

An Interview with

The JCB Prize for Literature Winner

By Luke Giles

WINNING INDIA'S RICHEST PRIZE, THE POWER OF
TRANSLATION & THE DANGERS OF INTOLERANCE

“The story is about human conditions, how love and hate can exist simultaneously.”



WINNING AUTHOR BENYAMIN ACCEPTING THE JCB PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

The JCB Prize is an ambitious new literature prize - one that aims to create greater visibility for contemporary Indian writing, both in India and internationally. The prize is the richest of its kind in India, with the winner receiving £26,000, and if applicable, a further £5,000 awarded to the translator. The Literary Director, novelist Rana Dasgupta commented on the prize's focus on translation, stating that “we hope to stimulate much more translation between languages, so that readers may have a more unified sense of the literature in this multilingual country.”

This year's JCB Prize went to *Jasmine Days* by Kerala author Benyamin; an excellent novel that explores the recent turmoil in the Middle East. The JCB Prize jury were glowing in their praise of the novel: “Through the life of a young protagonist, *Jasmine Days* describes the lives of foreign workers in a Middle Eastern country on the brink of a revolution. Beautifully written and translated, this compassionate and morally complex novel confronts some of the difficult questions of our times.”



New Delhi, 25th October

We were fortunate enough to catch up with the jubilant, if a little jaded Benyamin, the morning after a spectacular prize dinner in New Delhi.

Many congratulations on winning the inaugural JCB Prize for Literature, you must be overjoyed to have won such a coveted and prestigious award?

I'm delighted, as well as surprised. I had no idea until the moment they announced my name.

One of the motivations of the prize was to help readers everywhere to appreciate the full diversity of Indian literature. In terms of the JCB prize itself, do you think it has perhaps filled a gap in India for an ambitious literary prize?

Yes, I think the most important thing is that the majority of significant awards, both in India and internationally, are only open to novels originally written in English, so for The JCB Prize to be consciously supporting translation is a great thing for regional writers across India.

Exactly, with over 20 regional languages spoken across India, there must be so many great works failing to reach the majority of the population...

Translated novels are appearing, but they are too small in number. Publishers have begun to take an interest in translated work, as they know that in order to understand what is happening across India, you need to look beyond the core languages to the many regional ones.

I am from Kerala, and I don't speak or read Tamil, the neighbouring state to Kerala, so the only way I know what is happening in Tamil is through translation. Without translation, I would not fully understand the culture in other areas of my country.

In terms of the translation process, it must be difficult as a writer to finish a novel you may



WINNING AUTHOR BENYAMIN ON STAGE WITH R. SIVAPRIYA, JUDGING CHAIR VIVEK SHANBHAG AND LORD BAMFORD, CHAIRMAN OF JCB.

have spent years writing, to then pass it on to someone else to interpret and re-write in another language. How does this process work, do you give creative freedom to the translator?

Certainly, I give freedom to the translator, we have to accept there are some things they understand about the translated language that I do not fully appreciate. In the case of *Jasmine Days*, I gave full creative freedom to the translator and she did a fantastic job. In fact, when I read the final translation, it may even be better than the original work!

The way it worked for me is the translator sends the first draft and we have a number of conversations to make sure the translated version doesn't lose any of the intended meaning.

Moving on to your prize-winning book, Jasmine Days, it would be great if you could give us an insight into your experiences and how they provided the inspiration for the novel?

I moved to the Gulf in 1992 where I lived in Bahrain for over twenty years. Given recent events, we know a bit about this part of the world, but we know very little about the people themselves, their political ambitions and the oppression that they have suffered over the years.

I have first-person accounts and have heard many stories from friends that may not have been covered in the news. There were many different types of incidents and riots, and different wars in the region during this period. I believed I had to write something about what happened to the people in the country I lived, and I felt I had new stories and experiences that I had to share with people.

You don't mention the name of the exact area your story is set, instead simply calling it "The City". Can you explain why you chose to leave out place names, was this to signify that during the Jasmine Revolution it could have been any one of many areas in the Gulf?

Yes, I wanted to tell a story of personal experiences from across the middle-east. If you name the city, I would limit the fictionalised area. By calling it "The City", I can gather incidents and information from things that happened in areas across the region and retell them through a fictional location. It gave me much more freedom of expression to tell the stories I wanted to tell without having to link my story to one particular area.

In the novel you explore the lives of Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims in the middle-east,



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but the main focus of the story is on the life of Sameera as a female Sunni muslim, who had immigrated to the middle-east. Can you explain why you chose to tell the story through this perspective?

I have accumulated many years of knowledge about these people, through my experiences and those of my friends, and I wanted to tell the story in the best way to explain the reasons behind the conflict, but also to highlight the love that still existed between them. The story is about human conditions, how love and hate can exist simultaneously.

In that case, was it important to tell the story from a female perspective?

Yes, I think that as a writer you look at the best way to convey the idea you want to get across to the reader. In the case of this story, I believe telling it from the female perspective provided the best opportunity to convey the complexities of love and hate in the relationships of people living in this part of the world.

One of the themes running through the novel is the danger of religious and cultural prejudices. Given the wider global context of growing intolerance and the spread of anti-migrant sentiment, do you think it is more important than ever for writers to tell stories like Jasmine Days, to encourage people to see things from the other persons perspective, and not just look at it as 'us' and 'them'?

Yes, completely. The writer should always be thinking about putting a balanced view across to the reader, to enable readers to see both sides of a conflict or dispute. We spend a lot of time thinking about things from our perspective, but if we were all to make the effort to understand the

other side, then we can learn to love each other and understand each other. This is the role of the writer in this new era. Writers should always seek to understand both sides of the story, to present the full picture to the reader.

Finally, a quick question about Indian writing in general. There are so many great Indian writers that have been unable to secure international publishing deals, can you give your view on why Indian writers have traditionally struggled to appeal to publishers and readers outside of the Indian sub-continent?

Firstly, we need more translators with the ability to seamlessly translate regional languages into the more widely-spoken languages internationally. Secondly, every writer is addressing someone, and in India, a lot of regional writers specifically address a particular reader, not considering the international reader. The international reader is unlikely to understand the issue, conflict or culture being explored in the book. The writers need to elaborate it more and explain it more, so the book is viable as a translated novel to be read throughout the world. Indian writers must think about the international reader throughout the writing process. Once this happens, Indian writers will change their writing patterns, and there will be many great Indian novels translated and published internationally.

Was the international reader at the front of your mind when writing Jasmine Days?

I always think about the international reader, it is one of my primary concerns when I am writing. I always think to myself, is this understandable in different regions of the world, and if not, I will find a way to explain it within the story.