuna-Ganges, Lower Meghna, and the Meghna Estuary system are sources for data on land eroded, accreted and thereby the gain and loss of land and the geophysical characteristics that define the nature of their soils. Twenty million people—12.5 percent of the country's population—live in chars, which accounts for eight percent of land, much of which is unsettled land. Another 15 to 20 million people live along the

banklines of the rivers, in fear of displacement from riverbank erosion.

Three of the major topics in the book address issues related to riverbank erosion and char lands dynamics; they assess the consequence of these instabilities in human terms; and examine the policy, planning and management for improving the conditions of char dwellers.

In some instances, their fate assumes episodic dimensions, as was the case in the 1970 Bhola disaster and in the 1985 Urir Char tidal surge that washed away thousands of people. *Living on the Edge* presents documented evidence and information on life and livelihood adversities of a chronic nature that are routinely endured by char dwellers and erosion-prone river bank line inhabitants from one generation to the other. This reality led distinguished geographer, Hugh Brammer, to recommend devising "forms of productive economic use of char land that do not require people to live in such hazardous environments"—a strategy that essentially turns a labour surplus economy to a labour-scarce economy. Bangladesh's development process is not dissimilar to this. The question is: how long will it take to pull up the labouring poor from such disaster-prone living environments?

Most of the book's contributors, therefore, focus on char dwellers' existing fearful living, livelihood conditions, and the means for improving upon them. The highlights include vulnerabilities arising from natural disasters such as flood, erosion, storm, cyclone, tidal surge; poverty—which is 2.7 times higher than the national average—and its consequent malnutrition; illiteracy; inadequate education, health and sanitation services; and limited rights to, if not absence of, land and livelihood resources. An ambiguity in entitlement arises because, in some instances, char dwellers serve a vanguard role to legal owners of the newly formed char land who do not move to chars until char living becomes safe. Usually, the poor labouring class from the neighbouring mainland or floodplains, either on their own or with consent of the original owners, move to the newly emerging chars. This is taken advantage of by the "local goons who torment the char dwellers continually".

This book will serve well those who seek to know what it is like for these dwellers to live in chars in the middle of our mighty rivers or their estuaries, and what it will take to improve their conditions.

ATM Nurul Amin is Professor Emeritus, Asian Institute of Technology.

BOOK NEWS

Shagufta Sharmeen Tania, British-Bangladeshi writer, shortlisted in Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2022



MAISHA SYEDA

Read the article on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook and Instagram pages.