

'A gripping narrative of human predicament
and surviving hope, yielding an extraordinary
combination of philosophy and allegory.'

A book you have to read'

AMARTYA SEN



'Reading this is to relive the horror, dive into
the darkness and spot a piercing ray of light'

SHABANA AZMI



the hooded light
the wall cracks, the bricks crumble to dust,
the floor heaves
like a giant gasping its last breath,
my husband is gone,
he must have fallen in
he must have fallen in
into the chasm that's gaped open
and where our room was, at my feet
where my child
was pushing the door open,
welcoming us in,
there is only the dark
and there is only
the missing,
there is only
the city and the sea

RAJ KAMAL JHA

The City and the Sea

by Raj kamal Jha



THE JCB PRIZE *FOR*
LITERATURE
— 2019 —

An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

PROLOGUE

My name I cannot tell.

There is a law in my land to protect me, to ensure that I am not shamed, it doesn't allow my name to be mentioned in public, this means I will have to whisper it, under my breath, and if you wish to hear, you may need to move a little closer to where I am or wait for a while, for the noise of small things to fade. In this hotel lobby where I sit, in this silent town by a quiet sea 6000 km away from home. The sound of guests, for example. Their chatter, checking in, checking out, tying tags to suitcase handles, snap of elastic, tap-touch of fingers keying in credit-card pins. Or, we could wait for night to fall, for guests to leave, some to step out through the revolving door into the street, some to walk up to their rooms, others to disappear. Like shadows do in light. That's when I will say it, my name. I shall break the law, speak the unspeakable. You will know who I am. But what's the hurry, I am not going anywhere, I cannot go anywhere. So let's wait for my child and his father, for them to come back from the hotel front yard where they have gone to watch snow, for the very first time. My child says he will return only when he is all white, when his hands freeze, when he can't wiggle his fingers in the mittens we bought at the airport, only then will he come back. You will have to hold me, Ma, he says, thaw me with your breath. Sure, I say, I would love to do that.

Now, go. Go into the snow. My child walks away, my husband says don't you worry, you are on holiday, this trip is your idea, big and beautiful, you worked hard for this, you earned this, you saved for this. Let our child feel snow against his face, in the palm of his hand, in his hair, on his clothes. Let him find out how long it takes for snow to turn to water once it touches bare skin. He is safe here, trust me, he says, I won't let him remain outdoors for long. When the snowfall becomes so thick that it's all a swirl, a blur we cannot see, like in the hotel photos we saw on TripAdvisor, we shall come back and then we can all go for dinner to the Italian restaurant right here in the hotel itself. That sounds great, I say, both of you go ahead, I will wait for you to return. The evening is a Christmas postcard that's unfolded around me. Snow falls. Each flake, perfect symmetry. Iridescent in the dark, lit by the yellow light from the glass lamps inlaid in wrought-iron gargoyles that rise into the blue-black sky above this small town, whose name I do not know except that it's somewhere in Germany, on the Baltic Sea coast. It's here that we have come, the three of us, our family, to celebrate our child turning ten. His first double-digit birthday. We will mark it with our first view of snow, our first view of the sea, our first view of the sky in a foreign country. Each one, my dream come true. You have come at the right time, says the woman at Reception. She is called Herta Muller, her name printed on a badge pinned to the pocket of her white shirt. My child notices that when we are checking in, he says that's the name of the German author who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2009, three years before his birth.

You are absolutely right, she says, then turns to me and says, you have a very bright child, as she hands him a map of the town in which she marks the hotel with a red star. She gives the room keycard to his father. The sea is not far from here, she tells me, it's a quiet sea, you won't find many people on the beach at this time of year. Here they are, back in the lobby, the child and his father, snowcold, snow-wet. We cannot go to dinner like this, I tell them, you will catch a cold, your shoes will stain the floor, let's go to the room, change, and then we can all come down to the restaurant. As we walk up the stairs, we hear our feet against the carpet. The wooden handrail is warm as if there's a heating coil running along its length; the staircase so narrow we climb in single file, I am in front, the child next, then the father. The chill floats up, from them to me, it makes me shiver. We pass a framed print of a painting on the wall.

Mother and Child Sleeping. Eugene Carriere, 1849–1906.

A mother holds her baby close to her, they are suspended in the dark, the woman's face frozen in fear, the child's eyes closed, its small mouth open, is it crying? We step onto the landing, we walk towards our room. The child races ahead, snowmelt drips from his trousers onto the floor, he's taken the keycard from his father, he stands at the door, looks at us once, he smiles, says something I cannot hear, his father stands behind me. Let's wait for him to open the door on his own, his father says, let him learn, and I say, of course, let's wait, we don't walk towards him, we stay where we are, more than ten feet away from the door, watching, as our child taps the keycard on the door sensor, confident and assured in the way he stands, the red light blinks to green, he

pushes the door in, holds it open, gestures to us to follow him in. Freeze this frame. A child happy, excited, at being able to open a hotel door for the first time, all by himself, just like an adult, his parents waiting to walk into the room to change for dinner on the first day of their first overseas holiday. This is what could have happened. This is what could have been. Instead, the hotel lights black out. The wall on either side cracks open, its bricks crumble to dust. The snow-laden wind whistles in, pierces us to the bone. The floor heaves and bucks, the chest of a giant gasping its last breath, trying to break free from the earth that ties it down. The carpet, its skin, twists and tears in a line of lightning that darts down its entire length. The sealed window at the end of the corridor shatters, its glass shards fly, cut my face, drip blood thick and wet. There is no one behind me now, my husband is gone, he must have fallen into the chasm that's gaped open at my feet. And, in front, where our room was, where my child was pushing the door open, welcoming us in, there is only the dark and there is only the missing, there is the city and the sea.

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