



THE JCB PRIZE FOR  
LITERATURE  
— 2021 —

Longlist



# WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HER

*Krupa Ge*



# What We Know About Her

by Krupa Ge



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—2021—

An exclusive extract from the  
JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

WHAT  
WE  
KNOW  
ABOUT  
HER

*Krupa Ge*

*For Swaroop*

*Kasiki poyyene neevalane, Kasiki poyyene*

(To Kashi I went away because of you, To Kashi I resigned)

—Kshetrayya, seventeenth century

# 1

## To Banaras

I was going to see my grandfather about a matter of inheritance. I had every intention of inheriting my home, sparse and secluded as it was. It didn't look like I would succeed, but I was determined to try.

The train was between stations, somewhere in the middle of small-town silence. A comforting, clove-scented fog settled inside my head as I lit up the first cigarette of my trip at the door of the coupé.

My mother is not an easy woman. This long-drawn fight over my claim to the house that stood on our ancestral land was necessitated by her need to give things away. She wanted to donate this house to some godforsaken NGO now. Amma was not like those irritating commies you ran into on Twitter: well meaning, politically correct, snarky and cutting people to size. The ones that turned up to work stoned, or wrote things like 'rest is revolution' and 'self-care is work' on their social media. She wasn't the kind you would identify as a jholey-wali. Amma was old school; a hardened, hit-the-streets, hold-that-flag-up kind of commie. A trade union lawyer who took after

her leftist father. She dressed like nothing special—cotton saree, a maroon pottu on her forehead, wedding chain, toerings, her hair oiled and braided. She lived her ideals, didn't dress up for them as if they were something other than life itself. I admired her and her work. But her ideals had begun to encroach upon every little comfort I could access. Now she was after the place I'd called home since I was eighteen.

What kind of parents leave their city-bred, teenaged daughter alone in a mofussil town to take care of an old home that was under repair? At that time, my brother was studying in Bangalore and my father was travelling to the smaller cities every week on work. Amma was needed in Chennai, she was busy, busy, busy. So I, all of eighteen, was in charge of our old house in Chengalpattu. At first, I only went across on the weekends, but soon after I graduated, my parents tore down our crumbling ancestral house and built a new one. That's when I was asked to stay close by in a cheap, dingy women's hostel and help the maistry.

From afar, my house looks bucktoothed and genial. The windows on the first floor make up the eyes, and when you close one of them, it looks like the house is winking at you. The main door and the beam on top are the house's mouth. The balcony that runs right across the middle has plants that I've never been good at looking after.

When the new house was ready, Amma asked me to pack up and come home to Madras. She wanted to rent it out. I didn't because I was upset. How dare she use me like a watchman? If she thought I was old enough to oversee its construction, she had to know that I was old enough to make that home mine. It's not as if she paid for the repair

work, or the new house, she hadn't even paid for my stay. My grandfather had sponsored it all. So I stayed put as nights turned to weeks and then years. Every once in a while, my mother recruited someone from the family to camp out in Chengalpattu. To threaten, cajole or blackmail me into leaving.

Amma had failed then. She'll fail now too.

I have often wondered if she really is my mother. There are no pictures of her pregnant with me. I know, I've looked. The thought really came upon me because of my brother. When I was seven or so, he started calling me Jujube Kumar. He said I came from a village called Jujube, deep in a forest, where people lived in circular homes, and that our mother bought me from the market in exchange for a few sprigs of curry leaves. She brought me home in a basket to be his pet animal, my brother said. He'd point to my deep jaggery brown, hairy arms and say, 'See how dark you are,' and then point to his own fair arms and say, 'See how I am like Amma, fair.' I would laugh, never giving him the satisfaction of a win. But deep inside, seeds of doubt had begun to appear, and I'd conducted tests on my mother over the years to see if she really had me. There was no Google, internet or computer in our homes and lives back then or I would have called his bluff right away.

When Amma sent me away, this suspicion grew very strong. It was only after I refused to move out of the Chengalpattu home that she told me why she'd sent me there. My father had maxed out his credit card and had no money to pay the bills. He had gone on a long leave of absence from his government job, and had started to work for a multi-level-marketing company, to sell soap,

toothpaste and hair oil. The first month when he made no money, he started to use his credit card, and by the fifth month, he was like an addict, swiping wherever he went. Burly, intimidating men, collection agents, would show up at odd hours, Amma said, to collect credit card dues. One of these men, she said, made an unsavoury remark about daughters and wives, and the kinds of ‘occupation’, whoring one presumes, they must pursue to pay their bills instead of cheating creditors. That nameless asshole had changed the course of my life, words can do that. He was why I was sent away.

There were other reasons too that I was fleeing to Banaras from Chengalpattu. One of them was in my hands; a yellow-brown, ink-stained letter my grandmother wrote in her youth to my thaatha. The romance it hinted at took me by surprise. Why had I never asked the women in my family how and if they loved? We didn’t talk to each other about love, come to think of it, ever. We lived as if love had nothing to do with us, all of us, daughters, wives, aunts, grandmothers and grandaunts. We lived in a world where everything, like marriage, was arranged to cause the least confrontation between people. Yes, even flag-waving leftists had arranged marriages within ‘the community’ in our family. A family of Telugus and Tamils, intermingled indistinguishably, speaking a language of its own that was neither here nor there, of migrants who criss-crossed the lands over hundreds of years, before states in independent India took on linguistic identities.

‘What people are your in-laws?’ you’d be asked, if you went to invite a relative to your wedding. No one used words like upper caste or brahmin in our educated homes. It was always subtler than that. You’d have to give them

the sub-caste or regions your would-be's ancestors hailed from. Velanadu, Mulakanadu, Palakkad, Thengalai, Vadagalai and the like. Love marriages, especially with those from outside the community, were rare, and invites to those weddings were always prefaced by hand-wringing and long explanations from parents on how hard they'd tried to stop the wedding from taking place.

Just as I reached for my second cigarette, the near-idyllic silence was suddenly lost. Loud men got off the train, hanging on to railings like monkeys, walking up and down on tracks that glittered like hot black diamonds. Talking on their cell phones, looking important. I didn't want any attention from them, so I returned to my seat.

I ate through the rest of the journey out of sheer boredom. My cell phone buzzed every now and then with spam. I didn't speak to anyone except strangers on Twitter.

Outside, in pits of sand that were once a lake, two men sat unspeaking. Smoking beedis. Plastic bags posing as cranes drove unwelcome, thieving birds away. In some places, the grass grew so tall I could see nothing beyond them. Save for minarets in pistachio green, palm tree heads swaying under the spell of a brief breeze and strange thorny, pointy trees that never grow in cities. On a narrow trail, two boys cycled, carrying a large stainless steel tiffin box each. Further down, women were working in fields.

Travelling alone through nondescript places in a somewhat empty train, falling asleep to the chugging, getting off at random stations to buy food, reading undisturbed. All the romance of it is gone when you need to go to the bathroom. Especially if you're on your period. I had to resort to acrobatics in there. What to hold, where and how to wash, where to chuck my pad.

An older white woman in kurta-pyjama made an about-turn after stepping into the Indian toilet. 'It's what hell must smell like,' she said. But you gotta go when you gotta go.

There will always be a big positive to train travel: Higginbotham's at the Chennai Central, my station sanctuary. Buying a book from the store before getting on a train was among the few rituals I performed with devotion. I picked up my first Sweet Valley University as a giggly, nervous teenager on a class trip to Coorg; *Archies* on summer vacations; and there were those *Tinkle* digests with Suppandi and Chamataka. I devoured countless *Gokulams* on trains, lying on my mother's lap. The 'one shelf for fiction, one for non-fiction and ten for self-help' kind of bookstores at airports would never match up.

This time, though, the book lay neglected. I spent most of my two days on the train reading my grandmother's letter, and then re-reading it. I'd have to ask my grandfather about it, ask if he had more letters from her. I deleted all my messages and emails as soon as I read them. I didn't want to leave behind anything I'd written. Memories are what photographs are for. Correspondence is different. They are short in love and long in hate. At least that's what I thought then. So this letter, all this talk of love from the matriarch was beguiling to me. My grandfather wrote a lot as well, but I didn't think much of his writing. Men wrote, I took that for granted. I didn't think women would leave their letters lying about. Especially back then. I thought they'd have them destroyed, for if you said one wrong thing, you could get caught in the quicksand of pettiness and scandal.

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11.2.1940

Chingleput

Dearest,

Greetings. Are you well? All are well here. Nana conveys his regards, and Amma her blessings to you.

Over the last week I have slowly learnt to slip back into the old ways of this large house. Madras, on some days now, seems like a distant dream. Even my routine has changed here. Nana insists I drink bed coffee.

You can wash your mouth later. Coffee is hot, come, come, my father says, every morning. Who can say no to that?

My mother thinks that I sit at the entrance in the evenings hoping you will magically appear. She does not want me to sit alone in the thinnai. On gloomy, rainy nights, I don't want to be inside. Like winged termites that come for mud lamps in alcoves, restless, looking for light before the rains, I sit outside, waiting for something to happen. Maybe, as she says, for you to come and see me.

The only change from my life before marriage here has been Amma's pronouncement that I will be given a break from kitchen work. After the humiliation of my first miscarriage, the gossip and ostracising that came with it from my father's sisters, I was worried about announcing my pregnancy. Amma asked me to keep it under wraps too for fear of the evil eye. A day after I arrived, I was just about to scatter cow dung water to cleanse the porch for the morning, when I felt something on the floor: it was a dozen reddened lemons and betel leaves.

Amma cried to Saapati Amman, and offered milk to the ant hill.

She said the same thing all day, praying to the goddess. This is the third time we have found something like this. Someone wants to bring down a dark curse on this house. Help me counter their black magic. You are my only protector, Amma, save my daughter!

My mother thinks it is the handiwork of a kept woman of one of my uncles or grandfathers. That or some man who's lost money to them while gambling. She's convinced they are trying to bring death into this house. I told her it was an unreasonable leap in imagination. She wouldn't listen.

Anyway, the second Manian mama found out I am with child, news spread wildly, the way the karepaku plant goes, wherever the wind takes it. Mama was poking around the kitchen, where he should not have been, and he heard Amma tell one of my aunts about my morning sickness.

Now and then, though, I feel as if I am playing the part of a grown-up. In my heart I know, just as well as you do, that I am just a girl. Same as the one who came to you, shaking, fear announcing its presence in every part of her being, the day I moved into your home in patnam. I do not know how to explain this to the others here, but Amma assures me that this is true of all women. And that, eventually, everyone did grow into real women.

Amma was braiding my hair when she told me this: you will become me. Like I became my mother. One day you will look in the mirror and search. In vain. You would have disappeared. And your mother's face will

smile back at you. You can change your hair now. Wear your bindi differently. Never wear your saree the way I wear it. Leave the tiniest bit possible at the end as pallu, not long and winding like I do mine. Or wear only glass bangles and not lac. But a day will come when your hair will be worn the way I wear mine now. When you will tie your saree the way I do mine. When you will wear only lac bangles. When you rummage through my ruins long after I have gone, looking for my remnants, you will find them only in the mirror, in your own reflection, she said.

When I arrived, my mother too was pregnant. Four months at that time. We would exchange notes on our morning sickness routines. Hers was always worse than mine. It makes me guilty now to think that I found comfort in it. A few days in, Amma pointed to her womb and threw her hands up in resignation: your brother has bled away. She did not seem upset when she said it.

I'm nauseous all day long. In the little time that I have at hand, feeling okay, I have been learning to sing from my sister. Lalitha has taught me two of my father's favourite songs. *Annapurne Visalakshi* and *Marugelara*. I tried singing them again this morning with Lalitha, but I cannot sing as well as her. When she sings, it is as if I am listening to the sounds of a waterfall, natural, unhindered, with seemingly unending depth and expanse. Her voice has the same effect as honey does on the quartz lingam in our house. It hits you and moves along its course, leaving behind a trail of sweetness that attaches itself to your soul. In the last year alone, she has given twenty public performances. I saw the dates in her diary. At temples in Chingleput, with violin and mridangam accompaniments,

Mahila Samajam and at three different venues in patnam. All thanks to you, she says. She's grateful to you and she makes it known, my little Lalitha.

She has grown into a star in town, that is certain. I see a new light in her eyes. And as she walks behind Amma on the streets, when we go to the temple, everyone waves at her. At the temple, the priest always asks her to sing and we all receive special treatment. Lalitha sings readily whenever anyone asks. In school, she tells me, she has won an embroidery competition, stitching with her left hand.

There is some good news I wish to share with you. Today, Mr and Mrs Easwaran and their party, who had heard Lalitha sing at the Trichinopoly hall, came home. They came dressed as they would for a wedding. The women decked in gold jewellery, looking like dark apsaras holding large brass platters. Amma was taken aback by the suddenness of it all. This shock soon gave way to utter joy. She went out to see what was happening when a cousin came running in and told her that a huge party was arriving to ask for Lalitha's hand. The crowd, he said, had the groom too.

Lalitha was shepherded into one of the rooms behind the kitchen, and all the other young girl cousins were sent upstairs to the store room. I helped Lalitha get ready. She went quiet in fear.

I am very scared, Akka, she kept saying. I cradled her in my arms and asked her not to worry. I told her that this was going to be just like her concert in Madras. Remember how she was scared at first, but really enjoyed performing later on? She did not say much after

that. I braided her hair tightly, she hates it when I do that but didn't protest much. My cousin quickly strung together jasmine with kanakambaram and marugu from the backyard. Lalitha prefers jaathi malli blooms in long muzhams flowing freely from her hair, but we couldn't find any, so we stuck the Congress colours in small bits on her hair messily. Amma took out her gold chain and I took off my glass bangles. We pushed all of the bangles onto one of Lalitha's hands; the other one, Amma said, Lalitha would have to keep under her saree. Hidden.

Amma was very quiet, except for that one instruction she gave Lalitha: they know about your missing ring finger, let me assure you. But there is no need to flaunt it.

I felt bad but did not say anything. Lalitha seemed frozen. She did not even let out a sound. After what felt like forever, the chatter in the courtyard grew smaller and they asked me to bring the bride-to-be. The boy was seated on the old swing near the courtyard, and his father and uncles on chairs next to him. The women from both sides filled up the entire courtyard. This wedding is going to be a much grander affair than ours, I can already tell. Lalitha walked in and touched the ground.

We heard her sing in Tiruchi and knew immediately that she was the one for our family. We all sing, you see. But not in public. When the prospective mother-in-law made this announcement, my father's face fell.

My mother did her best to comfort them. Of course. All this singing in public can't go on once she is married. We know that. It's just her father's whim for now. She will sing at home for you and that's more than enough, Amma assured them.

The mother-in-law-to-be seemed very impressed with Amma's promise. Lalitha did not look up. And if she was angry or disappointed, she did not show it. I was proud of her resolve. Within every tantrum-throwing girl lurked her mother's voice, instructing her to hold it all in until the time was right to let it out.

While the adults snacked, the boy's father asked Lalitha to sing. The boy seemed bored. He looked as if he would rather be someplace else. As if he was being forced into doing all this. Based on their expressions and complete lack of interest, I thought that perhaps they were perfect for each other. Lalitha and Venkatesan. An old woman from the boy's side scoffed at our coffee, as if we had offered her contraband, and demanded buttermilk.

Without looking up, her voice confident as ever, Lalitha sang. She kept time with her right hand. Amma was disappointed that Lalitha had forgotten (or ignored) her instruction again. They watched her hand for a while. They gasped every time Lalitha kept time with her toe, when she could not keep time with her missing ring finger. But as her voice rose higher and higher, they too seemed to rise above that detail and hear her. We all did. It was marvellous. Lalitha's talent as a musician lies not just in singing but also in choosing the perfect song for the occasion. That Arunachala Kavirayar felt most natural, as if it were a song tailor-made for this occasion.

*Yaaro, ivar yaaro, enna pero.*

It brought her not just applause but something unusual. A request from the thus far reclusive groom-to-be. The crowd broke into loud laughter and applause when

he asked, 'Can you sing another song?' And without hesitation, before anyone could register a protest, Lalitha sang. *Eppadi manam thunindhado.*

We all took it as a sign that this match would work. Lalitha continued to sing as the men exchanged tamalapaku. They came prepared with a ring. Like a real lady, my Lalitha was given a ring to wear on her left hand. I saw the weight lift off Amma and Nana's shoulders.

Later, when I helped her out of the saree, Lalitha hugged me and cried.

'His face, did you see it, Subbu? It bears no semblance of kindness. When he asked me to sing again, he didn't sound like he liked my music. He sounded as if he were the master and I his performing monkey. I will have to dance to his tunes 'ka. Please. I don't want this.'

She was being unfair and I told her she was. Why couldn't she see what we all could? They didn't even bring up her hand. I angered her though by bringing it up.

I thought you were on my side. I thought you would support me. You always have. Why have you changed? You have turned into Amma, she said and then cried. I slapped her lightly. Gave her a kiss on the cheek, wiped her tears and fed her hot rice with ghee and pappu charu. She will get over it. The little joker that she is, do you know what she asked?

Did you see his moustache, Subbu? Exactly like Hitler's. Why would any sane man do that?

Ever yours,  
Subbu

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