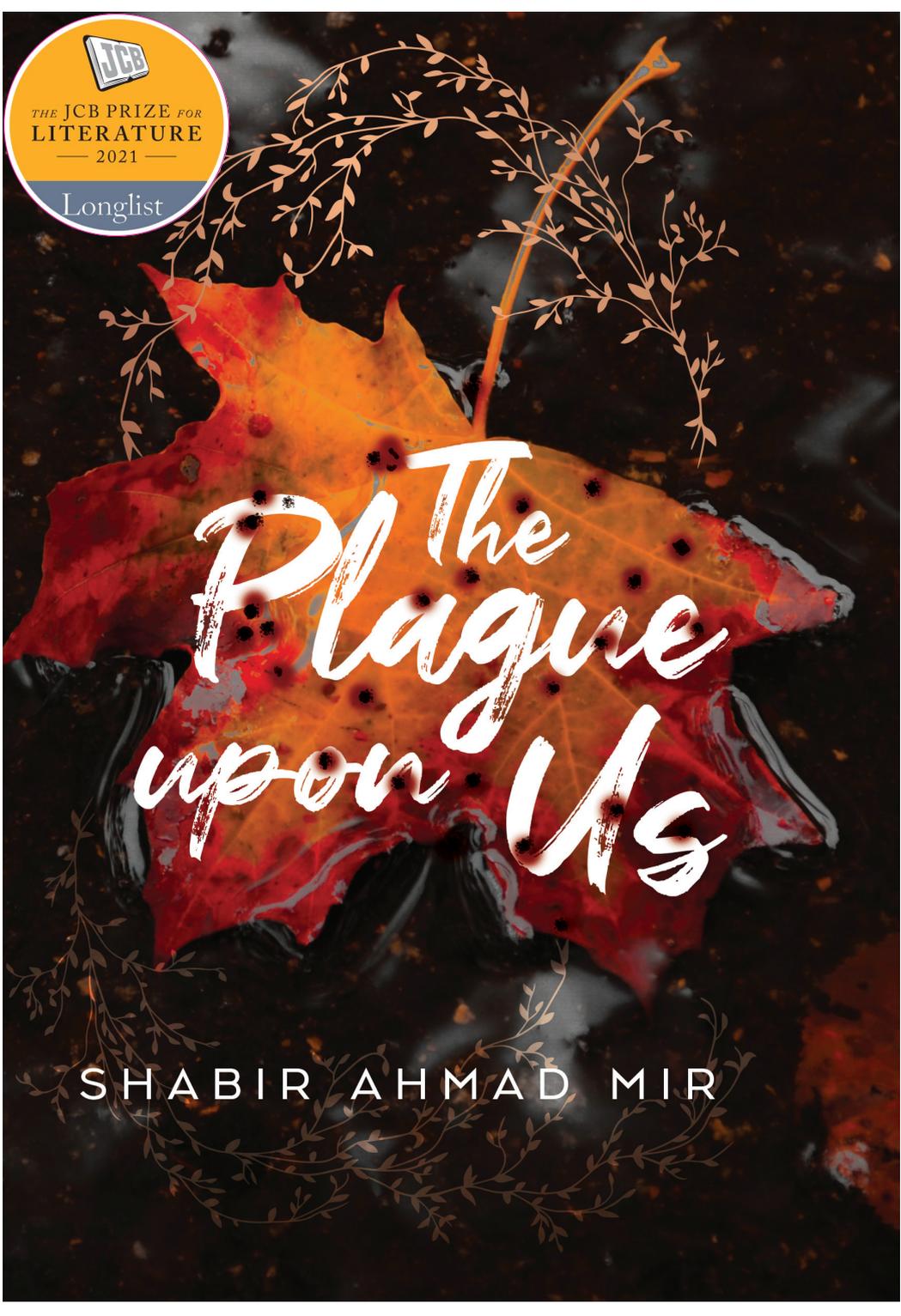




THE JCB PRIZE FOR
LITERATURE
— 2021 —

Longlist



The
Plague
upon Us

SHABIR AHMAD MIR

The Plague Upon Us

by Shabir Ahmad Mir



THE JCB PRIZE *FOR*
LITERATURE
—2021—

An exclusive extract from the
JCB Prize for Literature

THE PLAGUE

THE PLAGUE IS UPON US.

A vicious, dark plague.

Why, only the other day it struck two dozen among us.

Two dozen children and young men who, along with hundreds like them, are on the streets. All of them angry. All of them born of anger. All of them nurtured on anger: on black despair and red rage. No night has ever brought them respite. No night has ever sung a lullaby for them. Instead, it has always been black. Black, like the deep dark bowels of a crocodile with its jaws wide open. What and whom will it claim? Nobody knows. But it will. It surely will, as has the black night that has come before, and the blacker night before that.

If only they could sleep. Not a heaving sleep full of dreams but a cold, insensate one. A sleep like death that would drive away the wails and sirens from their heads, the nightmares from their eyes, the rotten stench from their mouths...

Yet, no, that won't be. They will just have to pass minute after weary black minute on the red rosary of angst, waiting for the night to end, waiting for dawn to come and set them free. But the dawn is just a wound through which a sticky redness oozes onto the horizon. The redness that they will find, by noon, squirting from helpless veins to form dirty, chaotic puddles in the desolate market squares trampled by stained jackboots. The redness that they must get used to, as it is the redness they must breathe through the day. They will swallow it. They will choke on it. They will vomit it out. But no matter what they do, they cannot get rid of it. The redness is their skin. They cannot scratch it off with their nails or tear it away with their teeth.

They are powerless.

They are helpless.

They are miserable.

They raise their eyes up to the heavens, wondering if someone is looking down at them.

At dusk, the red wound shifts to the west. Night comes, but brings no respite. And, again, the red of the day is replaced by the black of night.

They are perpetually bound by this dance of red and black. Until, one day, something snaps within, and they melt all the

misery, the helplessness, the angst, the despair, and forge stones out of them. Then, in simmering rage, they throw these stones at the men in khaki and olive. To drive them away. To drive them out, along with the redness and blackness they have wrought.

But they are ready, the men in khaki and olive. They always are. In their jackboots and fatigues. With red eyes and black guns. With the seeds of the plague – the bullets and pellets. The seeds of metal and lead that sow themselves deep into chests and legs and arms and shoulders and cheeks and foreheads... and eyes.

Eyes that drip blood and lead as the seeds erupt. Eyes that will forever bear the scars of the plague. Eyes that will now just be voids of darkness. Eyes that will now see only black.

‘It is you who has bought the plague upon us,’ Maulvi Saab cries from his Friday pulpit. ‘Yes, it is you. And you. And you. And you. And me. We have brought this plague upon ourselves. We have transgressed from the straight path. The people who forget their Lord and turn away from righteousness, they are the people who invite the plague upon themselves. The plague of pain and misery, of suffering and anguish. The redness that drowns our days and the blackness that invades our nights are the expiation for our sins. We must look within. Purge ourselves. Only then will the Almighty come to our aid against tyrants and oppressors, against the brokers of red and black.’

He makes me angry, Maulvi Saab does. He sets off a whisper in my head: *You know very well who brought the plague.*

But I don't know. I swear I don't.

You do. You have known all along.

I said I don't.

Really? You don't remember anything?

Damn you. Get out of my head.

But it doesn't. It remains there. The voice. Inside my head,
it always remains.

Let us play a game.

I don't want to.

Five flowers...

But I don't want to.

Roses...

Red and lustful.

Pansies...

Violet and petite.

Daffodils...

Yellow and delicate.

Marigolds...

Yellow and overflowing.

Sunflowers...

Yellow and burning.

Five faces.

No.

Tufail...

Cold.

Nisar...

Burning.

Sabia...

Warm.

Muzzafar...

Muzzafar... Muzzafar? What did Muzzafar look like?

Let us play another one. Three colours...

I hate it, this game. I hate it so much.

Red...

Eyes of a serpent.

Black...

Black. BLACK. B L A C K...

So you do remember.

I don't. I don't. I have never seen anything. Never known anything. How can I remember anything? What I remember is perhaps the memories of the dreams I used to have. Or maybe they are the tales I have been told. The things I remember are just my fantasies. I have never seen them. I have never seen anything at all.

But you do remember.

Why should I?

You don't remember how you were born in winter, the harshest one of all? So cold that men walked with icicles hanging from their beards? Not everyone could survive such a winter. You had to let the chill pass into your veins or set your blood on fire. Only those who could do that survived. Your father didn't. He could not; his blood was warm. Just warm. Not hot; not cold; neither frozen nor burning. And it oozed

through ugly holes from his body on a cold night beside half a dozen other warm-blooded shepherds who had gone to the mountains with their flocks of sheep and goats and were bought back as hole-ridden, nail-plucked, broken-teethed, piss-smelling bodies.

My father's body had to be thawed before he could be buried.

See, you remember.

No, I don't. I don't want to.

But you have to: your mother huddled in a corner, sharp tears leaking from her eyes and flowing down her face.

No. No.

You must remember your mother trailing behind the moving truck like the wisp of smoke from a dying candle, on a cold night full of snow as they kept asking you, 'Muzzafar? Where is Muzzafar?'

Shut up. For God's sake, shut up.

You must remember the night full of grunts and groans. The night when the demon had his fill. The night when Firdous Kaczur...

'Damn you, damn you, you fucking bastard, damn you to the vilest perdition of hell. Get out of my head, get out and go to the deepest depths where you belong. GET OUT. GET OUT YOU SON OF A BITCH. GET THE FUCK OUT...'

The cries bring people rushing in through the door. They pin me down. One of them thrusts a needle into my arm. Like on a foggy winter morning, the world starts to fade away from before my eyes.

ONE THOUSAND MINUTES, AND ONE

I WAKE UP IN A STRANGE ROOM. THE FIRST THING I HEAR IS the eager tick-tock of a clock. I open my eyes and see the clock hanging on the wall. A sentinel of time, keeping watch. How futile.

I feel groggy but the room is full of light. And it smells funny. There is a man sitting beside me. He too smells the same. Funny. He sees me trying to get up and says, 'Relax. I am here for you.'

Of course he is here for you.

The voice has returned.

'So, how do you feel?' the man asks.

'There is someone in my head. A voice. It doesn't let me be.'

'Hmm, okay... What does this someone, I mean, this voice... What does it want?'

The voice whispers the answer and I repeat it to the man, 'It wants to know who brought the plague upon us.'

'And do you know?'

Tell him.

'No! How should I know?' I cry out.

'Okay, okay. Calm down. Here, drink some water.' He hands me a glass.

I take a little sip.

Tick-tock, tick-tock... The clock goes on and on.

'Well, why don't you tell me something about yourself? About your childhood and growing up and all that stuff,' the man says with a smile.

'I don't remember anything about myself.'

Liar.

'You don't remember anything at all?'

'No, I don't...'

Hahaha...

'Okay. What about a story? Any story that you can tell me, that you remember?'

He wants a story.

'Come on now, you can't refuse me a story.'

You must not refuse him. You cannot... He is the lord of this place. He is a king.

'You must surely remember a story.'

You must obey him; you must obey your king. Otherwise...

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

'Whatever you remember.'

Tell him. Tell your king.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

Time is running.

'Anything...'

Tell him. Tell him.

'You must...'

You must or...

Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

...a virgin dies...

Tick. Tock. Tick.

...every minute...

I look at the clock. At a quarter to eight, I start my tale...

THE FIRST TALE

ONCE UPON A HARSH WINTER, IN THE HOUSE OF AZIZ POHAL, a baby boy was born. The winter was so harsh and the baby so frail that it seemed he would not survive. But he was a tenacious little thing; he clung to his life as a drowning man clings to the last wooden plank. Three months after his birth, when it seemed like he might survive after all, he was given a name: Oubaid.

His family were pohals, shepherds, only in name. True, they had a small flock of about a dozen sheep and goats, but it was Aziz's forefathers from five or six generations ago who were the real shepherds – nomads with a huge flock who moved between the mountains and the plains year after year, chasing the warm sun. One of them, perhaps finally tired of the to and fro, refused

to shift from the fallow land where he had camped and settled there with his flock.

During Aziz's great-great-grandfather's generation, the family split into two. Kabir Pohal, Aziz's great-grandfather, took his share of flock and continued to be a shepherd. Kabir Pohal's brother, Nabir Puj (as he eventually came to be known), took his share of flock and started to cut their throats. Puj, butcher – that is what he had decided to become, foreseeing a better future in this line of work.

Time proved him right. Over the years, the Pohals got poorer and poorer. Poverty drove them to offer portions of their flock to the insatiable Pujs at regular intervals. The Pujs in turn tried to pay them as handsomely as they could, while maintaining a neat margin of profit. Eventually it was this mutual dependence between shepherds and butchers that kept the two families bonded.

But nothing really changed. While the Pujs continued to do well for themselves, the Pohals' flock kept dwindling, so that by the time Aziz Pohal inherited it, the flock had been reduced to a token heirloom – like an old copper pot taking up space in the corner of a kitchen because no one knew how to get rid of it. Aziz worked mainly as a farmhand now, in apple orchards and on rice fields. But his name remained Aziz Pohal.

Sometimes, when a breeze would blow on a hot afternoon, Aziz would look up from the rice field or walk to the corner of the apple orchard and look into the horizon, as far as he could,

and the distant mountains would melt in his rippling eyes. At such times he looked like a bird that has forgotten how to fly but still remembers the taste of the sky.

The ripples of longing in Aziz's eyes would mirror the laughter of the gurgling streams in the late spring, when it was time to take his flock up to pastures in the mountains. Not that he needed to go; he could hand over his flock to some bhakerwal, like most of the small flock-owners did. The visiting bhakerwal would take his flock along with those of the others into the mountains, fatten the animals with fresh mountain grass, water and air, and return them to their owners after a couple of months. In return, the bhakerwal would be compensated in cash, or presented with a few sheep or goats. But Aziz was among the few flock owners who drove their flocks into the mountains themselves. He would stay in the mountains for a couple of weeks, then leave his flock with the bhakerwal and return home with a heavy heart – and his long wait for the next spring would start. He lived his life waiting from spring to spring.

Oubaïd's mother, Maimoona, came from a family of zaeldars, landlords. That is what they were called, despite not being landlords any more. Their house was called Zaeldar Kouet – the mansion of the zaeldars. More than their ancestry, it was because of the house that they still had their name.

The house, it was believed, was as old as the village itself. In fact, the village seemed to grow out of the house. Zaeldar Kouet, true to its blue blood, had grown ugly and obese as it aged. It

had put on fat with each passing year, with the periodic addition of one annexe after another to accommodate the varying tastes and requirements of the family.

'A zaeldar girl marrying a pahal... Hahaha!' Oubaïd would often hear people comment when his father and mother were not around. Oubaïd could never understand why these people laughed. What was so amusing about his mother marrying his father? Curious, he asked his mother one day what was funny about her marriage.

Maimoona bit her lip and told him, 'It so happened that once a sparrow flew over Zaeldar Kouet. Now, this sparrow was carrying a pebble in its beak and as it flew over the house it dropped the pebble. I was born out of it. Girls who are born from pebbles must marry a shepherd. So your father and I got married.'

'Did it hurt, Mouji, to be born from a pebble?'

'It did, my son. Yes, it did.' Maimoona lifted Oubaïd up in a tight hug and kissed him, her tears wetting his cheek.

On Tuesdays and Saturdays, Maimoona would visit Zaeldar Kouet. She would take Oubaïd along. Not that Oubaïd wanted to go, but Maimoona would insist. 'It is your matamaal after all, your grandparents' house. Come now, you will love it,' she'd say. On their way there, Maimoona would beam a happy greeting to people they passed and tell them all the same thing: 'We are going to Zaeldar Kouet. Little Oubaïd just can't get enough of his matamaal.'

But to Oubaïd Zaeldar Kouet was a horrible giant cave. It made him nauseous to even think about it. He was afraid to touch

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