

'A philosophical novel that discusses the  
mysterious problems of life and death'



**BENYAMIN**



THE JCB PRIZE FOR  
LITERATURE  
— 2021 —

Longlist



# ANTI-CLOCK



V.J. James

TRANSLATED FROM THE  
MALAYALAM BY MINISTHY S.



# Anti- Clock

by V.J. James

translated by Ministhy S.



*THE* JCB PRIZE *FOR*  
**LITERATURE**  
—2021—

An exclusive extract from the  
JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

## The Carpenter's Son

*'How deserted lies the city, once so full of people. How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations. She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are on her cheeks. Among all her lovers there is no one to comfort her. All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies. After affliction and harsh labor, Judah has gone into exile. She dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place. All who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress.'*

(Lamentations 1: 1-3)

As usual, I am about to go to sleep, after reading the Bible and contemplating its words.

It was Appan who ingrained in me the nightly habit of opening the Bible to any page, and skipping seven lines before starting to read, no matter what the circumstances. Since he had insisted that I shouldn't desist from the routine even if he lay dead, I followed his instructions even on the day death visited my house.

By no means should anyone jump to the conclusion that I am an ingenuous saint. I have a wicked intent that goes against the teachings of the Scriptures. I want to kill Satan Loppo, either by tying a noose

around his neck, bashing his head in with my mallet, or stabbing him through his heart. It is that lone desire that keeps me going.

The bloodier and more dishonourable ending I can think of for Loppo, the better! What he deserves is much more than what I desire. The only way I sustain my life is by keeping a coffin ready for him and waiting for death to ensnare him.

At a mere glance, a coffin maker can assess the body measurements of a person and visualize a fitting casket. It is a place where life is lidded before being sent off on its final journey. Only the coffin maker and those who have experienced death can appreciate that the dead are not merely dead. If someone believes that the dead crumble into dust beneath the earth, he is wrong.

*It was Appan who told me that the coffin is just a temporary retreat.*

I used to frequent Appan's sweaty workplace in my childhood. I became his favourite child as I loved helping him at work, pasting black varnish paper or saffron strips over the panels of the coffin with wheat flour glue. I continued to assist Appan even after my siblings got bored and stopped working. The many nuggets of wisdom that he shared with me in his boundless affection turned my notions on life upside down.

It is hard to believe that there exists a mathematics of life that adheres solely to a coffin. Appan revealed the truth about the hollow tents that interred the lifeless on a foggy December night.

'But only Christians use coffins. What about the others, then?' I questioned naively.

'Who told you that? The pyres of the Hindus and the tombs of the Muslims are all boxes,' Appan said. 'I am sure each religion has something similar. I don't know much about those, my child.'

Appan always confessed his ignorance. He would never besmirch his soul by telling lies. My poor Appan! He would often advise me that whenever others tried to harm us, we should light a candle and pray to the Lord. Whenever I forget my tender-hearted Appan and

get into a frenzy about murdering Loppo, a turbid guilt congeals inside me. Truth be told, my vengeance has no leg to stand on.

Despite my ferocious obsession with Loppo, I doubt whether I would be able to land a stinging slap on him, let alone kill him. Who does not know that a coward's revenge is nothing but a mulishness that dies within himself? However, to convince myself otherwise, I repeat my death wish for Loppo often, and deceive myself. Preparing for murder, I have built a coffin and wait for my enemy to step in it.

Like a moron, I continue to dream that one day, Satan Loppo's sturdy body will fall right into the box I have propped up against the wall. Having crafted it for my arch-enemy, I should be feeling affection instead of hatred for the coffin. It is my heart's beloved creation: A refuge made of wood, the culmination of a lifetime's desire.

If one were to think expansively, it is an act of benevolence too. Though I treat him as my nemesis, there is nobody but me for creating Satan Loppo's final resting place. People build magnificent mansions to live in. But why is it that nobody builds a shelter in advance for their sleep after death? It is such a good deed that I have done for Satan Loppo! Isn't it a marvellous gift when one fashions a luxurious home for someone's last slumber?

Though I pretend to don a saint's robe and justify my intentions, that fluttering mind of mine refuses to be fooled.

'You are deluding yourself that building a coffin is an act of kindness. Wishing to see your enemy lying dead inside is a sin in the eyes of the Lord.'

Like a deflated balloon—punctured during its sojourn in the sky—I then shrivel up and succumb to the pull of the earth. That is my true state of mind right now.

As is my wont, when feeling guilty after transgressing in my thoughts, I place a candle before the picture of the Sacred Heart on the alcove. In some unforeseen future, if I do end up killing that

wretched Satan Loppo, the lighting of this candle might serve as some kind of redemption.

If the Lord accumulates all the candles I have lit till now, the heavens would be flooded with the light of a veritable afternoon sun. As the matchstick flickers and the candlewick lights up, I remember my Appan again.

Appan started making candles after he was no longer able to sustain his household by crafting coffins. It was a small cottage industry, not entailing much capital. I was my Appan's helpmate in that endeavour too. The 'Saint Anthony' brand candles had mediated all the prayers in the parish church and neighbourhood during that time.

Appan would collect the molten teardrops of wax coalesced on the candle stand and transform them into new candles. He earned a decent profit from the candle business. Though we sold our candles at a much cheaper rate than the market price, when the profits started arriving, my pure-hearted Appan suspected an inadvertent sin in that too.

My Appan knelt in confession and muttered in extreme contrition:

'Father, I have made excess profit from the candles.'

'How much did you make, my son?'

'Five times my investment, Father.'

'From whom did you make the profits, child?'

'That would include the sales for this church too . . .'

'Levied a profit from the Lord himself, you rogue?'

The Reverend Father stared at my Appan through the netted separation that filtered out the sins. Fearing the perdition of hell fire, Appan cringed, even as Father burst into hearty laughter. He kindly reduced the debt of my father's sins. After all, the Lord was bound to forgive my Appan, who was generosity incarnate to his own debtors.

Appan made profits so that he could feed his children. Still, if he felt guilty about it, his heart must have been as pristine as that of

an angel. The same gentle soul had carved the heart of the rosewood into an elaborate candle stand and nailed it on the alcove.

When he opened his shop in the morning, Appan would light the candle in front of the Sacred Heart and pray with his eyes closed. Minutes would tick by . . . Appan wouldn't budge even if a customer arrived. It was a holy communion between the coffin shop and the heavens.

When I became older, Appan allowed me to light the candle. At the first instance of that burning flame, I realized that a candle wasn't a mere wax light. Usually, all shopkeepers lit lamps before their favourite Gods at the start of day and prayed for munificent profits. In Shashankan's tailoring shop opposite the road, the lamp is lit before Vighneshvara, with his long trunk and broken tusk. I do not know if the God with the human body, elephantine face, and mouse-vehicle is pleased with Shashankan. Somehow, I am unable to pray the way others do. Isn't it similar to praying for an acquaintance's death?

'*Lord, thy will be done.*' That was the prayer my Appan taught me.

Cogitating on the past, I lit the candle, and a mouse leapt down from the candle stand fixed on the wall. When it started crisscrossing the floor frantically, I left the Lord and Appan to their own devices and chased it.

I had been after that little terrorist for a while!

Not only did the mouse disturb my sleep with its ceaseless squeaking, but it also gnawed at the coffins. It dared to exhibit an indecent acuity, and taunted me by appearing and disappearing suddenly.

The mouse was driving me nuts, evading my traps every time I tried to catch hold of it.

Determined to finish it off this time, I grabbed a piece of wood and gave chase, scattering my work tools in my wake. In the welter of coffins and implements, it was easy for the mouse to play hide-and-seek while dodging me.

I angrily turned each coffin around and peeped beneath. The scamp must be hiding under one of these. Either I would maim it with a wooden chunk or strangle it with my own bare hands!

There it was: A dirty black tail could be seen twirling from within a chink in the coffin made for Satan Loppo.

‘You night raider!’

The mouse, which had made an ill-timed entry inside the casket meant for someone’s posthumous sleep, deserved a solemn death. I moved ahead cautiously—like Yama trying to lasso a soul—without making a sound. The mouse had no clue about the impending disaster.

The Yama in me was struck by a mischievous fancy then.

I caught hold of the tail which was extending through the coffin’s fissure and yanked it. Dreadful squeaks emerged, as the creature thrashed around for its life. It evoked a stink of putrefied fish curry. Since the box was meant for Satan Loppo, I had always imagined his body inside. His body too was forbiddingly dark and furry like that of a mouse. Satan could assume any form, couldn’t he?

Brother Romario, while delivering Bible classes for children, had gone overboard one day while describing Satan. He had ascribed to him horns and a tail, along with an abhorrent, repulsive body.

‘Just like Loppo here,’ Manas cried out. Everyone burst out laughing.

As Lopez’s hard fist connected with Manas’ face, four blood-streaked teeth broke in his mouth. Lopez blazed fiercely, very much like Satan. Thus, he was christened with his nickname—Satan Loppo—in the precincts of the church.

The humiliation associated with that name followed Loppo unremittingly and made him a rebel. There was no day in school when he did not get into fisticuffs because of his name. When he grew up, everyone obsequiously called him ‘Lopez Muthali’\* to his face but jeered at him, calling him ‘Satan Loppo’ behind his back.

---

\* Boss



Imagining Loppo as a mouse, I became excited.

With Satan Loppo having entered the coffin meant for him with inimitable precision, the emerging squeals acquired the exquisiteness of spicily roasted meat. Though it was an illusory joy, I could not help relishing the moment. If one cannot directly fight with someone, imagining retribution soothes one's frayed nerves. The rare occasion when a trifling person like me could torture a powerful man like Loppo deserved celebration.

But the one-to-one fight between man and mouse did not continue for long.

Unexpectedly, I lost my foothold and fell backwards among the coffins.

In my hand was a twitching black tail.

Drops of blood were dripping from it.

The mouse scabbled desperately between the coffins with its bleeding butt, screeching wildly. Its heart-rending curse rang out more lucidly than any in a human tongue. Then it bolted from my sight and vanished inside an obscure mouse hole.

It came to my notice that I had fallen inside a coffin. Like an undersized corpse, I was lying inside a rather large box. I felt amused at my pathetic position. It was shameful, this ghostly status that I had brought upon myself.

'Lord, you boxed me in, didn't you?' I looked at the Sacred Heart lit up by the candle and chuckled, 'Alive and kicking!'

Though I laughed for quite a while about landing inside that coffin, my eyes soon welled up with tears. My sight was shrouded by a moistness which could be claimed by neither happiness nor misery. My laughter unexpectedly turned into wails, and tears started flowing uninhibitedly. Nowadays, a thin line separates my laughter and tears.

Recollecting my Appan's words that men should desist from crying, I slowly regained my composure. Then I wished to brag about my latest adventure.

Whom should I disclose it to?

If only my Beatrice and my children were here, I would have showcased the tail and been lauded for my achievement.

‘Finally, I trapped that bratty mouse, my dear! Look, how dark its tail is.’ I would be a coxcomb indeed.

‘Huh! What bravado in your dotage!’ Beatrice would tease.

‘Appa, how did you cut off the mouse’s tail?’ my young daughter Roselyn would lisp.

Then I would enact the battle scene between man and mouse. After catching the second show of the movies in the village theatre, I would often mimic the emotional scenes for the benefit of my family. Actors like Sathyan, Kottarakkara, and Sankaradi would travel afar with me. I am a master of facial expressions. Even when I would act out the tragic scenes, my family members would shake with laughter. Since my poor Rosarios was blind, he would laugh on hearing the laughter of others.

It would be at that juncture, when the talented actor in me would bring to life the human-animal conflict, that my eldest son Alphonse, the scholar under training, would put forth the question on genetic science: ‘Appa, was the mouse male or female?’

I would be irritated at not having determined the mouse’s gender. When it came to mice, it was difficult to guess grandchild or progenitor, let alone male or female! Yet I would reply like this:

‘I did not check, Alphonse.’

‘Likely to be female. Suppose it is a male, will it have tailless children?’

‘Perhaps . . .’

Then my sightless Rosarios would sigh deeply, ‘Poor creature, how it must have suffered when its tail was severed! If a hand is cut, wouldn’t we hurt?’

The long-sightedness of my blind son often left me speechless. Though he could never watch my enactments, I perceived that amongst all of them, Rosarios understood me the best. Sometimes I felt that both his sightless eyes were lit up by candles.

My dearest family would talk about the next generation of tailless mice running amok among the coffins. We would have our supper. Then we would embrace one another and go to sleep.

Ah, those were just my crazy dreams!

It was on a tepid Friday that the augury had descended from the skies, accompanied by thunder and lightning.

*'Carpenter's son! Build a tent for four.'*

I built the tent without complaining. When my Beatrice and children were resting—in a coffin crafted by my own hands—in the third row of the weed-infested cemetery, with whom could I talk about the tailless mouse?

Leaving behind unceasing rains and an everlasting Good Friday, when everyone took off for the graveyard, my life was sucked into the pits of hell.

No, I do not need these unbearable memories.

I don't want to remember Appan either, the one who left after reminding me to uncomplainingly light candles before the Lord. Neither Appan nor the Lord will understand the plight of someone who wishes himself dead but is forced to continue living. If I am holding on, it is only from the desire to see a human-shaped ghoul lie inside a coffin that I have built.

With a heart that bled continually, I retreated to the coffin workshop. I found my tools and started hacking away at the wood. Collecting the chopped-up pieces, I built the world's smallest coffin. It had all the attractions of being small and beautiful.

Observing all reverence due to a corpse, I placed the tail inside and covered the top with a wooden lid. I nailed the lid in, and then carrying it on my shoulders, walked towards the southern part of the house. By the side of the shivering macaranga tree, I dug a pit with my bare hands and buried the box.

To invoke the atmosphere of an elegant funeral, I recited a requiem silently and cast a fistful of earth over the box.

'May the soul rest in peace.'

It felt as if I had buried a disgusting organ of Satan Loppo. Though a battle was raging in my mind, I felt a sense of victory. Yet, when I returned to the coffins, my mind was melancholic, like an orphan's grave. There was a trail of blood left behind by the mouse's posterior all the way to the box made for Loppo. It was the largest among all the coffins in my shop.

My life, which dragged on without anything to share with anyone, was not even worth a mouse's tail. Rather than stretching it meaninglessly, it was better to put an end to it. It could then be kept inside a box and buried in the earth to make it fertile.

*Wasn't my shop a big coffin, housing someone who was long dead?*

# Discover the Greatest Novels of the Year

If you enjoyed this extract and wish to read on, [click here](#).

V.J. James' *Anti-Clock* is one of ten books on the 2021 JCB Prize for Literature longlist.

Follow @TheJCBprize.

The winner of the 2021 JCB Prize for Literature will be announced on 13th November.



## THE JCB PRIZE FOR LITERATURE —2021—

[www.thejcbprize.org](http://www.thejcbprize.org)

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS