Gods And Ends

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THE JCB PRIZE *FOR*
LITERATURE

—2021—

An exclusive extract from the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

Philomena Sequeira

Philopotamus, they called her, the boys in the trees, following her slow progress down the main street of Lourdes Colony, Orlem. 'Phi-lo-Phi-lo-po-tah-mus,' they would shriek, one ragged chorus picking up where the other left off. She, unsmiling, would walk the gauntlet, her shoulders swinging and double chins bobbing, eyes locked straight ahead. If she looked like she had a purpose, she reasoned, they would pipe down and go away. They never did.

When Philomena was little—a sweet child among the motley bunch of children perennially outside Obrigado Mansion, where she was born and raised—the elderly ladies of the neighbourhood would walk up to her and tug her cheeks. 'So cute, men, she is,' they would say to each other, before stumbling into shared memories of former friends and relatives who were once as cute, in better times that were long behind them. Philomena would endure their caresses and accept their adulation without question. She would then wriggle out of their grasp and waddle back to her games with the other children.

One of their favourite pastimes involved cutting a notch into a paper plane, hooking it to a rubber band, then lighting the tip on fire before sending it whizzing into the air. No one ever got hurt by this potentially catastrophic idea except for Zuleikha Furtado, who once had the misfortune of standing beneath a plane that was half on fire. She survived the incident, but her bald spot took years to disappear, and the children of Obrigado never let her forget it.

Then there was the game that involved creating a little noose from the vein of a coconut palm leaf. Carefully knotted, it would be lowered into one of the gutters on either side of the street. While some of the children held their nooses in a row, others, a few feet away, would swirl the muddy waters, prompting the frogs living there to move. The trick was to get a noose in front of a swimming frog. The minute one moved its head into a dangling loop, the noose would be pulled, yanking the frog cleanly out of the water and leaving it to struggle at one end. It called for patience and an immense amount of concentration. It also explained why cricket bats and footballs were often found abandoned during the monsoons, with their owners all huddled in groups around a gutter.

Every day at 6 p.m., on those wet, windy days and after, Mrs Brigette Sequeira would call for her daughter from the crumbling edifice that was Obrigado Mansion. 'Philo, come for tea,' she would scream from the first floor. 'Dadda will be home in twenty minutes.'

Philomena would drop her noose and run. Pushing open the red gate with paint peeling at its corners, she would walk past Mrs D'Costa, Mrs D'Souza or whoever happened to be around or staring at her from a doorway. 'Evening, aunty. Evening, aunty,' she would mumble, rushing past before anyone could stop and ask about her parents, and whether they were still fighting. She never quite knew

how to tell them that they had never stopped. ‘So big she’s becoming, men,’ Mrs D’Costa would say to Mrs D’Souza. ‘Nowadays these children have no time for us only.’
Still running, Philomena would hurry up the narrow concrete stairs of the building, her hands held out against its filthy walls for support, and head for Room 108. It was the last room on the first floor of the one-storey structure built in 1903 by the landlord, Francisco Fernandez, born in the village of Quepem in Goa. He had spent most of his life here, surviving solely on rent collected from his tenants. Holding her nose as she rushed past the two common toilets that stank perennially, Philomena would stop running a few feet from her door. She would wait a second or two, until she caught her breath, before walking in. It was always with a sinking feeling, especially on Sundays, when her dadda would be home.

Jude Sequeira was at the table when Philomena walked in that evening. Before him was a glass, a bottle of water and a quarter of Officer’s Choice, the brand of whisky he preferred, not because it tasted like real whisky but because it was cheap enough for him to afford three times a week.

Philomena ignored the table and walked straight to the kitchen, which took her less than ten steps to do.

Each living space in Obrigado Mansion had one large room and a cooking space, with a small cubicle at the corner that served as a bathroom. The cubicles had no doors, so they could only be closed by the drawing of curtains hung from makeshift rods. There were no overhead or underground tanks for water, so tenants did what they could to store their share in plastic buckets or barrels, waking up daily at 5 a.m. for the pitiful quota of a half hour allocated to them by the municipality.

The Sequeiras had split up their living room with the help of a wooden partition—after almost a decade of begging their landlord for permission—to create a separate sleeping area that they referred to as the bedroom. It comprised a large bed that Brigette had received as part of her dowry, which had supposedly belonged to her grandfather and had been made from a single block of teak. Philomena didn’t care about the wood but liked the bed immensely and thought about it for a second as she stepped into the kitchen, reaching for a clay pot in which boiled water was kept. The clay cooled the water, unlike refrigerators that chilled it. Few of the tenants could afford refrigerators at the time. Brigette was at the stove, stirring something in a steel vessel while making balls of dough for chapattis. As Philomena poured water into the plastic cup placed upside down on the covered clay pot, her father called out.

‘Where you’re going without saying good evening?’

‘Good evening, Dadda,’ she called out meekly.

‘You will only say it when I tell you or wot?’ Jude asked, his voice rising a notch.

‘Sorry, Dadda.’

‘Wot you did all day today? Come and tell me.’

‘I went to school and then to play.’

‘Playing with all those bleddy roadside fellows all day. Wot you’re thinking, men? I’m working to send you to school, and you want to bleddy play with these loafers? You did your homework?’

‘I’ll do it after *khaana*, Dadda.’

‘Why khaana, men? All the time khaana. Look at your size. You’re becoming like your mumma, bleddy fat—’

He was cut short by the appearance of Brigette at the kitchen door. ‘What you want, men?’ she asked. ‘Our daughter wants to eat khaana, let her no! If you don’t want to spend on food for her, what you want to buy more liquor or what?’

‘Shut up, men,’ Jude shouted. ‘Wot is your bleddy business what I buy? You’re working or wot? You bleddy sit and gossip with the building ladies. My money, my liquor. Your father’s paying or wot?’

‘Keep my father out of this, men,’ Brigette shouted back. ‘When he was alive, he gave everything you asked no? Now that he’s dead, you want to bleddy take his name?’

‘Wot big thing he gave, men? Wot he bleddy gave? One big cupboard and a bleddy gold chain? You want me to put a garland on his photo or wot?’

‘Gold chain and cupboard only you remember, men? Wedding money who gave? That wedding car who paid for? Your mumma wanted new dress, who gave?’

‘Wot you are dragging Mumma’s name for, men? I’ll bleddy give you a tight slap.’

‘Give, men. You can only hit ladies. If my brother comes, you’ll bleddy sit in a corner like a coward.’

‘I’ll fuck your brother, men. Wot I’m scared of? You think I’m scared of him or wot? Bring him and show, men. See what I’ll do then. Bring men, go and bring if you got guts.’

Philomena returned to the kitchen, the cup of water untouched before her. She stared at its walls, the sickly green peeling paint. It had been wallpapered once, before she was born, but the pattern was no longer recognizable. She thought she could see a hint of sunflowers, but it could easily have been yellow dots in an abstract pattern. It didn’t matter either way. A crash of breaking glass interrupted her thoughts, followed by the sound of a slap. She rushed outside to see Brigette trying to push Jude, her

left cheek reddening, tears streaming down her face. Jude, his eyes bloodshot, pushed her away. 'Wot you're looking at, men,' he told Philomena. 'Bring another glass from inside and sweep this up. Do some work, men, around the house. This is a hotel or wot?'

She did as she was told.

Francisco Fernandez

No one knew how long Obrigado Mansion had stood at that little corner of the street. What its tenants did know was that it had begun to crumble, sinking into the earth, one chipped brick at a time. No one knew what the original colour of its walls had been; a few corners painted yellow and some traces of whitewash were all that remained. The rest was now naked brickwork, exposed to all weather and condemned to wear a green tinge during the monsoon when moss covered the sides and damp crept into the bones of those who slept within.

It had been named by Francisco's father, Emerciano Fernandez, who had, according to those who knew the family, never left his village in Quepem, south Goa, to come and visit it. This didn't trouble Francisco, who was never really bothered by anything other than the rent of Rs 125 per room due on the third day of every month. It was collected by him and put away by his daughter-in-law, Dulcine, a widow who had lost her husband, Francisco's only son, Trifornio, in a fishing accident less than a year after they had been married. That was fourteen years ago.

Francisco's two rooms occupied the front of the mansion, with three others built into the back for tenants and a further three on the first floor. He would walk from Room 103 to 105 on the ground floor, then 106 to 108 on the first, tapping the half-open front doors gently and smoking patiently until representatives of the families came to greet him with money in their hands. He would ask how they were, but never in a manner that showed he cared in the least. He would totter home and then settle into an ancient chair in his living room, happy to wait another month before repeating the exercise.

As twilight approached, Dulcine would collect the money and carry it to her bedroom to be stored under layers of clothes deep inside her steel cupboard. It would lie there with the rent of previous months and years, away from the banks Francisco had never learnt to trust, safe for when he decided to take it all home to his late daddy's bungalow in goa. As his daughter-in-law went about her task, Francisco would walk to the kitchen and reach for a bottle of cashew feni placed on the refrigerator. Mixing a large portion with water, he would carry the glass to his living room and sit there listening to the clock tick, while children of the colony played noisy games outside.

Dulcine would sit by the kitchen window, braiding her hair for a man who would never come home. She hummed an old *manddo* that her mother and aunts would sing on quiet summer evenings in goa. '*Tambdde roza tuje pole, dhukhanim bhorleat mhoje dolle* [Your cheeks are like roses red, while from my eyes these tears bled]. *Papachem licens asa zalear polle, Kazar zanvcheak mhoje kodde* [Ask for your father's approval, so you and I can someday be wed].'

Surrounding Francisco, on the walls of his home, were framed black-and-white photographs of relatives long deceased: his son Trifornio, aunty Claire, cousin Rudolph, sister Janet. There was also a large wedding photograph of himself with his late wife Betty, clicked decades ago when he had been tall and dapper, and she had been the prettiest girl in the village of Divar. Francisco would stare at each of those faces in turn, mouthing words he alone could decipher. After the darkness outside was complete, the children finally home in front of their meagre dinners, he would rise and fry an egg for supper. He didn't know if Dulcine had eaten, and never asked. His hands would tremble slightly as he ate sitting before the radio. He never switched it on.

Jude Sequeira

'Dese Orlem buggers are fatted men. Solid dey crib, dis is not working, dat is not working, so little space we got, so small houses we got, wot dey bleddy know about anything, men? Wot dey know about life sitting on their fat arses and complaining about dis and dat. Bleddy fuckers think dey own the bleddy place just because one– two years dey spend in bleddy Dubai and Kuwait and all. Fuckers don't know we also know people in the gulf, we know bleddy wot dey do, licking that sheikh's arse for one–two dinars.

'Now I know everyone here men, years I've spent saying hello hello to everyone, all dese fuckers I know. Wot dey do, wot dey say after mass, all bullshit. No one bleddy gives a damn about Orlem men if you go outside. If you tell people you're from Orlem, dey say wot is Orlem, where it is? Dese fuckers think dey got a lottery or something, telling everyone they live here. See the Bandra fuckers, men. Wot bleddy Orlem has dat the Bandra fuckers don't have? Wot bleddy gold is in the streets here? Half the bleddy Bandra fuckers live here now, selling houses for peanuts and taking wot is left and living *susegad* on the interest only. Dat is the life, men.

'One bleddy fucker goes to Dubai, comes and thinks he knows everything. I'll tell you about Orlem, men. Wot is here? Nothing. Two–three bleddy useless schools, one big church, three doctors who can't tell their arseholes from their elbows, one dirty bleddy fish market, one nursing home where my daughter was born and where the food was so bad I bleddy praised the Lord I was not delivering, and one graveyard for all dese fuckers to go to in the end. Dey act like it's bleddy London, men. Walking lagdis lagdat showing off bleddy shitty shiny dresses. Who else wears these dresses, men? So much pink and gold, no other colours are dere or wot? Eyes bleddy hurt just looking at what dey wear, men.

‘Only good things are parties. Every week one–two parties you can go to. If you don’t have friends den you have to look at the parties from outside like those bleddy D’Souzas. No friends dey have, only Born Again friends who only drink holy wine and fuck once every ten years. Bleddy frauds. Once I went to this party, here only it was, someone from Eddie’s bar invited me. Come men, free booze he said, so wot I bleddy cared, I *tapkaod* with him. Some gulfie fucker’s house it was, all Scotch and all, I bleddy had four-five pegs non-stop in case he aksed who are you and wot you’re doing in my house. Den I put some Scotch in this empty Thumsup bottle to take home also.
Everyone was tight, men, no one was looking also.

‘Parties are important, men, but only if dere is booze. Once I went to this bleddy house for some communion party or something, and sofdrink dey were giving. Where’s the Scotch men, I aksed. No alcohol, dat fellow said. It’s holy day no, our baba’s holy communion day. Bleddy wot Jesus was turning water into wine for, men, I aksed him. He was not drinking or wot? Where you saw the priests drinking holy sofdrink at mass, men? It’s wine no? Den wot party dis is? Fucker got angry, men, but all the other fuckers were also looking dis way dat way, searching for the bar. Wot we bleddy cared about his son’s holy communion, men? We also had holy communion, and our bleddy uncles, aunties were all tight. Wot dey bleddy cared?

‘First when I came to Orlem, dese fuckers were thinking I’m a bleddy village fucker because I came from Umerkhadi. Where it is, dey were aksing. Bleddy fuckers acting like dey were born in the fucking Taj Mahal hotel. Half of dem came from bleddy Bassein and Nala Sopara, fuckers. I put dem in their place men. Umerkhadi is where all the real men are, I tol dem. One–two came to fight, and I caught one fucker’s balls and aksed, wot you want? After dat all friendly dey became. You have to show dem men, otherwise dey think dey are Lord Focklands.

‘I’ll tell you something, men, if you ever come to Orlem. If you want to buy a house, just see the nameplates. All dese Gulf fuckers who buy two–three flats together and have their names on all the nameplates, just run and find some other building only. One–two flats dey buy and suddenly dey think someone has made dem king of the buildings, men. And when dey sell their bungalows and get flats, den also dey think dey are bleddy landlords. Same bleddy names also dey give to the buildings. Honey Vista one building is called. Wot name, men, dat is? Where dere is honey? Wot is Vista? No one bleddy knows only and proudly after mass dey will tell everyone, come to our house, men, Honey Vista, and everyone will say yeah yeah nice building. Lucky, men, you’ll are. Bullshit, men.

‘Only good thing is the chicks, men. All solid chicks are here. See wot dey wear, men, all short short dresses. One bleddy fashion parade only it becomes at mass. Like Jesus Christ is hanging from the cross and dese chicks are tempting him to look down, lagdat only dresses dey wear. Dat’s why I also got tempted, men. So many chicks in Umerkhadi but one bleddy mistake I made and found dis one from Orlem. Always aks around, men, before going with dese chicks. Dey smile and laugh and you think, nice one dis is and den you get married and in two days you know the true colours. One mistake and everything you will lose. Aks me, men, see wot I got stuck with. Tcha.

‘See, men, in Umerkhadi, we dint have all dis bullshit about wot he said and wot she said because we had to fight, men. Fight or someone will take your bleddy house and go. How many of us lived in this one house, men, if I tell you shocked you will be. I was dere with my five brudders and four sisters and my mumma and dadda and sometimes my papa and nana also stayed when dey came from goa. In one room, men. How we slept, how we ate, how we cooked, we only know. One small bathroom, no water, and every house had five-six people men. Dese bleddy Orlem fuckers here in Obrigado complain about small small houses. I tol dem, come one night to Umerkhadi, men, and dis place will look like a bleddy palace.

‘Mistry building it was called, where our room was. Very old it was even den, so I don know if it’s dere also now. Must have gone now. Some builder must have made one of dose tall buildings and sold it to the bleddy diamond merchants. Who else can bleddy afford, men, for that price? Four-five lakhs who has? Unless you’re a bleddy thief or a doctor or something, who has money like dat? Bleddy doctors are also thieves only, men. One bleddy operation they charge one lakh. Wot they’re giving, new heart and new liver or wot?

‘Sometimes I think I should have stayed in Umerkhadi only. Nice it was, men. Solid we used to fight but one bleddy *lafda* from outside and all the boys would come, men, solid unity and all we had. So many friends also I had. Here where I have real friends, men? Dese bleddy Obrigado fuckers are my friends or wot? Tcha, men. Just bleddy hi and bye I say to dem. Some friends I have at Eddie’s, because only a man who drinks should be your friend. I don trust anyone who says he doesn’t drink, men. Who you are, men? Jesus Christ’s brudder or wot? Who tol you not to drink, men? Priest or wot you are? Same bleddy fuckers will come with their cocks out wen some hot chick passes by. Bleddy saints or wot dey are? I know who dese fuckers are, men.

‘Bombay was better back den, in Umerkhadi. All of us were together, no bleddy Catlick, Hindu, Muslim shit. All together used to play and all. Only dose Parsi fuckers used to stay separate, because everyone knows dese Parsis marry their brudders and sisters, men. We used to bleddy celebrate everything, all Diwali and Eid and whatever, all on the road we used to be. For dat ganesh Chatutti we used to dance, men, on the bleddy roads and go to Chopati. Every year, men. Now see all dis bullshit. Only Catlicks in some buildings, no Muslims in some buildings, only Hindu colonies. Wot bullshit. In Mistry building, if you fell sick, everyone came with medicine. Some fucker wud bring some leaves, someone wud make some shitty soup. Here who cares, men, if you live or die? Which Catlick you have seen coming before the funeral? Only afterwards dey come, praying and crying and saying trust in god and all.

‘Why the British left, men, my mumma used to say everytime. I don know wot she wanted from dem, but everytime she used to tell us. Custard and all we used to get, she used to say. Wot custard, men, I aksed her. For custard you want British rule or wot? She was bleddy angry, men, all dis corruption and all. Everything was working wen dey were here, she tol me. Trains, buses, roads, everything was working. Now nutting works only. Roads dey dig up every week, searching for god knows wot, trains stop every day and can’t get in also sometimes, and can’t bleddy do anything in that government office

without giving money, men. All corrupt bastards only in dose bleddy government offices. Fuckers only sit and drink tea and ask for money.

‘Our priests were also good fellows. Nowadays only bleddy fuckers who want to bleddy sit and do nutting become priests. Wot work dey do, men, show me? Just say some masses. I also can say, men, mass, wot is dere? Bible is dere no? I can’t read or wot? I’ll bleddy read it, men, in front of all these fuckers. One–two jokes also I’ll tell, men, about Jesus and his miracles and all. Aks anyone, men, solid jokes I know. No one laughs in church, men, dese days, den wot fun is dere? Why I’ll go and sit for one bleddy hour and see dese fuckers’ faces?

‘From Umerkhadi you could go everywhere, men. On Saturdays and all we used to go to dockyard, and wot bars, men. Cheap booze. Here where you get cheap booze, men? Pydhonie we used to go to, take one bus and go, and buy vegetables and all dirt cheap. Now see wot vegetables you get, men, for fifty bucks one–two bleddy bunches you get. We used to come with enough for all of us, men. So many in one house, solid cooking also we had to do no?

‘Hard to forget, men, all dose times. good times, all our friends and all. Solid fun we had, one big jingbang we were, all picnics and all every time. And wot parties, men. I want to go and see all dose fuckers in Mistry building. See if dey are staying dere only. After weddings and all many of us left, men, and now Mumma and Dadda and all are dead, so who is dere? We sold our place long back. I want to see who is dere in that building now. Dustbin dey call it, dese proudy fuckers. Wot dey know, men, how we lived. No space and all we had, but we were kings, men, dere. Kings.’