

'A dazzling coming-of-age novel that is disquieting and heartening at once. *Undertow* is a powerful tale of love and loss, and Barua weaves magic with her spellbinding prose and splendid craft' ANEES SALIM



# UNDERTOW



JAHNAVI  
BARUA

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *REBIRTH*

# Undertow

by Jahnvi Barua



*THE* JCB PRIZE *FOR*  
LITERATURE  
— 2020 —

An exclusive extract from  
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

# 1

As if things were not bad enough, the morning of her wedding the All Assam Students' Union declared a bandh. Two young men, their heads split open in a police lathi charge the day before, had died in the intensive care unit of Gauhati Medical College and Hospital soon after midnight.

Rukmini had known as soon as the boys died. One of her classmates, on night duty in the ICU, had called her. When the phone rang, shattering the silence of the house, she had snatched up the extension in her room on the first ring. She listened to the words tumbling down the line and knew straight away there would be trouble in the morning.

In her mosquito-netted cage, Rukmini lay awake through the long night. She would not have slept anyway, but this business with the boys had sealed any hope of sleep coming to her rescue.

She lay curled up on her left, the quilt pulled up to her face. Its velvet cover was soft against her skin as it rose and fell with her breath. Despite the December cold, the wide windows looking out west across the river were open. And through the fretwork of the mosquito mesh she could see the night sky, dark and silent, the stars glittering cold fire.

There was something enchanted about the sky on a clear night like this. Rukmini could not help but feel its magnetic pull. As if people and events from afar, but below this same sky, were calling out to her, to leave her safe harbour and sail into unknown alluring waters towards them.

Beneath the sky, she could also see the river. The reflection of the few streetlights along its southern bank, the occasional flicker of a lamp on a country boat moored on its inky waters, these made the river visible to her in the deep of the night.

This river that had run through her life, the Brahmaputra, swept around the bottom of her hill. Even in the dark, especially in the darkness, she sensed the waters racing past her towards the distant flatlands of Bangladesh and, beyond, to the Bay of Bengal.

Black river, dark velvet sky and where they met, dark blue hills, invisible in the night.

Rukmini lay awake, hungry and exhausted. She had not eaten dinner. Nor lunch. No one in the house had eaten. Her mother, Usha, had taken to her bed early in the afternoon. She had refused food or water since. Torun, her father, had shuffled from his bedroom to the drawing room—Rukmini heard him moving back and forth—pausing frequently outside her locked door. Romen had shut down the kitchen. There would be no feasting, there would be fasting instead on the occasion of the marriage of the daughter of the house.

When Arun, her older brother and sole ally, had ventured into the cold kitchen to ask for food, Romen had evicted him from his domain, yelling angrily.

‘How is it my fault?’ Arun had asked.

‘It is everyone’s fault!’ Romen had shouted back.

The muscles at the nape of Rukmini's neck knotted at Romen's remark.

It was all her fault, in the end.

Then a flare of anger. Was it anyone's fault? Was falling in love a fault? To the wrong man, it certainly was, she could hear Usha say. A man who was not of her religion, let alone her caste, nor of her race, not from any region remotely near hers, and a man whose skin was dark, to make matters worse.

Over my dead body. Every day, for a year, ever since Rukmini had told her parents about Alex, Usha had said that. You will marry him over my dead body.

That day too, Usha had chanted that phrase like an incantation. She had shouted it out loud through the closed door; she had cried, crooning it and she had mumbled, fumbling over the words, and it was a wonder that Rukmini heard her low wails; but she did, through the day and the early hours of the night as she lay rigid listening to them making their way out of Usha's room, under two locked doors, into hers.

To keep the tumult at bay, Rukmini devised her own spells. She thought of Alex, of how his skin felt under her searching fingers; she remembered how her heart trembled when he looked at her in that knowing way he did. She held on to the knowledge that from the next day on he would be by her side, constantly and forever—and how that simple fact would heal everything. All would be well, she said out loud. It would all be okay.

Finally, the exhausted night came to an end.

Morning broke, but it was a stale one, worn out by the troubles of the night. As expected, as soon as the sun rose, word swept around the city that a day of mourning, of protest, had

been announced. The city was to be shut down. Normal life was to be suspended: no one would leave home, no offices or schools or shops would open, no vehicles would be allowed on the streets and those that chose to defy the bandh would do so at their own risk.

Rukmini shivered at the window despite her thick quilted gown. Grey clouds floated across the sky threatening rain. Unseasonal in December in this part of the country but what could be more fitting? Rain on her wedding day, rain on this marriage so beleaguered to begin with.

There was silence from her parents' bedroom. Sleep must have overwhelmed them at some point in the night.

The silence was amplified by the absolute stillness inside the house and outside it too—up and down the hill and on the river. No boat on the water this morning, no cheerful cries tossed between boatmen crossing paths, no distant blaring of horns, no children wailing in the chill of dawn. On this day of mourning, not even the wind stirred. The only sound was the murmur of the river as it sped along, oblivious to the happenings of the city it flowed through. A city under siege and only the river dared disregard it.

There was a knock on the door.

'It's me, Ruku.' Arun's voice was low.

Rukmini unlatched the door. 'Are we still going ahead?'

'Yes.' Arun rubbed his eyes. 'Of all things a bandh, today of all days.'

'How will we go?'

'Deuta has organized a police escort, he spoke to the DC.' Arun turned to go. 'Will you eat something?'

'No.'

‘As you wish. Remember we have to leave at half past eight.’

Her father, Torun, who had shadowed her life, making sure she did not lack for anything, had rendered Rukmini this final service. He had arranged for her to be taken safely to the place where she would sign on a piece of paper and become a new person. A wife, a woman, in time perhaps a mother. Not merely a daughter or a sister, any more.

From the window seat in her room, Rukmini had a spectacular view, one that she had grown accustomed to. Some said it was the best view in the city of Gauhati. Her classmates, when they came home—she was part of a study group that met once a week in her house—spent the better part of the time exclaiming over it until she was exasperated. But this morning she looked at it with a pressing sense of loss. She was being silly, she was not going into exile after all, but as hard as she tried Rukmini could not shake off an unreasonable worry that it would be a long time before she would see this view again.

The yellow house Torun built in 1960, the year Rukmini was born, had the advantage of being situated on the edge of a hill that while not exactly overhanging the river did overlook it as closely as possible. Only the narrow winding road that ran up to the house and then on to the other buildings on that hill—the Hotel Belle Vue and the Raj Bhavan, the governor’s residence—separated it from the river. The panoramic view was unobstructed on three sides. Rukmini’s room looked west and from it she could see the river winding around the base of the hill and flowing on westwards where it was straddled by the metal filigree of Saraighat Bridge. In the watery morning light, the bridge looked deceptively fragile, a wisp of spun sugar against the grey sky. Rukmini knew just how strong it was and

how it held together two lands that struggled to break free of each other.

In the mid-distance rose the small islands of Umananda, atop which was a Shiva temple, and Urvasi, with its pillar raised jauntily into the sky. The river was beautiful. Rukmini was not good with words, the river had been described more poetically by others. All she knew was that when she looked at it, the breath caught in her chest.

On the far edge, on the north bank, low blue-green hills ran along the water and, above, the sky arched vast and endless. The river had been her friend. It had always extended to her a sense of purpose, its constant motion—albeit a lazy, languorous one—had encouraged her to keep moving, to forge ahead from one place in time to another. Rukmini was grateful for that, for she knew she could only too easily sink into a despairing absence of movement.

Seven o'clock.

Time to begin her preparations. Her white silk mekhela sador, ironed meticulously by Sita the day before, hung on the wooden clothes stand. Rukmini ran her hand over the smooth silk. The golden diamonds woven into it glimmered in the pale morning light. Arun had chosen and bought this exquisite set for her, an extravagance much more than he could afford. Rukmini's heart swelled at how much this brother—a man not given to grand expressions of emotion—was doing for her.

She had to be grateful for what little she had, the people she had by her side—Arun, Robin Khura, her father's best friend who had without hesitation offered his home as the venue for the wedding registration—and Alex, of course, her beloved Alex. Better not to think of the ones who were casting her out.



Still, no girl should be so alone on the day of her wedding, Rukmini thought fiercely, as she turned the shower on. The water was so hot it was steaming. Perversely, she stood under it, daring it to scald her, but all the heat did was stain her fair skin pink and draw out her anger until she was empty of it.

She dressed swiftly, methodically, in the silent room. With the towel wrapped around her, she dried her long hair with the blow dryer, cringing at the grating noise it produced. She plaited neatly her still faintly damp hair and swung it over her shoulder where it hung voluptuously against her spine. She slipped into a petticoat and a silk blouse, after which she pulled the mekhela up her slim hips, and wound the sador around her midriff. Kajal on her lower eyelids, a quick swipe of lip gloss, her grandmother's pearls fastened around her neck—they had mysteriously appeared on her dressing table the day before—and pearl jhumkas pulling down at her ears.

She was ready.

In the mirror, Rukmini looked adequate, but as if she were dressed for someone else's wedding. She certainly did not look like a bride. As she smoothed the pleats of the sador down, Rukmini realized how profoundly she wished to look beautiful this day. Alex always said she was beautiful but Rukmini sometimes doubted his assessment. She longed to be tall and broad-shouldered, not so small and petite that people often mistook her for a schoolgirl. Well, she would have to make do with the cards life had dealt her, in this aspect and all others. Rukmini squared her shoulders and walked out of her room.

Torun was sitting in his armchair in the drawing room dressed in his nightclothes, his white punjabi-pyjama, an eri shawl wrapped around him. His head was sunk on his chest and

he could have been asleep but for the occasional tremor that shook his shoulders.

At the sound of Rukmini's door opening, he looked up. He was weeping, the tears flowed down his face without restraint.

Rukmini's heart sank. What little courage she had mustered was in danger of melting away. She looked at Arun, who rose from his chair and smiled at her.

'Come,' Arun said, 'come and take Deuta's blessings.'

Rukmini knelt and laid her palms on Torun's feet. He put his hands on her head and chanted the ancient blessings. 'May you live long and forever. May you be the mother of many sons.'

After he withdrew his shaking hands, Rukmini stayed at her father's feet for a few moments. A cold breeze blew in from the veranda. She stood up and, without a second look at Torun, turned to leave.

At the main door, Romen stood, face averted, arms crossed across his chest. He was almost the same age as Rukmini, a couple of years older at the most. They had been friends ever since Usha had installed him in the household ten years ago, a raw awkward village boy. He had grown since then, becoming many things to this household: cook, guardian, friend, brother. On this occasion he chose the position of an elder and as Rukmini stopped beside him, placed a hand in blessing on her head. 'Be happy,' he said.

Sita stood at the main door, twisting the pallu of her shiny nylon saree in her thin hands. Only fifteen, but she wore a thick line of red sindoor on the parting of her hair, the unmistakable mark of a married woman. Rukmini paused by her side and took her hands in her own. 'Look after yourself,' she told the

young girl who was crying now. 'If you need anything, talk to Arun Dada.'

The main door was open. Sunlight streamed in and Rukmini closed her eyes for a moment against the glare. In that instant, she felt all the weight of the closed door behind her. No one alluded to the absence in the room this morning but the silence that seeped out from the edges of the sealed master bedroom had diffused steadily through the air. The tension had escaped no one.

'Come, Ruku.' Arun, standing beyond the threshold, extended his hand.

'Wait!' Romen called out from behind. 'Wait for just a moment.'

Rukmini turned in confusion.

Romen whirled around and ran down the living room to the master bedroom door. He knocked on it, softly at first, and then insistently.

'Aideo! Open the door,' he said. 'Rukmini is leaving.'

An answering silence. Romen banged on the door now. 'Don't do this, for God's sake, Aideo. Our girl is leaving.'

'Let it be, Romen.' Arun turned to Rukmini again. 'Ruku, time to go.'

'Go, Majoni,' Torun said from behind. 'God be with you.'

Rukmini hesitated. She knew how stubborn her mother could be, how wilful, yet she had not anticipated this. She had assumed—as all the others had—that Usha would relent and, at the very least, condescend to bless her daughter as she left. Usha did no such thing.

They had never been friends, Rukmini and Usha. Perhaps that was why she was so unflinching. There had never been any of that soft mother–daughter business between them. Rukmini

would not have been averse to any maternal overture; she had seen her friends with their mothers and had envied them, but Usha made no such gesture towards her and, in time, Rukmini had grown resistant to her too. Torun was her father and her mother. She hardly saw Usha as a parent.

The black Ambassador waited in the porch. It had been washed and polished until it was gleaming. Biren, the young Mising man, who had come to them last year from his village in the distant north at the foothills of the eastern Himalayas, had outdone himself. He stood at the rear door nearest to her and held the door open. A uniformed policeman was in the front passenger seat and when Rukmini looked down the hill, she saw two police jeeps waiting outside, on the main road.

The car set off down the driveway. At the gate, Rukmini turned around and craned her neck up to look up at the house. She knew it was bad luck, one did not look back when setting out on a journey, but her heart would not listen to reason.

In the pale morning light, the Yellow House was indistinct, its edges fuzzy as if it was tired. Then she saw Torun standing on the front veranda. He was leaning over the balustrade as if searching for something. He must have caught sight of her, for he raised his right arm and waved. Rukmini frantically rolled down the window glass and waved back. Tears rolled down her face. She would look even less like a bride now, kajal smudged, and face red. But she did not care.

‘Don’t cry, Bhonti.’ Arun placed his hand on hers.

Rukmini smiled at him. He had called her by a name from their childhood.

Bhonti meant sister in Assamese, but many girls were named Bhonti too. Sister.

Sister, brother, father, mother. Kinship ties were never felt more keenly than on days they were loosened or severed: at weddings when girls left to join another family, on graduation when children left home to study and, most of all, at deaths, when a bond snapped never to be replaced again.

Rukmini's thoughts turned to the two boys lying cold in the morgue this winter morning. There would be autopsies, there had to be in these cases. Rukmini imagined the examiner making that first incision. A Y-shaped slice, the short stems of the Y from shoulder joints to the sternum, and then a slash straight down to the pubis. Rukmini shivered. She had a horror of that first cut, even on warm living flesh. In the operation theatre she felt the bile rise when the surgeon cut peremptorily into the skin and blood rose like a tide from the edges of the incision. Alex teased her about this unsuitable, inconvenient delicacy in a doctor. He felt invincible, he told her, as he cut into a patient. It was at that moment, he said, many surgeons felt like God. Well, Rukmini experienced no such elation. Bad enough in an OT but in the morgue it was gruesome at another level altogether. On the table, a boy, alive and warm just hours before and now—now, just a body on a steel table, inert, inanimate, of no more significance than the scalpel cutting through him.

'What are you thinking?'

Rukmini was startled. She looked at Arun. 'Nothing,' she said. 'Nothing. By the way, my luggage?'

'In the boot of the car, Baideo,' Biren answered.

Rukmini had packed a small suitcase the night before. She did not take much, just a couple of churidar-kameez, a pair of jeans, some shirts and few underclothes and nightclothes. She

had also packed her doctor's apron, her stethoscope and a few of her textbooks.

'Aren't you cold?' Arun asked.

Rukmini rubbed her arms. She had goosebumps on the exposed skin. It was cold, chillingly cold, but like the girls she had often disparaged at weddings, she had decided not to put on a warm cardigan that morning. She had not wanted the beautiful mekhela sador hidden. She had not wanted her slim arms and the curve of her waist concealed either.

'It *is* cold,' she said.

'Style?' Arun smiled.

Rukmini smiled back. 'Yes, Dada, style.' She wiped her damp face with the back of her hand.

The sun had broken out and burnt the mist off the river. Shorn of its cover, the river was empty, bereft of all motion. She was glad to see it this way: no boats on its heaving water, no distractions, only sunlight bouncing off the surface and kites riding the spirals above. Silver sandbars had emerged braiding the wide river. Rukmini thought, with a flicker of regret, of all the celebrations that would follow as winter progressed. Picnics on the sand, feasting and music and dancing.

She had grown up on the river but in the last seven years Rukmini had come to know it in a way she had not known it before. Every day, she had walked along this stretch of the river on her way home from the hospital. The blue-and-yellow medical college bus came only as far as the corner of Latasil Field where it turned off towards the High Court. She got off at the turning, near a small shop that sold cigarettes, bubble gum and paan, among other things. There was always a clutch of jostling young men around the ramshackle structure. Rukmini learned

to ignore their comments: pretty sister, give us some time; don't break my heart . . . She learned to walk with her elbows raised to ward off touches and to walk as fast as she could with the mekhela flapping about her slender ankles.

Once she was at the river, she was safe. Here she often dawdled. The water was so close she could smell it. On hot summer afternoons, the heat rose off it in swells, and in winter, a cloying clamminess touched her skin, teasing out goosebumps. And always, the sense of being part of a larger heart beating that ran invisible leads into her own timid one, charging her with energy. Ferries docking at Kachari Ghat disgorged passengers who moved on to unknown places, vegetables were unloaded for sale from country boats nudging each other, men yelled across the chaos, birds soared above all this commotion. Yet, at times—hushed afternoons and this morning, for instance—this same river was so placid and tranquil, so still that her heart slowed down in response. If she looked long enough at the glittering water, she could fall asleep.

The river had another side to it; Rukmini knew that well, although she hated to admit it. Swollen, sullen, it grew belligerent with the monsoon rains and became quite another creature. As the muddy waters rose threateningly up the silver banks, Rukmini would feel her heart race and when it looked like it could crest the top and spill over, she would walk home by another, safer route, one that skirted the base of the hills near the Yellow House. She knew the river regularly broke loose in rural areas turning wide tracts of countryside into a muddy sea, but she had seen it happen in the city too, once when the roiling waters had foamed over and slithered like a thousand-headed snake into the streets.

In the monsoon, and on the odd other days when it rained, Torun would send the car down from the house to the Latasil corner to fetch her. Wherever he was—in office at the Secretariat or on tour in some remote part of Assam, in the days before he retired in 1979 and at home after retirement—the black Ambassador would be waiting for her at the corner. When Rukmini got home, Usha would invariably be asleep—my beauty sleep, Usha would call her siesta—lost to the world and certainly to her daughter. Rukmini would wonder at her mother's strong sense of self-preservation.

It was left then to Torun to worry about matters like Rukmini finding her way home in the rain—and in this and in everything else, he had met her needs without her even having to ask. Who would be there for her now? Would Alex do for her what her father had been tirelessly doing for twenty-three years? She was stepping off the edge in every way imaginable: leaving this, her hometown, flying to Bangalore, a city she had never seen, making her way into a family she had never met. All she had was Alex and she hoped fervently he would be all that she had hoped for.

The roads were abandoned this morning. An unnatural quiet prevailed in the narrow threadlike lanes that led off the main road along the river. The small houses that lined them were still: no sound of people talking, no errant television chatter or laughter. The only human presence was the clusters of policemen in khaki and the occasional police vehicle that coasted past them.

So many times in these past few years this small town had been gripped by such protests. Ever since the students of the AASU had decided to fight the government on the issue of



Bangladeshis being allowed to not just stay but also vote, the state had been thrown into chaos.

Normal life had been overtaken by the unpredictable: the rhythms of offices, schools, colleges, households, births, deaths and weddings—all had been ruptured by the overwhelming call of the cause. Four years now and the Agitation—it was aptly named, the movement the students had launched in 1979—showed no signs of abating. The people of Assam had not lost hope or courage or energy yet. They spilled out on to the streets in their thousands when summoned by the student leaders—the Boys, as they were affectionately called—to picket and demonstrate and protest, and stayed indoors with windows closed and lights out when ordered to by the same leaders.

Rukmini had marched on the roads too. On sweltering summer mornings, she had walked alongside her fellow medical students, in angry phalanxes, from the hill the college stood on, to Dispur, to the seat of the state government. In the blazing sun—thin cotton blouse stuck to her wet back, silk mekhela clinging to her damp legs—she had stood patiently blocking the gates of the Secretariat preventing officials and ministers from entering their offices. Faint with hunger and sometimes fear, at the sight of the restless police cadres grouped in front of them, she had shouted with hundreds of others, *Joi Ai Assam*.

Long live Assam. Long live the Motherland.

A state at war. A city at war, that was what this city had become. The bandh this day had allowed her town a small reprieve, given it a chance to remind Rukmini of how it had been before it was stoked into a blaze.

In recent times, she had not paused to stop and look at it. This morning the city was graceful in its tranquil elegance.

On the low green hills and in the valleys that nestled between them, single-storeyed houses with their half-timbered walls of plastered ikora reed and charming pitched corrugated metal roofs—called the ‘Assam-type houses’—lay close to the ground, encircled by rings of green: slim straight betel nut palms, sturdier coconut palms, mango trees with unexpected seasonal inflorescences of flamboyant orchid, and tangled shrubs bearing flowers and fruits throughout the year. Some even possessed their own little ponds, their unruffled surfaces studded with pink water lilies.

Each house an oasis unto itself, Rukmini liked to think. In Robin Khura’s modest backyard there was just such a small pond, where Jitu, his son, and she had spent many a morning trying to catch the fish that lurked beneath the glassy green waters. There was some concrete now: there had been very little of that in the days when she had been growing up. But now in many compounds, in most neighbourhoods, concrete houses had been built alongside the old ones, and in some, the older ones had been torn down entirely to make space for the new. Nevertheless, these new buildings hardly ever rose above two floors, they did not breach the canopy that surrounded them. Only in a few areas—the bazaar areas along the river mainly, Fancy Bazaar and Pan Bazaar—did a few tall buildings stand. The rest of the town still hugged the ground it was built on.

‘So quiet,’ Arun remarked. ‘Is it always so dead during a bandh?’

‘Yes, yes it is.’

The bandhs were absolute here; Rukmini had seen footage on television of bandhs in other faraway cities—Delhi, Bombay

and Bangalore—and in those places there was still some movement in pockets as contrary groups opposed the calls. But here in Assam, bandhs were just that. Bandh. Everything closed, came to a grinding halt. No one challenged the protests because everyone supported them, understood the need for them. Nothing so complete was possible without deep feeling. The people were gripped with an urgent desire to fulfil what the Boys had begun: to make the government do its duty; to expel illegal aliens, instead of arming them with citizenship and voting rights.

Rukmini had lived through many of these suspended days when the city was inert with a silence broken only by the softest of sounds: the rustling of leaves in a mango tree as the wind passed through, the cawing of a crow from the top of a water tank, the muted chatter of a television.

This was the first time she was out there in the open on such a day, exposed, vulnerable on the dead streets, the cynosure of unseen watching eyes as their small cavalcade coasted through the empty streets. She felt like a traitor. That was what the boys from the college students' union had called her when they first found out about Alex and her. Why not an Assamese boy? Why a Malayali from Kerala? Are there not any Assamese good enough for you? Desodhrohi, one of them had said to her. Traitor.

In time, they got used to this relationship. Some even befriended Alex, and he in turn learnt to speak Assamese and joined the Students' Union and marched alongside the others in protest marches. Usha submitted to no such mellowing, though. In her eyes, Rukmini remained a traitor, who had betrayed state and race and family.

They had arrived at the bend in the riverside road, the car turned left towards Latasil Field. Rukmini looked up. In the far distance, rising up from the river, was Nilachal, the Blue Hill, the sacred hill where Goddess Kamakhya's powerful temple stood. Legend had it that when the great god Shiva, maddened by grief after his beloved consort's death, roamed around earth carrying her mutilated body, her *yoni* had fallen here. A temple was erected to honour it.

Rukmini bowed her head, as she always did, to the hill, to this many-splendoured, formidable Devi, who it was said still menstruated in her chamber deep under the earth. Patron Goddess, Protectoress of her land, Kamakhya was adored by her people. She made Rukmini unaccountably uneasy. Stories of the Devi's limitless powers had been part of Rukmini's childhood. Her aita, Torun's old mother, had been a skillful storyteller. Aita had spoken of the Devi's intransigence when defied, of her vengeance when wronged. Rukmini was reminded of Usha; her mother and the Devi had a lot in common.

Usha was a generous benefactor but she was equally ferocious in her antagonism when she sensed the slightest resistance. Rukmini saw that Torun had opted for absolute surrender—she could understand his position now she was in love—and Arun was fortunate in that Usha allowed him commodious space to conduct his life in the manner he chose to. She accepted—with enthusiasm, instead of opposition—Arun's choice of wife: a girl from another caste. The servants treated Usha with a mixture of love and watchful fear and they survived well.

But Rukmini had not played by the rules. She loved her mother, indeed, was in awe of her brilliance and competence and flamboyance; she longed to be her friend. At the same

time, she found herself unable to condone her mother's smooth manipulations—her domineering will that made plain that everything had to be her way. Her way or the highway, Rukmini had always thought to herself, under her breath, even in her mind. She always stood her ground. It was no surprise that Usha and she never became friends.

The twin ponds of Jor Pukhuri now appeared before them. Biren turned left and coasted along the southern banks of the two ponds. At the end of the road he turned left into a narrow lane that skirted the eastern margin of the first pond and led to Robin Khura's small house.

Rukmini smiled, the first time that morning, when the car stopped. She watched Arun's face soften as he gazed out of the window at Jitu standing by the wooden gate. This modest Assam-type house sagged under the weight of the old white-and-pink bougainvillea sprawled on its sloping red roof. Its three inhabitants—Robin Khura, his deceased wife, Makon Khuri, and their son Jitu—occupied a special place in both their hearts. A more significant place in Rukmini's heart, perhaps, for while it was the icing on the cake of Arun's childhood, in her case it *was* the cake.

Arun's childhood and life thereafter bore little resemblance to Rukmini's. Torun and Usha adored Arun and Rukmini could not grudge them that. They were suitably proud of their brilliant, good-looking son. Arun's only drawback—if one could call it that—was his reserved manner, which, unfortunately, stood highlighted against Usha's imperious enthusiasm and Torun's garrulousness. Sometimes Arun suffered for it. But in every other aspect, he had lived up to expectations. He was a loving son, always considerate of his parents' wishes; he was

an equally affectionate brother. Rukmini loved him for that. The staff in the household doted on him and so did friends and family. It was impossible not to like the pleasant, smiling young man who seemed so capable and dependable. Arun also excelled in his studies. Right after school, he passed the entrance examinations to the renowned All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi and had passed his MBBS with honours in three subjects. By the time, Rukmini had passed her MBBS (with honours in ophthalmology), Arun was a cardiac surgeon, working in his alma mater. He was literally the sun—Arun meaning ‘morning sun’—around which his parents revolved.

Robin Khura’s family was the balm to Rukmini’s wounds. Torun and Robin had been in the same school in Jorhat, in the same class and, as they never tired of saying, had shared the same desk during their ten years of school. After graduating from Cotton College in Gauhati, Robin Sarma went to Delhi to study English; he came back with a doctorate. His thesis—on ‘The similarities in the works of Emily and Charlotte Bronte’—secured him a job in Gauhati University as a lecturer. He retired eventually as the head of the Department of English there.

But, the best thing that happened to him—he delighted in pointing this out—was marrying Makon Khuri and she was probably the best thing that happened to Rukmini too. A petite woman, frail in health, she more than made up for this shortcoming with her heart. Given to peals of laughter and even more frequent hugs and kisses—unusual for a conventional middle-class woman of her generation—she brought a lightness and gladness to Rukmini’s life. Rukmini truly believed that Makon Khuri saved her life and that she helped her become the person she was. At the slightest chance, Rukmini would pack

her bags and depart for a few days' stay at Robin Khura's. Usha objected, indifferently at first, and then more strenuously when Rukmini hit her teenage. She often alluded to the fact that Jitu and Rukmini were too close. But Torun always overrode this one complaint of his beloved wife and everyone else was only too happy with the visits.

Usha had not been far from the truth in this matter. By the time they were sixteen, Rukmini knew Jitu had grown fond of her in a very different way. But she harboured no romantic feelings for him at all. It had been awkward between them for a while because of this but one day, just after their school-leaving exam, while they sat fishing at the pond in the backyard, she broached the subject.

'I love you, but not in that way, you understand.'

Jitu hung his head. He looked intently at the water. 'Why?' he said, eventually.

'I don't know why, Jitu.' Rukmini felt tears welling up. 'One either feels that way about a person or they don't.'

This time Jitu did not say anything.

'You are very dear to me and always will be. You know that, right?' Rukmini said. She was angry that the tears were now coming thick and fast; she was not used to crying in front of another person.

Jitu never let her lack of reciprocity come between them. They remained good friends and, in time, he was a good friend to Alex too. This morning, it was Jitu's dear familiar face that Rukmini saw first at the gate.

And then behind him, on the small veranda outside the main door, she saw the face that still made her heart lurch in the same way it had the first time she had seen it. Alex! She

stepped out of the car in such haste that she would have tripped on her mekhela and fallen had Arun not been there to hold her.

‘Careful, Ruku,’ he said. ‘Slow down! He is not running away, you know.’

Rukmini took a deep breath. She walked beside Arun matching her pace with his slow one.

At the gate, Jitu gave her a brief hug. Rukmini was startled. Jitu had never embraced her before.

Alex was before her now, not quite within reach, but just at that distance she liked to have him. This way, she could look at him without drawing his attention. Alex was standing next to Robin Khura on the small veranda. Robin Khura was dwarfed by Alex’s lanky length. Alex inevitably stood out in Gauhati wherever he went; his height caught the eye first—he stood at a considerable six feet three inches—then the colour of his skin. People were accustomed to paler skin in these parts. And finally, his exuberance, his almost childlike friendliness that drew people in.

It was this buoyancy that had attracted her too. That and the look he had in his eyes—sometimes—when he had looked at her. As if there was a connection between them that was secret and intimate and invisible to the rest of the world. As if he knew her already and as if both of them were aware of that too. The hair on her forearms had stood on end the first time she intercepted that look.

They had been at the Dissection Hall in college at the cadaver assigned to them. The students were divided into groups of ten for their dissection lessons and because both their surnames began with ‘G’—Goswami and George—Rukmini and Alex were assigned to the same group.



Anatomy dissection was a rite of passage, fraught with tension, for most medical students. It was their first encounter with the human body and a savage one it was. To be cutting into a dead human was not just physically challenging, it was frightening. The ten of them had gathered tentatively around 'their' cadaver. The three girls in the group had stood close together as if to gather courage. The boys had stood across in positions of assumed indifference or embarrassment.

Alex seemed to be the only one not intimidated by the situation; he stood at the head of the cadaver, his copy of *Cunningham's Anatomy* in hand, and said. 'Let's do this, shall we?' At his words, the others straightened up and took their places. Alex glanced across at Rukmini, and in that instant she felt a current, as if they had said something intimate to each other. She grew hot and damp under the collar of her thick white apron. Alex George was evidently someone who could get under her skin and she found she wanted him there, and for a long time. A cliché, she realized later—love at first sight. But it had happened to her and as she had once said to Jitu: one either felt love or didn't. In this case, she fell headlong in deep unquestioning love.

Alex took over the group after that first day. His nine group mates were so relieved they yielded gratefully to him in almost everything. And he responded by being decisive and firm when required, but at other times cheerful, sometimes to the point of breeziness.

In time, Alex grew steadily popular outside their small circle too. People liked him immediately—it could be his good looks, those eyes sparkling with some private mirth.

Good looks could work against one, Rukmini knew, in a small town, so it was more than that. It was lucky people took

to him, for the college and the town could be stubbornly set against the outsider, particularly in the current times when parochial feelings were running so high. Alex was from Kerala in the south of India. His father, from a family that owned vast acres of plantations, was in the Air Force stationed at its base in Tezpur, four hours from Guwahati. All these facts could have easily swung against him. He could have been the unwelcome reminder of the Indian government. But his charm served as his shield.

Early on, Rukmini realized that Alex was full of surprises. While mostly responsible, he relished the unorthodox and enjoyed breaking the odd rule now and then, something she found surprisingly annoying.

Once he smuggled a brain—a *human* brain—out of the anatomy hall in a Dalda tin. Rukmini's dissection group had formed an informal study circle that met in one of the local student's homes. They most often gathered at Rukmini's house late afternoons after college hours. In the beginning, Rukmini had worried about how Usha would receive this influx into her house. Usha had never been particularly welcoming of Rukmini's school friends, perhaps one of the primary reasons for Rukmini's sad lack of friendships growing up. But this time, to her surprise, Usha warmly welcomed this motley crew of medical students. Rukmini had not been able to piece together this puzzle until after she had announced her intention to marry Alex.

'And to think I thought I could keep an eye on all your friends by having them home,' Usha had said.

It was to one of these gatherings that Alex brought the Dalda tin. He brought it in a plastic shopping bag, in plain

sight, and if the others were in on the plan they did not reveal it to her. As they sat around, Rukmini occasionally caught a whiff of acrid formalin. She raised her hands to her face and tried to sniff at them without the others noticing. Ever since they had begun dissection, she could not get the smell off her fingers and had started eating with knife and fork.

‘What are you doing, Rukmini?’ Monmi, one of girls, called out.

Rukmini flushed. ‘Nothing.’ She looked around at the others. ‘Can any one of you smell something odd?’

Arindam Hazarika began laughing. ‘It is Alex’s Dalda tin!’

‘What is in it?’ Rukmini leaned towards it.

Alex carefully lifted the tin out of the bag and put it on the floor. ‘Please get a tray, steel, if possible,’ he said.

Romen found an old steel tray that Rukmini handed over to Alex. He had surgical gloves on now and, with a naughty smile, levered open the cover of the tin. A rush of pungent formalin filled the room. Alex reached in and lifted out a dripping brain and as the girls watched, aghast, placed it gently on Romen’s steel tray.

‘Voila,’ he said. ‘The mysterious human brain.’

Rukmini was speechless. She was incredulous, angry, amused and anxious, all at the same time. Only Alex would dare to conceive of and execute such a bizarre, daring plan. To think he had carried that tin in a public bus—what if someone had smelt something fishy and apprehended him? It infuriated her to think of the risk he had subjected himself and the rest of the group to. Also, was it not unethical to smuggle a human brain out of the Anatomy Hall in this fashion? They had all sworn to accord the maximum possible respect to the cadavers—the

human beings they had been once. Was this not a breach of that code? Most dangerous of all, if Usha were to find out they would truly suffer. Rukmini felt a chill as she imagined her mother walking into the room with a tray of food for the hungry students and finding them huddled over a human brain. Still, she was thrilled by what he had done.

Alex had, without any trace of concern, commenced reading from their anatomy manual. Sitting across from him, Rukmini listened to his low voice and thought how beautifully he read. And as always, admiration gave way to a diffuse, aching longing. She watched the way his silky hair fell over his forehead and she looked at his long fingers as he turned the pages of the book. And she grew distracted and dreamy and was soon far away from the proceedings before her.

The odd thing was that apart from that occasional questioning look that Alex directed her way, Rukmini had no idea what he felt about her. He never let any obvious feeling show and she was so unaccustomed to men and their ways, she did not even know what to look for. In school, she had never been one for the boys; none of them interested her and, even if they had, she would have had to face a storm at home.

Usha had very strict and old-fashioned ideas about young women. These did not include having boyfriends or their being able to choose their husbands. Girls had to live within a secret perimeter, a Lakshman Rekha, that parents drew around them. When the time had come for Rukmini to apply to colleges, Usha would not permit her to apply to any outside the city. 'Girls should leave home only to go their husbands' homes,' she had said with grim satisfaction when Rukmini found out she had been admitted to Gauhati

Medical College. It was permissible for Arun to live in Delhi and study there but Rukmini's fate was to be at home under parental supervision.

Ignorant in every aspect of life, including love, Rukmini was completely ill-equipped to judge what Alex was thinking. There was no way of knowing if Alex would reciprocate any of her feelings. Still, there was a certain delicious pleasure to be had in imagining he did. Every time he looked at her in that way, Rukmini would tingle with the anticipation of what was to come and when it did not, she found herself, in an odd way, relieved. For any declaration of romantic interest would be followed by conflict of unimaginable intensity with Usha.

So, when two years later, at just such a study session in her room, when the rest of the gang was out of the room, Alex reached over and kissed her firmly on the lips, Rukmini froze. She grew hot and then cold and remained entirely speechless and Alex had misunderstood and stood up abruptly. 'I am sorry,' he said, his clear voice unusually thick. Rukmini stood up too, dropping the book on her lap. 'No,' she said, 'No, it is fine, I am fine I mean.'

It was more than fine. Rukmini could never have imagined what was to follow. It was as if she had only now begun to come alive. Under his gaze she felt beautiful, something she would have scoffed at had it been suggested to her by anyone else. She saw her smallness as delicate, her pale skin as pretty, she looked at herself in wonder. Her ideas, her opinions were brought out in the open and, to her astonishment, they were declared intelligent, wise, fantastic even. She watched herself move into the centre of a world that revolved around her and she was overwhelmed.

This then was what love was all about! This was that jealously guarded secret. To no longer be limited to being one person, to being unalterably part of two. Seized by the urgent impulse to share every trivial detail of her life with him, Rukmini would hover tensely around the extension of the telephone in her room waiting for Alex to ring from the hostel. Usha's afternoon siestas were a blessing now. Rukmini would attach herself to the phone and pour herself out to Alex. If she could have, she would have melted into that telephone line and been with Alex physically.

They often did not have occasion to meet alone. They were surrounded at most times by friends, classmates and their parents. In a small town, there was precious little privacy for anyone in love. An occasional kiss behind a door, a quick embrace before the door opened—that was all Rukmini had known so far. Not that she minded much. There was a whole universe that had opened up to her beyond the physical touch.

To Alex, she was the centre of things and so it was for her too. In the lock-and-key model they had studied in physiology antigens and antibodies fitted in with an exactness that allowed no room for error. That was how they were paired.

Despite her father's enormous love for her and her brother's steady affection, she had been consigned to the margins of life in the Yellow House by Usha. Well, Rukmini found she did not feel so negligible any more. In a glad inversion of the way Usha diminished her, with Alex Rukmini was enhanced; she felt *more* of herself.

The world would alter again this morning, Rukmini thought as she walked up the path towards Alex. In a few hours, she would be a wife and Alex, her husband. She shivered again and, as if sensing her fear, Arun turned and linked his arm with hers.

At the veranda, Arun released Rukmini's arm and she walked, instead, beside Alex, into Robin Khura's small drawing room. It was a humble room, with its old wooden three-piece sofa set and a couple of cane armchairs. That it lacked a woman's touch was obvious. But Jitu and Robin, with the aid of the woman hired to help around the house, had done their best to smarten it up. The cushion covers were freshly washed and ironed. There were vases of clumsily arranged flowers on the bookshelves, one tall arrangement of fragrant rajnigandha and other of red roses, overblown and already shedding petals.

'Sit, sit!' Robin Khura ushered the couple into the two-seater sofa. 'The magistrate will be here any minute.'

Rukmini sat down beside Alex. Her hand resting on the seat of the sofa was alarmingly close to Alex's. She hoped he would not reach across and take her hand. She did not know how things were done in his family down in Bangalore but here it was taboo to touch even your spouse in public view. In fact, it was bad form to express any affection or love between a wife and a husband at all. This was not a society that believed in a hug or embrace outside the bedroom.

'Tea, anyone?' Jitu asked.

Rukmini spoke quickly, maybe too soon, and regretting her haste. 'Not now, later, maybe.' She could not possibly eat or drink anything now. When would the magistrate arrive? She wanted to be done with it all as soon as she could.

'Easy, sweetheart,' Alex said and Rukmini felt herself flush. She was embarrassed at Alex's use of this endearment before the assembled.

There was just the five of them this morning. There would have been more had it not been for the bandh. All eight of their

study circle group and many more of their batch mates—Alex after all was a favourite with many. Some of her friends too, from school, may have shown up. The bandh had kept them all indoors. No family either, though Arun and she had three cousins—all in Jorhat. There were none they were particularly close to.

But what of Alex?

Rukmini realized she had not given any thought to Alex's family, who were absent. His father had died two years ago, but what of his mother and sister, Rose? When asked, he had said that it was too far for them to travel and they would be going down to Bangalore the next day anyway. There, he said, there would a big reception at Bangalore Club. She had not thought it odd then, but now sitting in the still drawing room, suffocated by the cloying scent of the rajnigandhas, Rukmini was struck by how very strange it all was.

The magistrate arrived, half an hour late. At ten minutes past ten, Rukmini put down the pen she had signed her name with and allowed Alex to gather her up in a quick embrace, before bursting into tears.

Later that afternoon, in their hotel room in Belle Vue, on the river across the Yellow House, which Arun had booked, Alex opened his arms to her. Rukmini walked eagerly into his embrace and with a sigh, relaxed against his strong body. She stood on her toes and laid her head down on his shoulder for a quick rest. When he cupped her face in his hands and bent down to kiss her, Rukmini kissed him back, but against her will she felt an unease grow inside her. She had her back to the window and she knew the curtains were drawn against the afternoon sun, but she felt a gaze, searching, boring into her back.



‘Alex, wait,’ she said, ‘give me a minute.’

Rukmini walked over to the window. She yanked the two panels of the thick cotton curtains closer together but as she did, for a brief moment, a chink appeared between them and she saw before her the Yellow House down on the hill.

She turned around to face Alex. ‘Do you mind,’ she said. ‘if we wait? I mean, not now, maybe not even tonight.’

A puzzled look on Alex’s face but he recovered himself quickly. ‘Sure. Whatever you are comfortable with, sweetheart.’

They lay down to sleep instead and while Alex dropped off almost instantly, Rukmini stayed awake for a long time. She could not get the image of Torun sitting on the veranda as she saw him that afternoon.

Alone, gazing out at the river.

# Discover the Greatest Novels of the Year

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

Jahnvi Barua's *Undertow* is one of ten books on the 2020 JCB Prize for Literature longlist.

Follow @TheJCBprize.

The winner of the 2020 JCB Prize for Literature will be announced on 7th November.



THE JCB PRIZE FOR  
LITERATURE  
— 2020 —

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

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS