

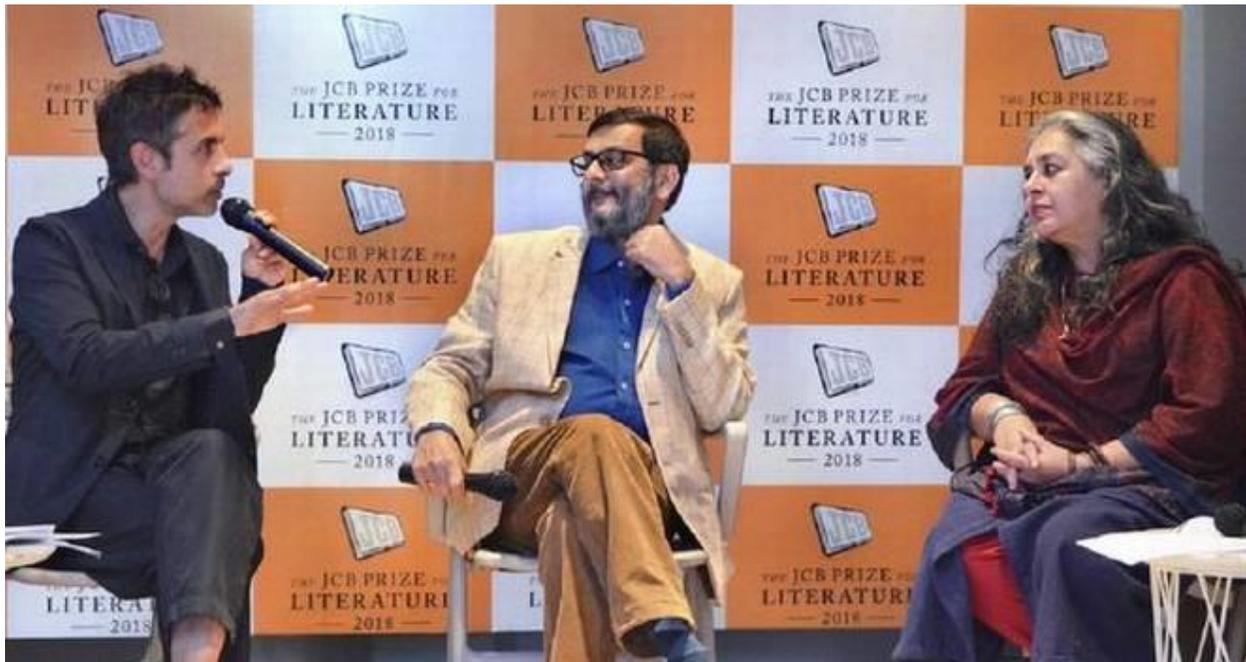
Publisher: The Hindu

Author: Anuradha Vellat

Date: October 05, 2018

Many shades of freedom

The five finalists of JCB Prize for Literature 2018 represent the rich literary and cultural landscape of India



Societies hold freedom close to their hearts, whatever they think the notion of it is. A notion that changes every day. A recording of these notions can only be found in literary texts over the years – how from wanting the freedom to vote, we now want the freedom to vote for nobody or how from wanting to go to school, we now want to be able to choose our subjects. Fiction stands the test of time, staying as a constant reminder of this freedom, reminding us of our battles and rebellions. It is then hardly surprising that this idea of freedom is what contemporary Indian writing holds close, too, given the times we live in. The JCB Prize for Literature 2018 has short-listed five finalists, each representing a narrative of freedom, one that binds together the individual, family, society and the country.

The five finalists represent diverse cultures, but without the jury consciously looking for that diversity. Perumal Murugan's *"Poonachi"* (translated by N Kalyan Raman), *"Half the Night is Gone"* by Amitabh Bagchi, *"Jasmine Days"* by Benyamin (translated by Shahnaz Habib), *"All the Lives We Never Lived"* by Anuradha Roy and *"Latitudes of Longing"* by Shubhangi Swarup are the books that made it to the top five.

Speaking with *The Hindu*, author Rana Dasgupta, who is also the Literary Director for the prize, says these five works of fiction will endure values that would get carried on for years to come. "The key thing here is that the winner might disappoint lots of people, but, together the five books are a basket that many people would find something in. While judging, there was no prejudice about what writers could write about or what political views they should hold, or where they come from or what language they should write in. It was simply the question that will these books endure what is valuable from 2018 to the future?"

"We can imagine all kinds of reasons in 2018 why freedoms of thought, expression or destiny might be important things for writers today. Friends to cultural expression have usually only intensified the desire for people to express in culture. For instance, Soviet Russia was an extraordinary laboratory of culture and music and films. And even when it was impossible to be overt about certain political opinions, they were coded into movies in all possible ways. So, I think censorship fear is a reason in no way that a writer should give up."

Exploring the subject

Dasgupta says that apart from fiction, a lot of the non-fiction writing emerging from contemporary India are also dealing with themes which are imperative to ideas of freedom, speech and one's social being. "A lot of people have been saying that we are at the golden era of non-fiction and I think that is clearly the case. We are, as a society, telling a lot of stories that have not been told, debating with great sensitivity and depth. Historical events, biographies and politics have become fantastic areas of writing lately and have become a very important part of contemporary Indian writing. In literature, it is very difficult to say that these are the things they are writing about, but from what I have observed, from three of these short-listed books, there has been a major concern with ecology. Things like drought, and the kind of anxieties and hopes around water, land, rain, ocean etc, are quite significant, which totally an appropriate thing for writers today to be preoccupied by. One of the things that forces societies to be respectful of its landscape is that that landscape is richly embedded in literature. We respect it as we look at landscape poetry, descriptions of spirits of the forests or rivers etc, and then it seems to be more violent to be disrespectful," adds Dasgupta.

Author and translator Arshia Sattar, one of the jury members, says that for Asian, especially Indian writing, family has always been a central figure of discourse. "In Roy's book, for example, we have a story of a woman which is sort of parallel with the story of India's freedom movement. It is very much about the individual and the family. If we pick novels from Western countries, usually, the juxtaposition is between the individual and the society. But here it is the family, which becomes the primary unit of expression. You rebel against it and you create against and with it your individual identity," says Sattar.

Eminent novelist Vivek Shanbhag, also one of the jury members, says that often, the narrative is what differs a writer from another, at times being withdrawn from a complete sense of rationality. He says, "Take for instance, 'Poonachi'. Unless the writer is so rooted in his folk

traditions, you cannot write a book like that. To make a point, I would say that a rational mind cannot write a book like this, of a goat talking.

I wouldn't be able to write it, I would probably start thinking about the logic and rationale behind it. But here is a writer who is so different. Freedom here is expressed through the eyes of an animal. I think it represents something."