
HOUSE (RUMAH)

story by Pramoedya Ananta Toer
translated by Sumit K. Mandal*

At the time I felt like a chat, but my housemates had all gone off to the cinema. So I went over to the neighbor's house. On a Friday night at that! I still remember the day because people were thronging home from listening to the *tafsir*¹ at the mosque next door.

While we were enjoying a conversation about the hardships of a time of political, social, and economic transition, an Arab said:

"*Assalamu*" He held a black cloth umbrella on one hand and wore a tall *pitji*² on his head. His short neck made it seem like he had never looked about him in his whole life. He was built tall with a belly bulging forward, and his sarung was hitched high up. His eyes were deep and piercing as if they wanted to destroy everything they spotted. And his shoes were too old.

"Ya, *marchaba!*"³ my host exclaimed.

"What have you got there?"

"Banana fritters!"

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¹ *Tafsir* = Koranic exegesis.

² *Pitji* = a rimless velvet cap which is usually black in color. "*Berpitji tinggi*" in the text.

³ *Marchaba* = welcome in Arabic.

Slowly but surely, the shape of his powerful build began to form before our eyes. The chair in which he sat creaked under his weight as if it was about to break.

And the conversation quite naturally shifted its course. Meanwhile, I became quite worried that our host and the Arab would end up chatting for five hours straight about something they loved but I hated—what's more, in Arabic.

Then, someone rather short and stout—in a word dumpy—also came by after descending from the mosque next door.

“Ya marchaba, ‘Amir!” the host called out once again. This time to Mr. Dumpy.⁴

And Amir, uttered with the flavor of an Arabic accent, also appeared on the verandah. His eyes flickered continuously and every so often he would close them tightly like someone who had not slept in a year.

Then the talking became more boisterous: on the Prophet's views about religion; on the Koran being in fact simply the good deeds of the Prophet himself; about the *bismillah*⁵ which upon deep contemplation turns out to encapsulate all the philosophy that ever existed in the world; about the Koran for which there was no comparison among all the books that ever existed on this earth; about astronomy, Ibn Sina,⁶ bani Ummayah,⁷ and Palestine with its Jewish people who were persevering and hypocritical; and lastly, about polygamy.

When the conversation turned to polygamy, the Arab stopped talking. He would stop talking and become dispirited as soon as people touched on the subject of marriage. And his eyeballs would protrude so far that they seemed about to pop out of their sockets. Without looking at anything, he seemed to be scrutinizing something close by that only he could see. It was common knowledge that the Arab was unhappy in his married life. At the age of fifty-one he remarried, this time his sixteen-year-old niece. In the first few months of marriage, his wife cried continuously as she longed for her playmates. (While happily playing with her friends, she was called by her father, and then married off to the old man). In subsequent years, this young wife⁸ shed many more tears because she had not been blessed with children. That's why Grandpa Arab⁹ did not dare step into his own household for very long.

Everyone knew that when he popped his eyes, it was a signal for ending the topic of conversation he so hated. Otherwise, he would remain with his eyes popped straight through, unaware of his surroundings and then wandering off without any consideration for good manners.

Finally the conversation turned to:

⁴ i.e., “sibuntek.”

⁵ *Bismillah* = “in the name of God,” the invocation that precedes each chapter of the Koran.

⁶ Avicenna (980-1037), the Arab physician and philosopher.

⁷ The Ummayyads formed the first Arab-Islamic caliphate in the seventh century.

⁸ i.e., “siistri ini.”

⁹ i.e., “kakek Arab itu.”

"Just imagine! Everything's wrong *tuan*¹⁰ 'Amir," said the Arab. "The tax is five hundred in a year. That's not even a profit of five cents in five years."

"So what's happening with your court case?" our host asked.

"The court!" the Arab cried in disgust. "The court! The court! What about the court! The case has been decided twice! Decided twice! It's only here that a case can be decided twice! The people occupying that house were supposed to leave. But who was supposed to evict them?!"

"That's obvious—the police!" our host offered.

"The police!" he shouted, followed by a harsh laugh that was abruptly extinguished. He became wistful, shaking his head as if all the sorrow he had ever experienced came suddenly to assail him.

I too was surprised but remained silent. *Ustad*¹¹ 'Amir chuckled happily. Then he offered the following:

"Muhammad! The one in the right will always win. So too it is said in our religion. Take my wife in Krukut—the tall and slender one with pink cheeks and even teeth! You know what, *tuan*? Huh! A while back her house was occupied by some Chinamen.¹² And yes, we went to court and won. The Chinamen were thrown out and . . . paid damages!" He chuckled again. "You know why? Patience. The outcome is in God's hands. We Muslims are people who know how to be patient. Don't you think so?! The truth will always win."

Then, verses from the Koran came flowing out, or it could have been a joke in Arabic. I didn't know. That's the disadvantage of not knowing foreign languages. Finally:

"Muhammad, what do you think of my *tafsir* just now? And how about my argument about the inauthenticity of religion here! Oh, how can religion be inauthentic. Surely, if it weren't authentic, it would have been swept away long ago, like justice, like the fate of that house of yours! You must believe in justice."

"How can I believe! Justice that is no longer authentic! Just imagine, *ustad*, I brought a case to court in '51 and had to spend fifteen thousand on it. The case was settled, I won. But even then, the occupants of my house couldn't be evicted. In '53, another ten thousand. Just imagine, *ustad*, I went to the court every day. You know me. I'm not afraid of a fight . . ."

Then, his voice, like the rapid fire of a machine gun, sought attention and sympathy from us all. In '46, his house—you could describe it as a smallish palace—was occupied by a Dutch captain who never paid the rent. Every time he came to press for payment, the lessee simply replied: "Want me to pay with this?" as he displayed his fist. For months this continued until one occasion when he came again and was treated in the predictable fashion. But this time he lost his patience. He grabbed the

¹⁰ *Tuan* is a term of address similar to mister but suggests a little more formality and social distance.

¹¹ *Ustad* = term of address for an Islamic teacher.

¹² In the text, I have translated the derogatory "Tjina" as Chinaman and "Tionghoa" as Chinese.

threatening fist and yanked it back. Then he challenged the Dutch captain to fight it out.

Apparently, his powerful physique, rippling with strong muscles, gave him an edge in the fight. One punch and the Dutchman was sent spinning and then rolling into a drain. A drain that usually was not cleaned for weeks at a time! However, at that moment there was no room for compassion. He leapt into the drain and trampled on his victim's body until his white skin was so darkened it no longer seemed filthy. The Dutchman's wife screamed for the police.

By the time the police arrived, Mr. Captain¹³ was unconscious.

In the ensuing police interrogation, he was the victor. And three months later, the Dutch captain left the hospital, paid the rent in full, and then hurriedly vacated the house. The palace was quickly renovated. Before the renovations had been completed, that is sometime after '50, someone or other and his family occupied the house without permission. A Chinese family.

The Arab sighed with relief. "Huh! if it were only a question of a fight," he said as he viewed his arm, large and firm like a club made of sugar palm wood. "I wouldn't back off for anybody, ustad." He looked at me and continued: "No backing off, tuan—could be Dutch, could be Chinamen! But not Indonesians. Indonesians have the same religion, the same Prophet—right? Now, that's the trouble." He laughed contentedly.

Now ustad 'Amir interjected:

"My wife in Jatinegara—tuan, you know, don't you? The tall, slender one, with a mole on the left side of her chin, who loves to help with the cooking where there are feasts—oh, a real woman she is! And what does she say? *Kafir*¹⁴ don't have power, she says. Let them live well in this world, but in the hereafter we alone will be victorious."

"Ah, how true," the Arab agreed.

"What happened to the Chinaman?" our host asked with a somewhat mocking laugh.

"That was a simple matter. I challenged him once and he ran away at the crack of dawn."

"Who else invaded the house?" ustad 'Amir inquired as he scrutinized the thick Arab *kupiah*¹⁵ which was covered with grime along the lower edge.

"An Indonesian! Hmph, I had to spend fifty thousand to get rid of him."

"Fifty thousand!" shouted ustad 'Amir with eyes bulging out, nearly fainting at the words. His red eyes glittered stilly as though covered with a layer of dust.

"Fifty thousand," sighed the Arab. "He left, but his Indonesian friend took his place! *Masjaallah*¹⁶ A real bastard!"

¹³ i.e., "sikaptén."

¹⁴ *Kafir* = unbelievers. "Kafir²" in the text.

¹⁵ *Kupiah* = a small rimless cap worn by Muslims.

¹⁶ *Masjaallah*! = My God!

Everyone laughed. But the Arab apparently did not find anything funny in the story. In the end, he forced a laugh in honor of the hospitality of our host, ustad 'Amir, and I myself of course. However, eventually he too felt happy because others could get some fun out of his story. He continued:

"But Indonesians are hard to fight, tuan. You know what? I always keep a knife under this shirt of mine. No one can make me afraid. But Indonesians, tuan, *masjaallah!* We share the same religion, but the trouble is . . . Hmm, once upon a time in Arabia, tuan, there was an old man who had many children, all of them male . . ."

Then he proceeded to tell the story titled "United we stand, divided we fall," only it was set in Arabia. His rambling tale, spiced up here and there, finally ended with the following:

"Hmm, in the old days there were many wise people in Arabia. Arabs were truly clever in the past. Look how we are today, ustad, if Arabs and Indonesians can be broken one by one like the ribs of a palm-leaf broom, Islam will be finished here. Don't you think so?"

"But, tuan, you can still take the case to court!" our host submitted.

"I have had enough, tuan, I'm worn out. The court delivers a decision, tuan; the decision is written down on paper, tuan; and the paper has no power!" He laughed mockingly at himself. "The first case unfolded this way, tuan. The police arrived to carry out the eviction, everything inside the house was carried out to the yard—by the roadside. The house was empty. The police left. At that very moment, everything was moved back into the house. What could one say to that, tuan? The police had done their duty. Of course, I got angry at the time. But quite unexpectedly a gang of *becak*¹⁷ drivers intervened and attacked me. Naturally, tuan, I ran for my life!"

Once more everyone present laughed. Even he himself laughed. The serious expression on his face lost its seriousness, and he smiled sardonically.

"Of course, the house can be forcibly vacated once again tuan, but I would have to go back to court. A few thousands more would have to be spent. And the squatters in the house will repeat their tactic all over again. Tuan, I am really old now—I got old from worrying about that one house!"

"Whatever the case," ustad 'Amir interposed again, "you will win someday. In the name of God. Tuan Muhammad, you do still pray don't you? Our Prophet himself is the best example. He started out with nothing but ended up with a kingdom. Isn't that true? My wife at Klintji lane, tuan Muhammad, you remember her don't you? The petite, cute one with sweet brown skin like theater puppets.¹⁸ She once told me that everyone gets their fair share as long as they know the limits of their rights and responsibilities. Know when you're obligated, know when you're exempt.¹⁹ Right? So . . ."

"Eh, ustad, how many wives do you have, huh?"

¹⁷ Tricycles designed for carrying passengers.

¹⁸ "Golék²" in the text. Wooden rod-puppets used in Sundanese puppet theater (*wayang golék*).

¹⁹ "Tahu jang wajib tahu jang batal."

“Four households tuan Muhammad! Just imagine! Not cheap at all! But God continues to grant me a livelihood. Do you know why tuan Muhammad? Because I walk in the path of the Prophet,” he beamed after making this proclamation of his state of being.

Seeing nothing of consequence in this proclamation, the Arab imposed his complaints on the group:

“These are strange times tuan. We can’t get anything we want. No matter how many bushlawyers²⁰ there are, cases never get decided, they drag on and on forever. Even when a case is decided, the decision isn’t carried out. Ya, Allah! If you want things to work out, you must dare to spend still more money, dare to be attacked by a mob.”

His voice became more and more melancholy, and he became visibly older. He cleared his throat. All of a sudden his eyes lit up as he looked at ustad ‘Amir and asked:

“Ustad, you have four wives, right?”

“Yes!”

“Well, you must feel sleepy every day.”

Everyone laughed except ustad ‘Amir. Dauntlessly he righted himself in his seat, his eyes blinking like a beacon. Then, he said in an authoritative voice:

“Whosoever walks in the path of the Prophet will be safe.”

The Arab nodded his head mockingly and looked at me, so I felt as if I was obliged to follow his lead by nodding my head as well. And I noticed that our host had indeed preceded me. Like a bunch of turtledoves. All the while, ustad ‘Amir pronounced various verses of the Koran, not a single one of which I understood. Yet it gave me untold pleasure to listen to his enunciation. The more I reveled in the sounds, the more I absorbed, and the more I grew envious of his ability to use a language so foreign to me.

Suddenly, our host invited us to drink coffee. And the Arab drank too. When he raised his head from his cup, he followed up the coffee with banana fritters which in the meantime had gotten cold. His eyes sparkled at the sight of the remaining banana fritters lined up side by side on the plate. Then he started to cough. He drank another mouthful and gave thanks to God and the Prophet.

All of a sudden, the atmosphere changed rapidly. Our host, ustad ‘Amir, and Muhammad talked boisterously, gesticulating with their hands—waving, reaching out, pointing—while they kept shaking their heads back and forth. All in Arabic. Without moving his head from his neck, ustad ‘Amir glanced left and right with those forever sleepy eyes of his. He was really fluent in that foreign tongue and was visibly happy when he got the opportunity to use it. And I myself was all alone, like a strip of coral in the middle of the sea, present only to witness the storm.

They laughed.

²⁰ i.e., “Pokrol.”

They grimaced.

Shaking their heads back and forth.

Every now and then one heard “*astagfirullah*”²¹ as well as “*minzalik*.”²² One time our host grimaced like a monkey in pain. I couldn’t stop wondering what in the world made him grimace like that. So I too began to feel edgy. To avoid that disagreeable feeling, I looked at the face of the Arab very closely. I sensed that once a power of some kind had broken this Arab’s will to live. I could feel that his laughter was forced. Those coal-black eyes of his, small, deep, and calm, demanded still more sympathy—eyes that pleaded their cause to every human being willing to open his heart to them. I could also feel that he had poured forth liters of tears everyday, even if only in his tortured mind. It felt as though that house had all along been the only symbol of greatness in his life; a house built cent by cent from *riba*²³ which he collected on foot, step by step, enduring thirst and hunger, weariness and frustration—decade after decade.

When the talking and joking in Arabic ended, the Arab looked at me as if startled by his own realization that I did not know the language of the Prophet. Quickly he switched to talking in Indonesian. He continued:

“Don’t you think so?” he asked, this time turning to me. “When we have no possessions we suffer. And we suffer too when we have them, all the more so.”

Everyone laughed, including me.

All of a sudden thunder roared in the blackened heavens. Everyone glanced at the sky soaring above the edge of the verandah. Not a single twinkling star. The Arab rose, hung his umbrella on his arm, and shook hands with each one of us in turn. His hand felt hot. And so he left, with stumbling steps.

Ustad ‘Amir also left after gulping down his coffee.

The thunder rumbled on. And it felt as if only my host and I were left in this world, along with the lamp, the empty plate, and the empty glasses.

“You weren’t bored listening to his story, were you?”

“Amazing!” I exclaimed in awe.

“What was amazing?”

“His way of speaking! The way he mesmerized his listeners.”

“Just who was mesmerized by his speaking?”

“No one?” I asked.

“Absolutely no one,” he replied.

“Well, in that case, only I was mesmerized. But why weren’t you all too?”

²¹ *Astagfirullah* = God forgive me.

²² *Minzalik* = therefrom. An adverb in Arabic—*mīn dhālika*—used by the author seemingly to highlight the narrator’s incomprehension of the language.

²³ Interest derived from loans. A practice strongly prohibited in the Koran.

The host smiled in surprise. He looked at me long and hard as if he did not believe what I had said. Finally, he spoke very slowly:

"I thought you were bored listening to him. The thing is, in the old days he was a moneylender. Today he owns sixty-seven stone houses here in Jakarta. On average they rent for two hundred a month. Add it up for yourself. I was afraid that you were bored listening to him. You see, in the last five to six years that's been all he can talk about to whoever he meets."

"Amazing," I said once again.

And so the rain too came down, it seemed, as if unleashed.

Jakarta, 1955

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Translated from "Rumah," *Tjerita dari Djakarta: Sekumpulan karikatur dengan manusiaja*, 2nd. ed. (Jakarta: Grafica, 1963).

Translator's note

The Arab in this story is impervious to the tumultuous changes taking place around him in the fledgling nation Indonesia, fresh from the Japanese occupation; he pays no attention to the struggle for independence and widespread violence. For him, the central problem is the same problem as before: how can he get rid of squatters? And things have simply become worse; there is no longer any sense in going through legal channels, as there is no effective rule of law. So he resorts to beating up the Dutchman and threatening the Chinaman, but he is at a loss when it comes to that new species, the Indonesian. No loud statements are made in the story about the rise of the new nation—it is a caricature after all—yet the story captures much about the strange quality of the times as reflected in the capital Jakarta. The Indonesian tenant is a difficult case not because Indonesians "share the same religion," as the Arab says rather emptily, but because the former's status changed with the end of Dutch rule. No longer is he a lowly native beneath the Arab in economic and politico-legal terms, but a member of his own nation—though the gains of newfound citizenship are largely symbolic. After all, the Arab is still the one who owns the houses.

Colonial and post-independence narratives—reports, stories, and popular sayings—have evoked the insidious figure of the Arab landlord and usurer many

times over. He is usually long on religious talk and short on faith. So too the Arab in the story. For all his lip-service to religion, he amassed his wealth by means strongly proscribed by Islam. Pramoedya nicely weaves into the story the irreverent, free-wheeling, and slogan-filled language about Islam. Coffeshop talk of sorts, the conversation captures the cultural peculiarities of a strongly Islamic quarter of Jakarta with Arab residents. And the Arab's speech in particular has a distinctive flavor not rendered in the translation. For example, he contracts the verb *pergi* (to go) to *pigi*. Seldom has the figure of the Arab been portrayed as memorably as in this story, because Pramoedya does not merely satirize the Arab's life but casts it in an absurd and grotesque light, evoking sympathy and laughter at the same time. While other writings simply reproduce the figure of the Arab as evil, Pramoedya's story creates a human being possessed by the economic roles that since the colonial era have been the domain, and perhaps the burden, of many Arabs.

The humor in the story is not in the caricature of the Arab alone but also his audience. Notably, Ustad 'Amir is caricatured by the lively and amusing role that his wives play in his life. Seemingly mere objects of desire to him, distinguishable by height, figure, skin tone, and so on, it is these women who animate his voice. He appears the puppet and they the puppeteers. And the unnamed narrator is made fun of for his gullibility. He is entranced by the mesmerizing quality of the talk in Arabic which turns out to be a tired old story about the Arab's singular obsession—the house.

