

**A white-hot  
novel about  
today's India**



**to a**  
**prelude**  
**to a**  
**BOOM!**  
**to a**

A novel

**annie  
zaidi**



Prelude to a Riot

by Annie Zaidi



THE JCB PRIZE FOR  
LITERATURE  
— 2020 —

An exclusive extract from  
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

## Garuda Wades through Medieval History with Class 10-B

A man, once his bum is firmly attached to a big chair, modifies his name suitably. He needs a name of cosmic significance. Light of the World. Moon-Glory Hovering over the World. Lord of the Skies. The Terrible. Divine Flame. Ocean Pearl. The Universe Itself.

Problem with this guy was, he wasn't very fancy. He sounded like just another brown guy. Maybe he felt that way, too. His father was an ordinary soldier, one of those who worked their way up. Slave dynasty type.

No, no. Not an actual slave. He soldiered up the ranks. A common man, sort of. Many new dynasties were formed in this way. Even kings have to trust someone, right? And they do not trust their own family members for obvious reasons. If you remember your ancient history, Ajatshatru-Bimbisara. Recall?

Ah! Bad question, Garuda. Never ask 10-B if they recall what we did last semester.

Onwards! This guy, Hyder, was a solid fighter. Heart like a tiger. Brain also superb. How do we know? Well, if he wasn't smarter and more useful—see, finally it comes down to being useful to the king, and he was very useful. Why else was he hired? Why was he promoted? Just for fun? See, the establishment always needs a few upstart generals. But eventually, the fellow gets wise. He starts to think, aha! The king cannot do without me. This means, it is I who deserve to be king. So he makes himself equal in power to the king. Then his son inherits his power.

He never went to school, you know? Couldn't read. But he had his fierce heart and his soldier's smarts. There was serious fighting in those days. Not like nowadays. Flying above, bombing the whole country. Civilians, women, children, dogs, cats, caterpillars. In fact, there's no need to even fly overhead these days. You just push one button and a missile does the job. Who needs courage these days to go to war?

They're upping your fees next year. Did you know? Air-conditioned classrooms. So you all don't have to rot in this heat. What they'll do about power cuts, I don't know. Your school is going International. Have you heard? Capital I, International.

They will probably need two white faces to put on the faculty list. Otherwise nobody takes 'International' seriously. Your parents will want to see a white face if they are going to pay that kind of fat fees. Black faces will not do. Botswana does not qualify as international. Chinese faces are risky. Your parents can't tell Nepal from China. Nor can I. Border-nation peoples. You can't tell Nepalese from Chinese just by looking at a face. At any rate, I would be happier if they hired Nepalese teachers rather than Americans or Japanese.

Do you know how certain kinds of rot affect fruit? From the outside, the fruit looks fine. You start eating. You don't feel the rot until there's a gravelly bitterness on your tongue. That's the thing. The white man has left us to rot from the inside out.

These are instruments of confinement. Bench, desk, blackboard, cane. They taught us to sit like one teaches a dog. Put up a paw, shake hands, nice doggy. Sit, stay! Don't change your desk every day. The white man disliked confusion. Brown people, we are more complicated. We don't mind chaos. Crowds and noise. Not just on festival days. We thrive on chaos. No traffic rules. Cows, donkeys, monkeys. Everything is tolerated. What we do not tolerate is movement. Social mobility.

Do you understand the difference? Movement is not a byproduct of confusion. And it is not temporary. It is seeking new positions, maybe permanent positions. Movement versus inertia. Static versus kinetic? You must have read all this in Physics.

To give you an example, take your people, Fareeda. They might have been something else before they converted.

Yes, okay. Maybe you did come all the way from Arabia on a ship. Who knows? But even in Arabia, before the seventh century, people did convert. Here comes a new religion, a new messiah. People liked what they heard, or sensed that the winds of power were blowing in a new direction. They changed their identity so that the wind would be behind them, filling their sails. They travelled, and the same thing happened all over the world. One thousand years ago, or four hundred years ago. Kings won battles, sure. You know the word 'zeal'?

Where is your pocket dictionary? No, everyone does not need to look it up. Deepika, please look up zeal: z-e-a-l. Read it out for the class.

Now the thing is, even though people might bow to the zeal of a new king, they do not easily revert to their old identity once that ruler dies, or is deposed. Why?

Is it because people have discovered that there is something of value in the new faith? Or is it that they no longer need to crawl for the crumbs of approval from the old establishment? Or maybe, they discover that it's all the same, this identity or that.

Anyway. Point is, elites dislike movement. White elites are thrown out of the country, yet everyone is still sitting in their assigned caste places. Some of you, you have hundreds of acres of land. Your ancestors were rewarded with land. Pampered by generations of kings, brown as well as white. Even those who couldn't keep their backsides attached to the throne without the help of mercenary soldiers, they doled out land as a reward, and they took it away as punishment. You think you inherited your land because of your talents? How many of you would pass a farming test?

The bell will ring in ten minutes. No need to look at your watch, Yashika. That's the third time you've looked at it.

What I am saying is, you must learn to weave bamboo. Hand-fans made of bamboo. Electric fans, air conditioners, generators are all fine but twenty-four-hour power supply is

not possible. Not for all. Most of you, sixty per cent of this class will get only two hours' power supply every day. Give it ten years.

You don't believe me? You want me to write it down and sign a piece of paper? I can do that. Come back and talk to Garuda sir in ten years.

They will start by rationing diesel. Electricity will become very expensive. You will get married and have three kids each. Stop giggling. You will struggle to find clean water. Have you heard of climate change imperialism?

We'll discuss it in Geography. For now we must read History. After the school goes International, you will have different teachers for Geography, History and Civics. They will not call it 'Civics' then. They will call it Anthropology and Political Science. But as of now, they expect you to be civic rather than political.

If only we had had the sense to unite behind a strong, brown ruler three hundred years ago, we could have reversed the imperial onslaught. He would have kept our wealth here. He would have built better weapons. He would not send brown soldiers to fight for the freedom of white people across the seven seas. Tiger heart, yes, but he also had a brain.

Open your books to page 147. Fareeda! Please read out the first two paragraphs.

## Fareeda's Soliloquy

Dada must be losing his eyesight or else he'd have seen it's pointless. The way he goes on breaking his back over that runt of a tree that won't give us the littlest banana. He keeps saying it will. *Wait and see. It will. This year.*

This year, that year, next year. Next year, my brother says, it will no longer matter. Banana, pepper, the estate, none of it. Our grandfather, he says, must be the only person in town who does not see it coming. I asked him, what's coming?

*You are such a baby, and you are stuck here. But our grandfather is not a baby. He is stuck here on purpose. He travels around, he knows people. He should be able to see it coming.*

When I returned from school, I thought of asking our grandfather about this 'it' that's supposed to be coming. I found him in the garden, bent over and whispering to that same stupid banana plant. Then he saw me and made a loud sniffing sound near a flower. Pretending to have a cold. As if I don't know he talks to the plants. I asked him straight off. Do you see it coming?

*Patience. Love and patience. Nothing it can't do. A lily will bloom in the desert. What did they tell us about the land? When my father, your great-grandfather came here, they said nothing would ever grow here. For fifty thousand rupees, they were glad to get rid of it. Now see!*

*But they never loved the land. When you love, you don't just scratch the surface. You dig deep, gently uncover. Listen to what the earth is trying to say. What is her need? See what's under her skin. Too much rock? Loosen it, break it, give it your marrow. First, you sacrifice in love—*

I stamped my foot hard as if to shake off an ant crawling up my socks. Mariam has told me a hundred times not to do this in front of Dada. It is rude, she says. *You are not two years old.*

That's her favourite theme. Me not being two years old. I make it a point to stamp several times. That way, I am not stamping my foot like a kid. More like, I'm trying to kill some ant or centipede. But Dada knows. At once he stopped talking about love. I tried again.

What's this thing that's coming? How come my brother and everyone else in town can see 'it'?

The straps of my schoolbag were digging into my shoulders. His fingers, tipped with crescents of dirt, rubbed the waxy leaves, hovered over the pinched petals of a flower. Then he started to poke the banana stem all over, like Doctor Aunty used to poke my stomach when it hurt.

*What makes you ask, little baby? Do you see anything coming?*

I scuffed my shoes in the mud. The tiffin thing with Yashika and Deepika. I hadn't said a word last week. If I told him now, he would ask, why didn't you tell me before? He may insist on going to the school to have a word with the principal.

I shook my head. I just want to know, I said.

We stood in silence before the obstinate plant that would not yield any fruit. Then he knock-knocked on the top of my head with his knuckles. *We should go indoors or you'll catch the sun.*

Before I could roll my eyes, he let out a little snort. I rolled my eyes anyway and we both allowed ourselves a snigger. He always sniggers when people tell him to keep me indoors, lest I 'catch the sun'.

The only way I'll ever catch the sun is if the sun falls out of the sky and comes at me like a cricket ball coming over our boundary wall. I was born in the blazing afternoon heat, right here on the estate. I can take a lot of sun. My grandfather knows but he says it anyway, just to watch me roll my eyes or stamp my foot.

*My smallest, most precious thing. I can't let the sun get you.*

I waited until he had finished saying the whole thing, then I took a deep breath and said it out loud. Abu doesn't want to work the land. He says it's pointless because we cannot take the land with us when we leave....

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