

**Publisher:** The Wire

**Date:** 25<sup>th</sup> October 2018

# Malayalam Writer Benyamin's 'Jasmine Days' Wins JCB Prize for Literature

The novel depicts the lives of foreign workers in an unnamed Middle Eastern country on the brink of a revolution.



Malayalam writer Benyamin's novel, *Jasmine Days*, translated from the Malayalam by Shahnaz Habib, has won the inaugural edition of the **JCB Prize for Literature**. The winner was announced at a function in New Delhi on Wednesday.

The winning entry was chosen from among a shortlist of five novels including Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*, Subhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing*, Amitabha Bagchi's *Half the Night is Gone* and Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi*, translated from the Tamil by N. Kalyan Raman.

Speaking at the announcement ceremony, Vivek Shanbhag, jury chair of the 2018 JCB Prize, said one of the things the jury members asked themselves time and again was: “Will this book stand the test of time?”

The winning author, chosen by a jury panel including Vivek Shanbhag, Arshia Sattar, Priyamvada Natarajan and Rohan Murty, receives a cash prize of Rs 25 lakh and the translator receives Rs 5 lakh. The shortlisted authors receive Rs 1 lakh each, and the shortlisted translators receive Rs 50,000 each.

“This is one of the most beautiful days of my life. It is seldom that writers are showered with moments of love, respect and recognition of this order. On the contrary, we are mostly at the receiving end of allegations, misunderstandings, threats and abuse,” Benyamin said after the announcement of the prize.

“In the modern era, reading and writing are not just hobbies, they are a part of the political process in themselves. And at the same time, writers do take caution that novels don’t turn into mere political slogans. Thus, I believe that my novel *Jasmine Days* is not only the narrative of the dictatorship, the Arab Revolution, and troubles but also about solitude, isolation, rejection, sorrow, internal conflicts, despair, frustrations of a human being in each one of us,” Benyamin added.

*Jasmine Days* is the story of Sameera Parvin, a young Pakistani radio jockey working in an unnamed Middle Eastern country whose world falls apart when she is forced to choose between family and friends, love and loyalty, life and death. Through the life of Sameera, the novel depicts the lives of foreign workers in the Middle Eastern country on the brink of a revolution. Sameera finds herself trapped in a number of cultural shocks: coming from a conservative Muslim society, she finds her family appalled at her decision to work as an RJ but also finds her uncle approving of her decision. Things change for her when the political situation in the city changes and Sameera finds herself torn between the clash of communities and her empathy with the Arab protestors.

Author of over 20 books, Benyamin is a former electrical engineer who lived in Bahrain for several years before taking to full-time writing. His earlier novel, *Adujeevitham*, translated by Joseph Koyipally as *Goat Days*, is considered one of the most important books of Malayalam literature, having won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi prize, been reprinted more than a hundred times and translated into several languages. *Goat Days*, told through the story of Najeeb, a Muslim Malayali migrant working as a bonded labourer in a goat farm in Saudi Arabia, is considered a representative story of millions of South Asian migrants working under inhuman conditions in the Gulf.