



THE JCB PRIZE FOR
LITERATURE
— 2019 —

Longlist



THE
QUEEN
OF
JASMINE
COUNTRY

a novel



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MANIVANNAN

The Queen of Jasmine Country

by Sharanya Manivannan



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An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

CHAPTER 1

850ce Pudukkottai near Madurai, Tamilagam

It was not always there, and one day it was. My body was used to blood, its monthly spillage, but my nature was not. Its surge rendered my body a conch, keeper of a riptide. Desire – this new language – spun me on itself like a discus. At night, I walk as deep into the groves as I can go without being sighted, my anklets unclasped and held in my fist. Metal protects against malevolence, especially of the unseen kind. I turn circles, unable to sleep because of the bird in my throat and the blood drumming in every place where my pulse can be felt. I pluck wild hibiscus and golden magnolia, its petals luminously white under starlight. I lay myself upon red ochre earth and entangle my limbs and hair in grass and tender tulasi. I seep into the earth, its touch and mine the same, and then I blossom. Maybe everywhere there are those like me – people who smoulder sun-like but singe as easily as feathers. But I know of no one else who is fevered by a secret so large. Bolstered by the sleeping women of my family, I wake up drenched in sweat and tears. The night is as dark and still as a vessel of unstirred indigo. I sit up, still trembling, and crouch over to unfasten my silver-belled anklets, then carefully raise myself from the floor. I adjust my loosely draped sari over my body, and slip from the boundaries of home. And then, I run. Past the well with its dismemberments of moonlight. Past the cowshed,

where no creature betrays me. And then beyond, burning, into the grove where I came from. Into the grove where the parrots know not to mimic the sounds of my ecstasy and the undergrowth will not keep the shape of my trespass – and my body, this roaring, returns to and becomes earth and fire, and floods lush, and flowers. Perhaps this was what happened on my first night on earth. Perhaps it wasn't the very first night. Perhaps there were a few nights before it, when a woman had held me to her breasts and fed me, their weight easing along with my hunger. Perhaps we looked into one another's eyes. Perhaps she gave me a name that only the winds know now, a name I would not know myself by if she were ever to call me at a marketplace, if she turned away from a procession and ran in my direction, if she emerged from the shadows under a banyan tree one lonesome afternoon and laid her claim to me. With or without having bestowed upon me a name, I would like to think that she would always know me. Perhaps this was what happened then, on one of those earliest nights of my life. I woke a few moments after I was laid quietly on the ground in this tulasi grove, when the wetness of the earth had seeped slightly into the cloth I had been bound in. I saw stars when I opened my eyes. They would always be there, in all the years to come when I would seek them, as I aged almost nothing in contrast. I was born in the season of mid-summer monsoon, under the constellation of the lion, and then I was abandoned. Here's what I can never prove: that on the night the tulasi grove first embraced me, a man knelt to lay me on the ground carefully and smoothed droplets of rain from my forehead. That his teeth were white but he kept his mouth closed. That he moved as quickly as he could and

merged into the trees, his anklets faintly chiming, muffled by the rustle of grass. And then he disappeared. No, surely he waited to see what he knew would happen. Perhaps I only truly know this: that, somewhere beyond all certainty of belonging, I will never stop looking for the blue-black of his skin, and for the taste of the milk that was still on my breath. I opened my mouth and wailed. 'A baby!' the voice of the woman who was not yet my mother exclaimed. But her husband was already running, the plantain leaf of food before him forgotten. This is what I believe happened, in the minutes before my parents made me theirs. And these things I know to be true, for they told me later: how my mother did not ponder till afterwards how she could have known that I was alone, that I was neither a traveller's child nor a neighbour's. How she had placed a vessel of cow's milk on the fire the moment her husband's back disappeared into the shadows and then thrown it out, suddenly afraid it had curdled since the morning. How my father – fearing what? – had rushed into the grove on pure instinct, not a word exchanged between them first. And later still, as I watched him, I learned: what my father had feared were birds of prey, the curiosity of insects, the creatures of the wild that he loved and so understood to not always be loving in return. My father knew he was my father even before he knew me. He ran into his grove of tulasi barefoot, kernels of cooked millet still wedged in his fingernails, and lifted me into his arms. He saw my face by starlight and by a moon as shy as the secret of my origin. And he carried me back, very slowly, through the paths his footsteps had patterned over years, past the dark shapes of the plants he raised. My mother had lit a lantern and waited by the entrance that opened onto the garden. This

too would become familiar to me – her waiting at the end of days that lingered long after nightfall, the light by which she showed us the way. Now, I move constantly under cover of darkness and commit acts of subterfuge like the daughter of a thief. I surrender to the carnal like the daughter of a dancer. I scatter enigmas like the daughter of a shell-reader. I swallow the ocean in my dreams like the daughter of a diver. And still, I smell of wild jasmine and tender basil like the daughter of a gardener, my fingertips tinged with turmeric like the daughter of a woman whose world is the hearth – and this is who I am. In the year following the night when I was discovered in the grove, our king would annex the north of the island shaped like a mango. On my first birthday, my father would allow me to taste jaggery, which sweetened the offering at his favourite temple. The harvest would be rich that year, and for the sake of their child, my parents would replace the blue cactus on the periphery of the fields with thickets of sugarcane. Everywhere, a sweetness. My mother's songs as dense as honey, my father's poems as translucent. In the far north-east of the world, honey mixed with saltpetre, realgar and sulphur created a smoking powder that could burn a house down – but it was not, as the alchemists desired, the elixir of life. In the far north-west of the world, a ship made of oak was buried with the remains of two women – a queen and her daughter, or a shaman and her handmaiden, or some other configuration of loyalty or love that will come to be forgotten – and with them were placed tapestries, enamelled objects, and several animals that drew their last breaths inside that ark. And in this small new town under the flag of the double fish, in the deep south of a bejewelled peninsula, Arali and her

husband, Vishnuchittan, found themselves sometimes forgetting all else that they were before they became the guardians of a baby girl found amongst leaves still glossy with recent rain. Sixteen-and-a-half years have passed in the embrace of this garden. My father can no longer lift me onto his shoulders so that I can see above any crowd, but I hold what he showed me just as true as I hold the stars I first saw on my back that long-ago night. I raised, and raise still, my gaze beyond the certain to see through all of time, past the delusion of bondage, into the truth of all things. And this is why, on some mornings after I have lost count of the hours as they betrayed me, he does not ask me where I have spent the night. I catch him looking into the distance as though the first birdsong has something to teach him. And if he catches me, breathlessly making my way back through the bramble that protects the grove, he neither speaks nor sways. But still I blush like the sky as it dawns. For my father is always listening. I grew along with the fence of sugarcane. My teeth, when they came in, grew strong on the flesh of those stalks. I never wondered why my parents did not protect me with a deceit of love, for it was very little time before I became incapable of accepting a lie. And besides, that memory never left me, of those two bright stars above me in the night. The scent of recent rain still calls to that place in me that knows it was abandonment that brought me a home. 'Kodhai,' my father would say as I worked alongside him in his garden, learning how to turn decay into nourishment and to recognize not-yet-bloomed flowering plants by their leaves. 'Whoever brought you to me had no fear of being refused. This is why I sometimes think an emissary of Raja Srimara Srivallabha must have been the one. The king knew that there

was no child in our house. After all, the first time I was in his court, he had promised me a life of fullness for as long as he or his descendants remain on the throne.' My grandmother, Padmamma, was more imaginative. 'You must have been the child of a buffalo!' she would groan, pulling my frizzy curls into plaits, or pouring a vessel of water over my head as I ran naked from her slippery grip, or forcing balls of food into my mouth. 'A buffalo and a woman who wandered singing, clad only by the sky,' she would mutter in resignation, wiping coconut oil, or water, or spilt food from her hands. For as long as he lived, my grandfather, Mukunda Acharya, believed I did not have human lineage. He was convinced that I had manifested birthless amongst the tulasi in the absence of womb sac or womanly labour. His theory was taken very lightly in our home, even if nothing was ever said to his face. If I fidgeted in a queue at a temple, my mother would pinch me and hiss, 'Do you see anyone offering you flowers or chanting your name? Do you see anyone asking you for a boon? You're a little girl misbehaving, nothing more.' But Mukunda Acharya traced his devotion, or at least its erudition, back six generations. And because that made me the eighth in his lineage, even if I was a girl, he told me each day about the eighth incarnation of his supreme lord, Maha Vishnu – the tricky and iridescent Krishna, who wears a peacock feather tucked into his crown. And even if they had wanted to, nothing my parents or grandmother could say would refute the spell these stories held me under. I woke with a name of Vishnu on my breath; when I chewed, a name of Vishnu was in my saliva; and now, sometimes in the garden at midnight it is a name of Vishnu that escapes my lips in bliss. And so that I could speak this

name aloud as often as I could, Vishnuchittan permitted me to call him by his name, and not as Appa or Iyah as was correct. My mother, Arali, refused such impudence. She who fed me with cow's milk, envying the creature that could give me what she could not, would only be Amma. It was Amma's tale that I loved the most. 'Because my belly could not hold a baby, the garden absorbed my tears. The garden is my heart. That's where you were born.' And then, when I started to cry, moved by what she said even though I could not completely understand it, she would laugh and say, 'I bought you from a trader of pearls from Korkai. I had only a bagful of tamarind to exchange with, because your ruthless father had already replaced all the crops with tulasi. If I had had two bags, I would have been able to get a pearl instead. And instead of your arms around my neck, I'd wear a thread with that pearl!' 'You would never.' 'I would!' 'No!' One day I went too far. Unable to bear this play, I shouted, 'Then give me back to my real mother!' And Amma's face shrivelled like stroked mimosa leaves. I fled into the grove and waited there until Padmamma found me, crying over the bodies of vermillion ladybugs I had squashed in my rage. Now, in the long nights, I sometimes find them crawling on my body. And I wonder what it would be like to paint my lips with their colour, like the troupe of dancers who passed through Pudukkottai one Pongal when I was a child, who threw and caught each other in impossible leaps and contortions. But mostly I just watch them as they run over my skin, their tiny feet grazing my goosebumps. They are not what a lover's fingers must be like... But when will I know? Vishnuchittan began to teach me how to read before his father could stop him. And even before that, when I had barely

begun to speak, he sat me on his lap with a tray of uncooked rice before me, and pressed my finger into the grain to curve and line the letter □, the first letter of the alphabet. I made a noise – ah! – as though I had spoken the letter aloud. I would come to know that would always hurt a little, to write. My grandfather believed that even if women could know scripture, they could never learn to read the verses, only to hear them and thereby consecrate them to memory. He said this was because of an innate female capacity for the same. To absorb. But when Padmamma began to bring me scraps of writing to read to her – unbound palm leaves from almanacs, miscellanea from parchments found in temples, something that had fallen into her wares in the marketplace, carried amongst a trader's wares from another village – I watched her curiosity and diffidence and understood. One day, as an experiment, I lied to her. I replaced all the nouns in a line. Papaya became bitter gourd, the sun became the moon. She continued to listen as though nothing was out of place, processing the words I spoke without question, watching my finger as it underlined the lines. She never dared to pick up a bound or complete text, although we had many in our home. These scraps were all she felt were permissible for her to look at, and through me she had access to them. Once I saw what it means for a woman to be writless, I began to devour words with the knowledge that this was the only miracle of my life – to have them. To know them, and myself through them. To recognize them on sight. First, Vishnuchittan taught me how to read and then allowed me to take his materials – his holy texts and his own poetry and others', collected from temples and bartered for from traders – even without his supervision. As for Amma, she neither

dictated things to be written down nor did she take particular notice of the presence of calligraphy anywhere. In this way, she maintained concord with the ways of my grandparents. Of her own parents, she rarely spoke. But on some nights, my mother and father would linger a little while on the thinnai, our clean-swept front porch with room enough for a pilgrim to sleep on, after lighting a brazier of neem leaves to ward away insects, waiting for my grandparents and me to fall asleep. And I would be able to hear his lilting voice read to her. Softly. I could see his small lantern burning if I turned my head just so from my mat. I could never hear or see my mother's reactions, but years later when the verses of the Kuruntokai broke in me a dam I did not even know I contained, I could imagine them. How it must have been for her to be offered words strung together like garlands, their sentiments so vital even after a thousand years that bees would still spin intoxicated if they heard them. Later, I would come to envy her. For I was certain she had never known it, what it was like to weep until the place between her breasts filled up with tears, became a pond where a black-legged white heron fed, how it felt to have her whole body turn into a landscape where life thrives, tenacious, but in the absence of touch.

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