



THE JCB PRIZE FOR  
LITERATURE  
—2022—

Longlist

# Rohzin

by

Rahman Abbas

Translated by Sabiqā Abbas Naqvi

An exclusive extract from  
the JCB Prize for Literature



CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY  
INDIAN WRITERS

Let Me Acquaint Myself with My  
Being's Poison  
(*Jo Zeher Hai Mere Andar  
Wo Dekhna Chahun*)



It was the last day in the lives of Asrar and Hina.

The sea that had its arms around Mumbai was ferocious. It desired to finally win the centuries-old battle, gulp the island and be victorious. Tall waves rose and fell, rose again and dashed against the shore. It had been raining for the past three days, so much that now the dark alleys, narrow lanes, the wide roads and the crumbling streets of the city were all submerged in knee-deep water. Black clouds veiled the sky. The city no longer remembered how the rays of the sun felt and looked. The sky was leaking through huge holes in its being, as if it had transformed into a never-ending waterfall. The waters of the sea had found a comfortable entry into the underground drains. The drains were a battleground for the

unstoppable rainwater and the roaring sea, in a continuous struggle to make space for themselves.

This war had caused great damage to the embankments or the concrete sides of the newly constructed drains. The streams of water merged and made their way into the deepest layers of the soil. The residential areas around the inundated drains were submerging. The Mithi River was overflowed and the land around it lay submerged in deep waters. There were power cuts in most places. The condition of low-lying areas of the city reflected the wrath of rain and the destruction it had caused. All linkages between the city administration, government and the public had been snapped.

According to old dwellers of the city, it had never rained so heavily and destructively in the past. In the heart of the city an apocalyptic silence spread over the Mumba Devi's temple. Mumba Devi's deity looked sad. It was said that such sadness on her face was last seen by Brahma 6000 years ago when she had to counter 'Mumbaraka', an evil giant who terrorized the local population. After his defeat, Mumba Devi's temple was constructed and Brahma himself came to shower his blessings at the inauguration. When the deity was installed, there was an ambiguous and unexplainable silence on her face. Had Brahma already told her about the future Mumbai would soon have to face? Was there any other power in the universe except Brahma who knew the reason behind the transformation of Mumba Devi's natural smile into the sad ambiguous silence?



Asrar's father, Malik Deshmukh, along with his childhood friends Sajid Parkar and Abid Parkar, hunted for fish along the shores of the Arabian Sea.

They belonged to Mabadmorpho village and the name of their boat was the *Queen of the Sea*.

Everyone in Mabadmorpho knew the name of Malik's boat by heart. After extensive fishing in the turbulent waters, they returned to the shore each time and divided the catch among the three equally. Their wives sold it in the local fish markets. The sea, the fish and the boat were their lifelines. Their families lived off whatever little they earned from fishing. Happiness and food security were still a far-fetched dream for each of them. They were oblivious of the world and were very busy fishing in the seas. The sole aim for the three of them was to earn money, a lot of money. But fate had something else in store.

An unfortunate fate awaited them. The *Queen of the Sea* got caught in a severe whirlpool. All three friends were familiar with the movements, characteristics and various moods of the sea. They had spent most of their lives tossing over the waves. It wasn't the first time that they had seen a whirlpool. They had witnessed many, but the one which their beloved boat faced was so wide in circumference and so powerful in strength that they lacked the words to describe its intensity. Even their elders had never told stories of such a ferocious swirl in the waters. They stole a glance at each other but there was no time to even exchange words; all three jumped into the water to save their lives.

Only one made it to the shore.

Though the shores and the sea were thoroughly searched, Malik Deshmukh and Sajid Parkar were nowhere to be found.

Fifteen to twenty days later, a broken piece of the unfortunate boat found its way to the shores of Mabadmorpho. People were surprised to see that it was the very piece on which the name of the boat, the *Queen of the Sea*, was engraved. Immediately after this ill-fated incident, Mabadmorpho had to face one more inexplicable occurrence which kept it in a seemingly hypnotic state.

The day the broken piece of the *Queen of the Sea* was discovered, it was kept on elevated ground near the shore. Surprisingly, this coincided with the sighting of dolphins in the sea alongside.



Many felt that the dolphins were trying to catch a glimpse of the broken piece of the boat. Initially, no one believed the sighting. In fact, those who claimed to have seen the dolphins were rebuked and pulled up for being intoxicated even in broad daylight.

But the dolphins kept returning each day. When this went on for four to five days and the dolphins jumped out of the water, apparently to see the broken piece, people started believing the earlier story. Someone informed Abid, the sole survivor of the accident, about the dolphins. He immediately left his bed and went to the shore. More than half the population of Mabadmorpho was present there, watching the show of the dolphins. When people saw him coming, the crowd parted. He shook hands with a few and started looking in the direction of the dolphins. He kept staring at them attentively; his expression was ponderous. Then he climbed up to the elevated area and raised his hands in the air and waved at the dolphins. The onlookers stared at Abid and followed his gaze. They looked in amazement at the dolphins as they rose and fell into the sea. The rhythmic dance continued for nearly half an hour. Soon, they vanished into the deep.

Abid stepped down and the crowd surrounded him. A man named Karim Mujawar asked him in mock seriousness, ‘Tell me honestly, do dolphins drink beer too?’

The mob chuckled. Some found it so hilarious that they had tears in their eyes. One more reason to laugh even louder was that everyone knew that Karim had just set up a liquor shop recently.

When seriousness returned, an elderly man asked, ‘Abid, what is this all about?’

The man who had recently returned from the claws of death recalled that when they went fishing and were quite far in the sea, the dolphins would jump and dive around their boat and look at them. So, they also stopped to wave back. Having said that, Abid turned and walked away. The people who stayed back continued



discussing and debating the dolphins. They finally concluded that what Abid had claimed was next to impossible. After all, he just had a close encounter with death and was not yet out of the shock. The silence of the crowd gave legitimacy to the idea that Abid was facing some severe mental issues after the accident. The dolphins were never seen near the shore again. This made people rethink what they had been told earlier.



After Malik Deshmukh's death, his wife Haseena earned a livelihood by selling dried fish. She also took the responsibility of continuing their son Asrar's education. Asrar was aware of his mother's difficulties and the hard work she had to put in. The day his tenth standard examination ended, that very evening he told his mother that he would go to Mumbai to acquire a new skill and to find work. Haseena tried persuading him to stay but he wouldn't budge. He told his mother that three of his classmates would also be accompanying him. They had planned to temporarily put up in 'Jamati Ki Kholi', which was a property of Mabadmorpho in Mumbai. Anyone coming from the village could find residence here at a very meagre rent. Such properties existed since the beginning of the twentieth century in Mumbai and belonged collectively to the villages in the coastal region.

After being satisfied with the necessary details, she gave her permission. A day before he had to leave his village, Asrar sat alone at the seashore for a long time. He stared at the beautifully scattered sunlight on the waves. There was a peculiar melody in the union of the waves and the rays. He had found that melody touching since childhood.

He used to go with his father to the sea on fishing trips. He had seen his village disappear from his sight, slowly, as the boat moved further away. He had seen the exclusive dance of the waves

too. He was revisiting the moments spent with his father when the clouds appeared overhead, their shadows slowly spreading over parts of the sea. He was aware of the rush that lay hidden in these waters but had never enjoyed the serene beauty of the sea before in such a manner. He carefully observed the circles that the shadows of the hovering clouds made on the water's surface, those brown and black lines. Some dark and some faint. While deducing these shades and hues, his domestic problems surfaced in his thoughts. He could see the shadows of financial inadequacies reflect on his mother's face after his father's death. He also observed that his uncle's visit to his house had become more regular. His uncle often came to meet his mother around dusk and left at the time of the morning prayers.

He kept staring at the waves and his mind tried figuring out what lay buried in the depths of the water.

He dived into the sea and closely looked at the colourful and enchanting fish of all sizes that playfully swam around. When a fish came close to him, he felt it had something to tell, maybe a story. In fact, he usually felt that the sea was always ready to reveal its hidden truths to him!



The first of May was the first day of Asrar's life in Mumbai.

A superfast train takes at least seven and a half hours to cover the distance between Ratnagiri and Mumbai. His friends Suleiman Vanu and Qasim Dalvi were well-versed with this city. They vividly described the hustle and rush of Mumbai through stories to their friends. So, during the journey the city was like a floating dream in their intoxicated eyes. They were impatient to see the city, to embrace its speed and become a part of its business. Asrar had seen so many films made on Mumbai—*Bombay*, *Satya* and *Sadak* were his favorites. In fact, he had seen *Bombay* several times and heard

its songs on the tape recorder. He used to hum one song from the film quite often:

*Tu hi re, tu hi re*  
*Tere bina mein kaise jiyoon.*  
*Aaja re, aaja re*  
*Yunhi tadpa na tu mujh ko.*  
*Jaan re, jaan re*  
*In sanso mein bas ja re.*  
*Chand re, chand re*  
*Aa ja dil ki zameen pe tu.*  
*Chahat hai agar*  
*Aake mujh se mil ja tu.*  
*Ya phir aisa kar,*  
*Dharti se mila de mujh ko.*  
*Tu hi re, Tu hi re*  
*Tere bina mein kaise jiyoon.*



The train reached Panvel station at around nine in the night. They deboarded the train, kept their luggage aside, freshened up a little and drank tea at a nearby stall. They got into a local train after that. This was Asrar's first journey in a local. There were few people in the compartment. He took a window seat. A few youths on the platform who were chatting jumped in as the train started. Even before it reached Vashi station, tall buildings all around, shopping malls, huge hoardings on the streets and the red, yellow and blue lights seemed to be pulling Asrar towards them. Asrar had never seen so many advertisements and such blinding lights! Before he could get completely lost in the magic of this glamorous light, the train entered the next station. Through the



window he saw an ocean of people on the platform, which scared him for a second. Then he immediately recalled the various scenes of Mumbai that he had seen on the television where the crowds of Mumbai were beautifully showcased. Even before the train could stop completely, people started shouting and pushing each other to board. The coach was overflowing with passengers. Asrar silently observed them.

An inquisitive-looking boy asked him, 'Where are you going?' 'Bombai,' Asrar replied staring at him.

Wherever his answer was heard in the coach, the tired faces started smiling. Some even laughed at it.

A man, with smallpox marks on his face, smiled and remarked in a Bombay accent, 'This is Bambai!'

A Gujarati boy who had just boarded the coach and had secured seats for his friends mocked, 'These "bhaiyyas" are going to ruin Mumbai.'

'I'm not a "bhaiyya"!' Asrar immediately snapped.

This unexpected answer made the Gujarati boys smile. 'The moron must be a Bihari then,' one of them said and the others started laughing loudly.

'I am from Maharashtra,' Asrar clarified.

The Gujarati boy spat the mawa he was eating out of the window and said, 'Nowadays even Chinesewala have started calling themselves Marathi!'

The Gujarati boys again burst out in laughter. Suleiman could not resist speaking. He said loudly, '*Apla manus aahe re* [He is one of us].' Asrar and his friends started conversing in Konkani delicately dipped in Marathi.

The Gujarati boys fell silent. One of them also apologized. 'You see it isn't written on anyone's face where they come from.'

Asrar did not say anything. As a matter of fact, he did not even understand what was going on. Seeing that the Marathi-speaking boys were in a majority, the Gujarati boys were now quite polite. They offered Suleiman water and said, 'We are true *sainiks* too!'

The crowd reduced after a few stations. But the congregation of passengers at the station made Asrar inquisitive. He asked Qasim, 'So many people even at this late hour?'

'Till eleven nearly all stations are crowded.'

'Everything shuts down so early back home.'

'My friend, this is Mumbai. It is overflowing with people. You will soon get used to this place.'

Asrar smiled and resumed looking out of the window. He looked at the slums along the railway tracks with dreamy eyes and craving in his heart. It was already ten in the night, and he was amazed to see how there was still music and life in those huts. Old men, women and children were sitting outside their houses and were chatting away or busy working. Some houses had dirty old curtains covering their doors. Some doors were open, and he could see the light of the television emitted from the rooms. In a few areas film songs were being played at a loud volume. Young men and kids were dancing away to glory. In a dilapidated house near the track he could see four or five eunuchs standing in the dark, wearing bright, provocative clothes. At a little distance near the senghat tree, he noticed a few shadows. Asrar wanted to see the scene closely, but the train moved ahead. For some time the shining clothes and faces with garish make-up floated before his eyes and later slept in his unconscious. When the train stopped at the Kurla station, Asrar saw many burqa-clad women and bearded men. The men were dressed in a white kurta pyjama. Asrar immediately inquired from his friend, 'Is this "our" area?'

'Yes, this is Kurla, this is the area of the Qasais.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that this area has a good population of Qasais.'

'But in our village, they generally wear lungis. Do they wear white clothes here in Bombay?'

'No, no. The ones that you see on the station are Chilyas,' Dalvi tried explaining.

Asrar was inquisitive. 'Who are Chilyas?'



‘They don’t watch television. They belong to Gujarat. Initially, they were in the taxi business, but now they have taken to the business of hospitality and hotels as well.’

Asrar didn’t say anything. He resumed looking outside the train.

He was lost in the grandeur of Mumbai. He stared at every tree, house, building, road, hoarding and flyover. The city seemed like an ocean to him which had a lot of hidden secrets in its heart.

The thought of the ocean reminded him of how a day before he was sitting on the seashore. The music of the waves had slowly entered his soul and merged with it. For a few seconds he could no longer see Mumbai because his eyes had beautiful images of water in front of them. He saw the disturbed sea. The sea, that was hitting its head on the shores, as if in anger. And in an instant, it fell silent. But the silence had much more to it. It was a mysterious silence with a hidden conspiracy. He saw that on the surface of the silent waters, the *Queen of the Sea* was floating slowly. His father was engrossed in a conversation with his friends. Suddenly, the silent waters roared, and one could see water till the end of the horizon. A whirlpool opened its mouth right under the boat. The boat whirled and took seven spins before the water swallowed it.

Only Abid Parkar did not drown.



The first of May was a holiday. It was Maharashtra Day.

The inhabitants of the Jamat Ki Kholi were lost in deep sleep. At fajr, the muezzin coughed thrice into the mike and began reciting the azan and Asrar woke up. It was the muezzin’s regular habit to check the mic by coughing to ensure that his voice was audible and clear.

It so happened that in the madrasa where he had studied, every Thursday evening, his teacher, Maulvi Abdul Haq Bijnori, would



take him to a secluded place to feed him strawberry ice cream and would say, ‘*La yajub, la hujub* (It won’t melt, it won’t melt).’

As an after-effect of that hardened ice cream, his throat was always in a bad condition the next day and his voice was terrible too. He had stopped eating ice cream but the permanent sore throat had made his life difficult and saddened his soul. Hence, it was a routine to check his voice and throat every morning before azan.

Asrar was amazed that as soon as the sound of the azan from the nearby mosque rose, he could also hear some clear and some not-so-clear azan merging into each other from near and far and falling on his ears. Some voices were shrill, some strong, some from the throat and some were nasal. This collage of voices continued for a long time. One voice overpowered another and the one from far away felt close. The mic system of one muezzin got stuck at the ‘meem’ of ‘*Assalaat khairum minun naum*’, and continued buzzing with coarseness.



The urge to see Mumbai in the daylight was dancing in his chest. This was the reason he woke up a couple of times during the night. Right in the centre of the room was a faint zero-watt bulb that was dimly lighting up the place. Asrar’s eyeballs looked at the bulb and its yellow light reflected in his eyes, as if the bulb was looking for its own reflection in his eyes. The films had carved images of Mumbai in his heart. He was soon going to face the reality that Mumbai was. His brain was going through a chemical or hormonal reaction that prevented sleep from overpowering him. He was awake even in his sleep. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling. He noticed that the building was quite old. Two big planks of wood were carrying the weight of the small planks. Near the window was a small *mori*. On top of a slab was a steel



water tank. An earthen pot was kept right next to it with a steel glass on top. He stared at the pot for some time in the yellow light, then got distracted and looked away. There was a hanger on the door on which properly folded trousers were hung. For a moment his imagination made him believe that the clothes on the hanger were actually people and it was their souls that slept on the beds. This triggered a smile on his face. He said to himself, 'So many rubbish thoughts cross my mind!'

His mind involuntarily started thinking about those who were sleeping in that room. There were fourteen of them. Their beds were right next to each other with very little space in between. Some were snoring in their sleep. He stared at them and thought—are they alive? What if one of them has died and no one gets to know about it till dawn? Uncontrollable thoughts took birth in his mind. But he had a lot of control over his tongue.

His eyes were fixed on the clock. In fact, in the faint light, he could feel the presence of the clock on the wall. The hands of the clock were not visible at all. He was sure that it did have hands. However, it didn't matter if he could not see them at that moment.

Asrar was about to search his thoughts for something else when he felt as if some people were passing by the door. Before he could hear anything, their voices drowned. He was reminded of the seventh grade, when so many times he would feel that someone had peeped into the classroom and disappeared without being noticed. He failed to see that person each time. On a couple of occasions, when he would turn the pages of his notebook while the teacher was away, he felt that someone had crossed the door. But by the time he ran to look, there was not a soul to be seen. One day, after much disappointment, he shared this little secret with Aslam Dhamaskar, his old friend since first grade. Aslam claimed, 'I know everything.'

'What do you know?' Asrar inquired without hiding his amazement.



Aslam started talking discreetly in a secretive tone. He used words and phrases from the library books that he had read. These books spoke about the world of magic and magicians. They mentioned stories of djinns and devils. Aslam said that in the library and in the area to the left of the building where tall grass grew during monsoons and where squirrels lived, he had felt someone's presence who simply passed by the classroom. It was just a feeling, no one could see that person. Sometimes one imagined that the mysterious person was covered in white, had a long white beard and his face shone brightly. Aslam had also told his father about this. His father used to clean the mosque and head the prayers in the absence of the imam. Aslam said that because his father knew every person in the village and in the surrounding villages and went for special congregations organized by the Tablighi Jamat, he knew of many such incidents.

Asrar seemed interested and agreed with Aslam, thereby giving him the confidence to speak further. He put his hands around Asrar's shoulders and told him that there used to be a small mosque a hundred years ago on the land where the school stood now. Djinns offered namaz in that mosque. The British rendered it empty and useless and gave it away to one of their rich loyalists who claimed to be Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's friends, for building a school. The year the school was inaugurated the man died a painful and mysterious death. Some say that the djinns took him to the hills near the sea and threw him in the deep waters. His body was found after many days on the shores of Mabadmorpho. The elderly say that his entire body had no wounds or any other signs except a huge hole in the place of his heart. The police was called. They sent his body to the government hospital. Some villagers went to the hospital and on returning told everyone that the heart was missing from the body. This traumatized the villagers.

There was a wise old man who lived in the village during that time. After his death, his mazar was built adjoining the school. Everyone in the village called him Peer Sahib. They related the



story of the rich man to him. He remained silent for some time and then quietly said, 'The djinns eat the hearts of those who destroy their dwelling.'

His words spread like wildfire and reached the house of the rich man. Before the fortieth day of his death, his family constructed a mosque in the school campus. For many years, people kept offering namaz in that building. A few years back the mosque was taken down and a bigger one was built to accommodate the growing population of the village. And this was the mosque where good djinns lived. 'We see them sometimes, but they never harm anyone,' Aslam said, concluding his story. After hearing the narrative, Asrar regretted not offering namaz at that mosque ever. From then on he started offering namaz in that mosque every Friday and instead of listening to the sermons, he would stare at the walls, the ceiling and the chandeliers. He felt that it was possible that a djinn was sitting somewhere around listening to the cleric's sermon.

When this story of the past crossed his mind, he was forced to think, was it a djinn who had just crossed the door of this room?

'Why will Mumbai have djinns, it'll have ghosts!' These words involuntarily fell out of his mouth.

Aslam was lying right next to Asrar. He turned towards him and said, 'Get up, it is nearly morning!'

'Aslam, are you listening to me?'

Aslam did not open his eyes. Asrar understood that he was in a deep sleep; an attempt to wake him up would be futile. He turned over and closed his eyes. Coincidentally, he fell asleep. When he woke up, he was the only one lying down. The rest were having breakfast.



The door and windows were open, and there was light in the room. The sudden exposure to sunlight was blinding. Asrar shut



his eyes in reflex. That very moment he realized that he had just seen a dream. But what was it that he saw? He could not recollect. The only thing that he remembered was that he was an ascetic, wandering in a jungle. He was old and everything around was black. Black, tall trees reached up till the sky. The sun's rays were incapable of finding a way through those giant trees to enter the jungle. The black soil had scattered grass growing on it, which was also black. He saw a few butterflies flying, they happened to be black in colour too. He was amazed and worried at the same time. He started reciting some verses from the Quran. He was convinced that the verses had a lot of power. He started reciting the Surah Yaseen and continued walking in one direction.

After walking a little further, he saw black liquid flowing on the ground and realized that it was a river! The water was black! Disappointed, he sat on the bank when he saw a white boat-like thing approaching him, slowly, from a distance. It was a boat indeed. When it came closer, he saw a woman seated on it. She was clad in a green sari paired with a saffron blouse. When he could clearly see the woman, he noticed a mark of kumkum on her forehead, heavy silver bangles around her wrists and a golden necklace around her neck. She wore a nine-yard sari. The sari, delicately tucked at the back, reminded him of the enchanting portraits of goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati that adorned religious calendars.

For Asrar, this woman was a godsend and the only ray of hope to help him escape this jungle. He started waving his hands in the air to grab her attention. The woman did not answer or wave back. But Asrar was content that the boat was coming towards him. In a few moments, it reached the shore. He stood spellbound. The woman left the boat and came to Asrar. Her facial expression was a mix of happiness and seriousness. She asked him, 'How did you manage to get to this place? There is no way which leads to this jungle.'

He looked at her and answered, 'I did not come on my own.'

'Whoever got you here has to be a resident of this place. No outsider can bring a stranger in here.'





‘This place scares me. I really want to get out of here,’ a scared Asrar pleaded.

‘I realize that you do not belong here and want to leave.’

‘Yes. But who are you?’ Asrar inquired.

‘My name is Mumba. I am the keeper of all secrets that belong to islands, oceans and jungles. When a resident, out of greed or want, brings someone in here, it is me who rescues him,’ she answered in a comforting tone.

This made Asrar think. He did not see anyone there and he told her so.

‘You are an outsider, hence you cannot see anyone. Only the inhabitants of this place can see each other.’

Before she could complete her answer, Asrar had another question ready. He asked her why everything around was black in colour, even the river.

Her eyes looked at the surroundings, and then she remarked, ‘Your eyes have not yet opened enough to see the enchanting beauty of this place!’

‘What is so beautiful here?’ He wished to know.

‘Just look at this river. It is a river of the sweetest honey, the taste of which remains embedded on the taste buds for seventy years. The tree that gives you shade produces fruits that can destroy a human being’s hunger for the next thousand years. The floor has no pebbles but precious gemstones and jewels whose sparks are like a balm to the sore eyes.’

‘But I can’t . . .’

‘Ah, I know that you cannot see all of this. This world reveals its beauty only to its inhabitants. The butterflies that you see are nymphs. Anyone who has had the opportunity to witness their beauty will lose his mind. The words that I have to describe these enchantresses do not belong to your language.’

‘Anyway,’ Mumba stopped. This was the only description that she gave. She saw the wonderment on his face and asked him to sit in the boat. ‘This boat will take you to the place you’ve come from.’



He moved towards the boat, but his eyes were fixed on Mumba. As soon as he got into the vessel, he asked Mumba, 'But I can see you, as well as the colours of your clothes. Do you not belong here?'

She laughed but did not reply. He was still looking at her when he realized that the boat had left the shore and moved away. After a while, he could no longer see the shore. His heart wanted to see Mumba once more. He squinted his eyes to look harder and the view took him by surprise. The spot where Mumba was standing was now occupied by a white-clad woman. Her face shone like the brightness of the full moon. He immediately recalled that she resembled the djinn that had crossed his door in Jamat Ki Kholi. Before he could see her to his heart's content, someone had pushed the door of the room very loudly, waking him up. And this was the time when all the others in the room were having breakfast.

Seeing that Asrar had woken up, Aslam called out, 'Brother, you slept off during your attempt to wake me up?'

He looked at Aslam and recollected that he tried waking him up during the time of the morning azan.

Suleiman had a cup of tea in his hand. He turned towards Asrar and instructed him, 'Boy, get ready immediately, we need to go on an outing!'

'I suggest you bathe first, before the water stops running in the tap,' said Saleem, who had been living in the kholi for years and in some way or the other had become a caretaker of the place.

'Remember, you need to queue up for the toilet outside, so better hurry!' Qasim added while pressing an omelette between a bun. This made everyone smile.

Saleem remarked with annoyance, 'We have to stand in a line for everything—a line for the toilet, a line for this, a line for that.' He added an expletive towards the end of the sentence to substantiate the pain caused by queues. Asrar noticed his opened mouth. Saleem had a gold tooth, the tooth next to it had turned yellow, almost as if it was trying to replicate its neighbour's colour.



Asrar wondered how great an impact could an artificial tooth have on a natural one?

A boy entered the room and went on to wash his hands. He then turned towards Saleem and with utmost annoyance complained how the residents don't even flush after using the toilets and leave it dirty. Saleem replied, while pulling out with his fingers a strand of meat that was stuck in his teeth, 'Brother, this is exactly what these bastard bhaiyyas do.'

'Saleem Bhai, how do you possibly know who flushes and who doesn't. You did not see it for yourself!' said Mohammad Ali, who was rumoured to be in love with a Shia girl from northern India.

Qasim laughed at the latter part of the remark. 'You did not see it for yourself!'

Saleem looked at Qasim and said, 'He has relations with the bhaiyyas; that is exactly why he gets offended!'

Then he looked at Mohammad Ali and asked, 'Tell me honestly, isn't it true that . . . ?'

Mohammad Ali gave a crooked smile and put his hands in his pocket to take out the packet of *haathi-chhaap* tobacco. He started rubbing it on his other hand. He asked Saleem if he should prepare tobacco for him too.

Saleem wanted to continue with the previous conversation. 'Do not take me to be a fool!'

Mohammad Ali asked again, 'Tell me, should I make for you too?'

'Yes, sure,' Saleem replied.

All this while Asrar found this exchange very amusing.

Qasim again reminded Asrar that if he wanted to use the toilet, he'd better do it now or else take a bath because the taps would soon stop running.

'Oh yes, I will. But let me freshen up a bit before that.'

He advanced towards the door, then halted and asked Qasim for directions to the toilet.

'Go straight towards your left and you will find it,' instructed Mohammad Ali while handing tobacco to Saleem.



‘Aye hero, take water from the *mori*,’ said Saleem, putting tobacco in his mouth.

Asrar filled a plastic vessel with water and left the room.



The passage was dark. A little further to the left were two toilets. The door of one was open. He entered and, trying to close the door from inside, noticed that it was old and decaying. The bottom of the door was decomposing. The nearly perished bottom was covered with an iron sheet which had rusted over time. He tried latching the door again but in vain. He kept the water aside and in absolute darkness, attempted again, when he noticed a rope. He was reminded of his school washrooms that had such ropes tied to the nails of toilet doors to lock them up. He tied the rope in the same manner and sat down. It was dark around him. The stench that rose from the commode and entered his lungs via his nostrils was terrible. He had never faced such foul smell before. The stench maimed his intestines along with his heart and brain. He was trying to build up as much pressure as he could so that he could empty his bowels and rush out to breathe in fresh air again.

The darkness was slowly fading. In the little light that was now around, he noticed a used candle with half-burnt matchsticks lying in a corner. There were marks left by extinguished cigarette buds. He saw white insects crawling over each other on the decayed part of the door. Then he started staring at the commode. It looked like an ulcer. The ulcer had burst open at various places and was blistering now. Tiny, white insects were crawling over the blisters. One, two, ten, twenty, god knows how many! One of the white creatures was now attempting to crawl over Asrar’s slippers. He immediately poured water over it. The insect was swept off. But the moment this water went into the commode, a burst of stench rose from it. It was as if the waves of the stench were hidden deep under the dump. He blocked his nostrils with his fingers and looked

away. He was astonished. There were many obscene figures drawn on the wooden door in front of him. Some words in Hindi were also carelessly scribbled. At one place a genital was drawn with small and big circles. At another place a couplet had been inscribed:

*Is anjuman mein aap ko aana hai baar baar  
Deewar-o-dar ko gaur se pehchan lijiye*

He started looking at another obscene drawing with great concentration. One corner of the door was adorned with the drawing of a woman's breast, one small and the other one larger with, 'only for the purpose of looking and not sucking' written next to them.

The face of Jamila Miss popped up in front of his eyes. She was his class teacher in the tenth standard and taught maths and science. Her house was nearly two kilometres from the school. Once, when the peon was absent, Asrar had carried the geometry notebooks to her house. Miss had corrected the notebooks in three or four days. She then asked Asrar to bring them from her house. She was a very hard-working and talented teacher, and her husband was also an educated man. He was the headmaster of a government school in some other district. Her only son was pursuing a course in hotel management from Mumbai. None of her relatives lived around this area. She herself was very busy with the job at the school and therefore many of her chores remained incomplete. She started calling Asrar regularly to assist her. Getting entries made in her bank passbook, paying the electricity bill, booking the gas cylinder, etc., were the chores that Asrar would do for her. Miss would make tea for him quite often. She served delicious glucose biscuits along with it. Asrar would generally refuse them, but while watching a television programme or film, he never realized when the biscuits vanished from the plate.

When Miss started trusting him completely, she asked questions about his personal life and family. Asrar elaborately

explained everything about his family and household to her. His eyes watered while talking about his father's death. Miss Jamila also became emotional. Then she had put her head lovingly on Asrar's head and consoled him. From then on, whenever he went to Miss Jamila's house, he divulged all the stories and details of events that took place in Mabadmorpho. Sometimes he carried fresh fish along with him too. Once Miss pressured him into eating at her place and he gave in. He was interested in watching television at her house. He had told her that he didn't have a TV at home. It had broken down a couple of months ago and was yet to be repaired. Miss smiled and advised him to bring his schoolbag with him when he came to her house so that he could watch television and simultaneously study.

August was the month when it rained heavily in Ratnagiri. The thunder and lightning were terrifying.

Miss Jamila was cooking in the kitchen and Asrar was completing his homework in the drawing room. Miss felt that it was getting dark outside and it might rain. She asked Asrar to bring the clothes inside and shut the doors and windows. While closing the windows he stared at the old-fashioned houses of Mabadmorpho which were now shrouded in a mysterious darkness. The sea looked black, as if it were merged with a sky made of coal tar. The grey clouds were spreading in the sky and the west winds were dancing through the trees. A few birds flew and vanished between the mango and tamarind trees. There was a jamun tree adjacent to the window. A bat lived on it. On one branch sat a tiny, golden-feathered bird. She would sing softly at short intervals. Her voice made the body of the bat vibrate. It was widely believed in Mabadmorpho that the tree where bats dwelled was a meeting place for the wandering souls of the dead. Asrar looked at the bat and started thinking about the golden bird. What if she was a soul waiting for someone?

He closed the window and predicted, 'Jamila Baji, it looks as if it is going to rain quiet heavily!'

'Yes, it has suddenly got dark outside.'

Before Asrar could continue the conversation, the wind became stronger, and it started pouring.

He drew the curtain aside and looked outside the window. Jamila Miss lived on the hill. Mabadmorpho started from where the slope of the hill ended. The boundary of the small village merged with the Arabian Sea. From the window he could see the dancing waves of the sea as well as the drenched roofs of the houses in Mabadmorpho, but it was dark outside, and everything was a blur that day. He moved on to stare at the bat on the jamun tree. When the wind changed its direction, the raindrops could be seen falling on the windowpane. When he turned towards the television, he saw black dots covering the screen. 'Miss, the cable is gone,' he said in a loud voice. 'Then switch off the television,' instructed Jamila.

Asrar switched off the TV and started reading his book. The sound of the rain was getting increasingly louder. His concentration kept slipping as he wanted to look out of the window. The book felt like a burden to his eyes. He kept it aside and drew the curtains of the window again. Miss also came into the drawing room. He sat on a table, gazing at the beautiful and blurred sight across the glass window. Jamila put a chair next to the table and went back into the kitchen and returned with a cup of tea and a plate of bhajiya. She called out to Asrar. He turned and immediately jumped off the table to grab the plate from Jamila's hands and said, 'Miss, *aap bhi na* [Why did you have to take the trouble?!]'

She smiled.

'Arre baba, look how it is raining. The taste of the tea will be enhanced by the bhajiya,' she said and went towards the kitchen. She got herself a cup of tea. They were sitting next to the window, sipping the chai and enjoying the fries. The change of weather and the drop in temperature actually made the snack taste even better. She told him all about her village in Sholapur. Every summer vacation she went home, where her four sisters and two brothers lived. Her father had passed away and her old mother

lived with her eldest brother. He listened to her attentively. He had known her since seventh grade and thoroughly enjoyed her teaching, but it was his first encounter with her personal life. He started asking her questions. These questions opened up some old pages of her past. A little later, when the evening azan was faintly heard, she covered her head with a corner of her sari and said with a smile on her face, '*Jitna sunaw kam hai baba* [The stories are never-ending].'

Asrar smiled too.

The intensity of the strong winds and the heavy downpour could be seen through the falling trees and the huge raindrops. Suddenly, a loud thud was heard. Asrar peered out of the window. It sounded like something had fallen down. Jamila also stood up. '*Arre baap re baap*, the mango tree right next to the jamun has fallen,' Asrar said in a worried tone. '*Ya mere Allah!*' she uttered in reflex. She looked down from the window and remarked, '*Barish bhi kaisi ho rahi hai, kya tufan bifan aata kya* [What kind of rain is it? Do you think a storm is approaching]?'

'It seems so. The road towards Mabadmorpho has been blocked because of the fallen tree. Should I go downstairs and check?'

Miss pointed towards an umbrella and asked Asrar to carry it with him. He went out of the door and saw that a lot of water had collected on the stairs. He descended the stairs carefully and left the building. He opened the umbrella and proceeded towards the gate. The road that went to Mabadmorpho was now blocked by the fallen mango tree. The tree was quite old. A few more people came out of the building. One of them had a torch with him. He could now see a little light near the gate. The shower was heavy. The winds were overturning the umbrellas. A man, whose face Asrar didn't see clearly, advised that they wait for the rains to subside and then come back and take a look at the fallen tree.

Another man readily agreed and said, '*Hau master, abhi to bhotich barish ho rahi hai* [Yes, master, it is raining heavily]. We'd better get back to our homes!'



They returned. Asrar went near the gate and tried looking in vain for a small opening, hoping that might make it possible for him to reach Mabadmorpho in spite of the blockade. No sooner had he turn towards the building than a strong gust of wind overturned his umbrella. Before he could get the umbrella back in shape, he was already drenched. He ran towards the building. While climbing the stairs he could hear more trees fall. He had witnessed such rain three or four years ago when the intensity of the winds had blown away twelve to thirteen temporary tiles from the roof, turning his house into a small pond. He paused at the first floor to look at the jamun tree that was dancing in the wind.

In a few moments he realized that the tree was not just dancing but it also smelt sweet. This smell entered his nostrils. But the rain and storm did not allow him to fully enjoy the fragrance. He rang the bell to Jamila Miss's house but started knocking once he realized that there was a power cut in the building. Miss opened the door. The room was dimly lit by a faint candle in the corner.

'Miss, I got drenched.'

She picked up the candle and looked at Asrar from top to bottom. Water was dripping from his clothes.

She asked him to wash himself in the bathroom. He entered the house. Miss took the umbrella from him, and he started taking big strides towards the bathroom. It was dark in there.

Miss closed the main door and took out a candle from the box near the television. She lighted the candle and gave it to Asrar to put inside the bathroom. When Asrar bent to fix it on the floor, the candle went off. 'Wait, I will get the matchsticks,' her voice echoed in the darkness. His drenched body stood silently in the dark. It is said that the eyes of the body are powerful.

Miss was searching for matchsticks near the gas stove in the kitchen, but the eyes of her body too were staring at the quiet and drenched body of Asrar. The drenched body stood silently in the darkness. Physical attraction is impromptu and unscripted. It could be felt at any moment. The realization of this attraction sent

a strange shiver through Jamila's body, though her mind discarded the thoughts immediately. Asrar's body was a closed dome, oblivious to external murmurs.

However, it was also true that right then the locks of the dome had loosened and could break any moment.

Miss lighted the matchstick and asked Asrar, 'Where is the candle?'

'Right here in my hand.'

Miss entered the faintly lit bathroom. 'Keep the candle in one corner.'

Asrar sat down. The matchstick in Jamila's hand went out.

She sat next to him and took out another matchstick to light. In its light she saw Asrar sitting on his knees. He was holding the candle in his hands. She let the matchstick light it. Then Asrar placed the candle on the floor. While getting up she told Asrar that she would get him a T-shirt and a lungi. He said nothing in reply and kept sitting there, in silence. Miss took out her husband's clothes and gave it to him. Asrar immediately shut the bathroom door. The situation perplexed him very much. The running tap was pouring water into the bucket. He could hear the music of the raindrops through the glass panes of the windows.

The candlelight made it possible for him to see all the things in the bathroom. His eyes fell upon the hanger. On it were two blouses and a bra that belonged to Miss. His hands involuntary moved to touch the bra. He had never held one in his hands before. He felt a weird desire. He was oblivious of the depths and layers from where these desires arose. While touching the protruded part of the bra, his thoughts began to race. Jamila Miss slowly began entering his imagination like the light which slowly spreads from a little fire. He rubbed that area on his eyes and kissed it. Suddenly, the incorrectness of the situation made him scold himself, 'You call her *baji* and then think of her in such a manner?' The bucket was now full. He removed his clothes and poured water on his



feet; then he realized that there was no towel in the bathroom. He immediately wore his clothes and opened the door thinking that he would ask Miss for a towel. He opened the door and saw her standing there with a towel in her hands.

‘Arre, Miss, *shukriya*,’ he said and shut the door again. Miss had a smile on her face. The door was closed but she kept standing there for a while. What did she have in her heart? How much was she able to recognize the stirrings of her inner self? To what extent did she feel her overpowering desires? She didn’t know, but she was definitely surprised. She was surprised that desire didn’t have a religion. It was so powerful that all excuses of morality were destroyed within a few moments and the heart responded to bodily passions.

She smiled and said to herself, ‘*Bachcha hai abhi, kachcha hai abhi* [He is a child and still naive]!’ She went back to the drawing room and sat down. Her face was blushing at the thought that her mind could still nurture such absurd ideas. Asrar was still bathing inside. While applying soap on his body, his hands reached where there was a stream of desires, from where all the passions arose. He had risen, drowned and sailed on the waves of desire since last year. He placed his hands on his member and tried imagining those waves of desire that he had tested the previous year through the intoxication of masturbation. Suddenly, he could see the jamun tree, the bat and the golden bird that he had seen that day. In that one moment his mind had millions of thoughts encompassed within itself. He was in the bathroom for not more than ten minutes, but those minutes seemed to last for a thousand hours in his mind. Innumerable faces, scenes, imaginings and thoughts walked through his brain like a caravan in the light and vanished in the darkness of the unconscious.



He was a little hesitant in sitting near Miss Jamila in a T-shirt and lungi. She was well aware of this and made an attempt to overcome



the awkwardness of the situation and asked, 'To which side did the mango tree fall?'

'Right in front of the gate, Miss. The entire road is blocked. It can be cleared only once the rain stops!'

'All right.' She looked outside the window. It was pouring.

'Miss, I hope god stops the rain soon.'

'If it doesn't stop then . . .?'

'*Meri watt lag jayegi*,' he replied.

'What do you mean?'

'I meant to say that it will be a problem for me to go back.'

'Is there a telephone in your house? Or anywhere near your house? You can make a call from my mobile phone and inform them that you will be late and if the rain doesn't stop, you will spend the night here.'

Asrar informed his neighbour and asked him to convey the message to his mother.

Miss went to the kitchen to cook dal.

Asrar sat comfortably on the sofa and fell asleep.

The innocence on his face was accentuated by the dim light of the candle. Jamila peeped twice from the kitchen to steal a glance at him asleep. After finishing her cooking, she came and sat near Asrar. She felt happy seeing him dressed in her husband's clothes. The torrential rain had not rested yet. Nor did the thunderous winds contain themselves. The music of the heavy drops was echoing in her ears. In this music there was a magical calm. After many days, in fact, many years, she felt vibrant. She had no justification for this, nor did she have any clear understanding of it. It was just a feeling. In this state of her mind, she was just a woman. All the dust around her had vanished and she was of her own being. The solitude of being in a womb of desires. Jamila was overwhelmed by that vibrant feeling in her womb at that moment.

The food was ready, but Asrar was still asleep.

Jamila at times leaned on the window and looked outside at the rain or looked at Asrar while he slept. A few moments later,



there was fierce lightning which woke Asrar up. The sound scared Jamila too. Asrar was amazed that he had slept for so long. 'Sorry, Miss, I fell asleep. It sounds like thunder and lightning.'

'Good that you took some rest. Yes, there was a thunderbolt,' she said while seating herself in the chair.

The dark sky, which could be seen through the windows, now had remnants of the recent lightning. Some bolts spread themselves in the sky and some came so close as if to touch the buildings. They stood near the window, witnessing the fearful circus in the sky.

The candle kept on the table went off. The bolts of lightning in the skies were playing a very dangerous game of firecrackers. Suddenly, a bolt darted towards them, as if to strike the window. Jamila responded in a reflex of fear. No sooner had she turn from the window than her foot slipped. Asrar held her or else she would have fallen on the floor. 'Do not be scared, Miss; this is a very common occurrence. The lightning bolt has fallen somewhere far.'

'I got really scared!' Jamila said, pulling herself together. She stood again, leaning on the window. Her hand was in Asrar's hand. Together, they looked at the havoc-causing bolts and sparks in the sky outside the window. They could also feel the thunder within themselves which made the soul float. The windows to the body were opened up by the warm desires of the being. This warmth had a hidden magic to it. The desires of the being found their own course.

The two were under the misconception that the feeling that had sent sparks through their respective bodies, and the thoughts that were like bolts to them were hidden from each other. There still existed an innocent distrust between the two. Maybe they were unaware that desires find a home in each body, in each soil. Those who know are aware that desires have no specific season to be born in. When desires rise from their slumber, they can cross the highest walls and boundaries. Desires are the essence of the mud dough that made Adam. Desire leads to a



metamorphosis of the body. The being transforms into varied symbols, characteristics and appearances. The man transforms into an animal of an unknown epoch, while the woman changes into an archaic bird or some other phenomenon. The being searches for its pinnacle and satiation in other beings. Desires are very opportunistic. The poison of desire is very overpowering. The heart stops and the brain sleeps under the veil of oblivion. The 'self' drowns in complete darkness while the being changes its attire. In this darkness, the soul participates in this transformation.

Asrar turned towards Miss, she lifted her eyes. Their eyes were warm. Miss also turned towards him. Desire was alive in each soil. Jamila's fingers intertwined involuntarily with Asrar's. Their eyes were searching in each other for the pinnacle of their being. The rain outside was deafening. There were lightning bolts, and the west winds were encircling the building with fearful groans. The winds were spirited and mad. They were revolving around trees and branches, uprooting them.

Miss came closer to him. Desire leads to a metamorphosis of the body. Their noses touched, and in the warmth of their eyes red sparks rose and drowned as if in a whirlpool. Desires acquainted the being with the taste of metamorphosis. The taste of each other's tongues made them forget their existence. They sat on the floor. Miss transformed into a fierce lioness. She entrenched her paws into Asrar's back and started chewing on his bones. She felt the taste of his heart's nectar on her lips which, like a wave of light, intoxicated her soul.

They lay there till morning, smashed with the defeat of their being. When Asrar woke up and looked at Miss, who was lying next to him, he noticed that one of her breasts was smaller than the other. He smiled. He got up and went to the bathroom. The candle there had already melted. He looked out of the window. The rain had stopped. Very light rays of the sun could be seen scattered in the sky.



A lot of other things were also written on the latrine door. He read them all. During this time, he had forgotten the innumerable insects in the commode. The foul smell had already lost its strength. The reminiscence of Miss Jamila had silenced the chaos inside him a little. When he exited the toilet, he saw a man standing there. He had a tiny container in one hand which was filled with water and a beedi in the other. He looked at Asrar and said in a condescending tone, '*Kya be, so gaya tha kya* [Were you sleeping]? I knocked at least thrice!'

Asrar lowered his gaze and apologized, 'Sorry!'

'*Sorry ka bachcha, aa jate hain saale* [What use is your sorry? God knows where these people with their sorries come from].' The man entered the latrine groaning and mumbling to himself.

