

Shani Mootoo

With an introduction by
INGRID PERSAUD

CEREUS BLOOMS AT NIGHT

'A story of magical power'

ALICE MUNRO

EX LIBRIS

VINTAGE CLASSICS

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

SHANI MOOTOO

Shani Mootoo was born in Ireland and grew up in Trinidad. Her debut novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, was a finalist for the Giller Prize and the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize, as well as being a text studied in universities across the world. She is the author of several other highly acclaimed works, and her most recent novel, *Polar Vortex*, was also a finalist for the Giller Prize. She is the author of two books of poetry, *The Predicament of Or* and *Cane | Fire*. A filmmaker and visual artist, she has written and directed several videos, and her paintings and photo-based works are exhibited internationally.

She is the recipient of a Dr. James Duggins Outstanding Mid-Career Novelist Award, the Writers' Trust Engel Findley Award and has been awarded an honorary Doctorate of Letters from Western University. She lives in Southern Ontario, Canada.

Copyrighted Material

ALSO BY SHANI MOOTOO

FICTION

Out on Main Street and Other Stories

He Drown She in the Sea

Valmiki's Daughter

Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab

Polar Vortex

POETRY

The Predicament of Or

Cane | Fire

Copyrighted Material

SHANI MOOTOO

Cereus Blooms at Night

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Ingrid Persaud

Copyrighted Material
VINTAGE

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Vintage Classics is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

This edition published in Vintage Classics in 2023
First published in Canada by Press Gang Publishers in 1996

Copyright © Shani Mootoo 1996
Introduction copyright © Ingrid Persaud 2023

Shani Mootoo has asserted their right to be identified as the author of this Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

The author gratefully acknowledges receipt of a writing grant from the Canada Council for the Arts during the course of working on this book.

penguin.co.uk/vintage-classics

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781784878320

Typeset in 11/13pt Dante MT Std by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

For my parents, Indra and Romesh

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Introduction

I don't believe in a fate whose predestined outcome I must endure. Yet I feel I was absolutely fated to write this introduction, to this novel, at this time. How else can I describe a connection that began at birth? Shani Mootoo's father, Dr Romesh Mootoo, delivered me, a fact he delighted in recalling at our chance encounters while I was growing up in San Fernando, Trinidad. And then there was that brief time as a twelve-year-old when I, along with most at Naparima Girls' High School, was just a little bit in love with Shani Mootoo. For a few short months she wandered into our lives as a temporary teacher. Youthful, modern and a little alternative, I can still recall her smile during daily assemblies. All too soon she left us for the shivering Great North of Canada. I grew up, moved to London and forgot all about her.

Leap to a lazy Sunday morning in 1998. I opened the papers to a review of *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Shani Mootoo, a first novel that was making quite an impression. Even though it stated the author was Trinidadian I wasn't sure if this was the woman who had brightened the corridors of that austere high school. Back then she wielded a paintbrush rather than a pen. Only when I held the physical book and stared at the author photo did I realise that yes, this was the same Shani Mootoo for true. The cover included one of her paintings, confirming that her passion for art had endured. I wondered how she had journeyed from art to writing, oblivious that my own scenic route to writing would soon begin.

Days after reading that review I stumbled across a notice in *Time Out* magazine. Shani Mootoo was coming to London, to read and sign books somewhere in North London. Camden, I think. What would it be like to see her again, this woman whose fleeting presence almost two decades earlier had left an indelible impression? She had been the embodiment of fresh possibilities beyond the

Copyrighted Material

confines of that school on the hill and indeed our tiny island in the Caribbean Sea.

The evening of her reading descended dark and rainy. Work and family commitments conspired and I didn't make it. Later I consoled myself that at least my memories remained uninterrupted. *Cereus Blooms at Night* languished on my bookcase. Occasionally I stared at it and pondered, more about the author than the content. Jobs and domestic circumstances took me to live at various times in Boston and later Barbados. As part of my collection of familiar books it followed me everywhere, a steadying force through shifting landscapes.

Twenty-four years after reading *Cereus Blooms at Night* it has unexpectedly boomeranged back into my life. I could never have predicted that deep into the writing of my second novel, when the outside world rarely intruded, I would be wooed away from my manuscript by the name Shani Mootoo. I was asked to write this introduction. No way was I passing up the chance to make up for not seeing her in Camden on that rainy night a lifetime ago.

I tossed aside my manuscript and scanned the bookshelves for the familiar, bent-in spine. Over the next two weeks I read *Cereus Blooms at Night* three times, back-to-back. Set on the fictional island of Lantanacamara, which mirrors Trinidad, Shani Mootoo investigates our colonial legacy, race, class, what it means to be queer in an unaccepting society, and so much more.

With each reading my respect for Mootoo deepened. How had I not previously appreciated the courage it took to write this book at a time when queerness was considered both illegal and immoral? Her text was audacious in seeking a place beyond tolerance to true acceptance of otherness, and resonates as much today as it did in the 1990s when first published. Trinidad's Sexual Offences Act 1986 criminalised same-sex intimacy with penalties of up to twenty-five years of imprisonment. Mootoo could not have known that we'd have to wait until 2018 for Justice Devindra Rampersad to declare that ban unconstitutional in the Jason Jones

Copyrighted Material

case. At the time of writing this introduction transgender rights are still not even recognised and so do not have specific legal protection in Trinidad.

Mootoo placed queerness at the heart of her novel. Narrated by Nurse Tyler, a queer man, it charts the life of his charge, Mala Ramchandin, who is herself an outsider. A radical act of acceptance occurs early in their relationship when Mala steals a female nurse's uniform for him.* She recognises and acts on his unspoken need. By the novel's end Nurse Tyler chooses to express his queerness publicly by wearing the uniform.

But Mootoo's portrayal is not naive. The gardener at Paradise Alms House recalls his brother being regularly and mercilessly beaten by his father. The offence? His effete manner. To save the young child's life their mother makes the drastic, unilateral decision to place him in an orphanage beyond the belts and whips. The child simply disappears, never to be mentioned again. It is as if he's never existed. Each glance at Tyler's face and the confidence it exudes is a return to the grief of a brother lost through ignorance and bigotry.

And then there is Otoh, born a girl to a mother 'hungry for a male in the house'. Coupled with the belief of being in the wrong body, Otoh seamlessly transforms into a person who identifies completely as male, in every expression except relieving himself. This transformation from daughter to son is fully accepted by both parents and indeed the whole village where he is regarded as a heart-throb. So complete is the shift from one sex to another that Otoh thinks his mother has forgotten his secret when she mentions the possibility of marriage to a young woman, Mavis. But she stuns him by insisting a match is possible even though, she says to him, 'you don't have anything between those two stick

* Tyler could be read as a closeted transgender woman, but because this is never made explicit by the author, and because Tyler is referred to with he/him pronouns throughout, I have done the same here.

legs of yours’, followed by the curt rhetorical question: ‘You think because I never say anything that I forget what you are?’

It is in this scene between Otoh and his mother that Mootoo gives us an insight into her core philosophy. Otoh’s embarrassment is swept aside by the reassurance that ‘almost everybody in this place wish they could be somebody or something else’. And further, she believes ‘every village in this place have a handful of people like you. And is not easy to tell who is who . . . I does watch out over the banister and wonder if *who* I see is really *what* I see.’

Perhaps Mootoo could only write about queerness in these terms because she was part of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada. I can’t imagine this novel being written in the 1990s while still living in Trinidad. And even if it could have been done, I doubt it would have been well received. To me it is physical distance from the subject matter that allows the author’s passion to be moulded and crafted so skilfully.

Mootoo’s confrontation of taboo subjects continues in the storyline where Mala’s father exacts a price for his wife’s desertion by the ongoing, systematic rape of his two young daughters. In the Caribbean, as elsewhere, sexual abuse is often silenced. By contrast, details of Mala’s harrowing ordeal are laid bare. Again, this may not seem far-reaching in fiction today but at the time of publication it was a profoundly radical decision to pursue this storyline.

The courage that I so admired as a reader of this novel extends beyond confronting these challenging issues to the very prose Mootoo deploys. I found myself rereading her pitch-perfect dialogue rendered in Trinidadian English. Authors such as V. S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott had already begun smashing away at the notion that only the English of a tiny minority was allowed. Mootoo is part of the rebellion that refuses to relegate Trinidadian English to a mere dialect.

Cereus Blooms at Night is a book that was ahead of its time when first published. Its themes and language set it apart. Today it continues to serve as an inspiration and springboard from which

Copyrighted Material

subsequent generations of writers, particularly those interested in the Caribbean, have honed their craft. I am personally indebted to Shani Mootoo in my search through fiction to speak about things that cannot otherwise be said and to do it in the appropriate English.

And now it is time for Nurse Tyler to explain the urgency of this text, for he is hoping it will help reunite Mala Ramchandin with her sister Asha.

Ingrid Persaud, 2023

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PART ONE

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

By setting this story down, I, Tyler – that is how I am known, simply as Tyler, or if you wanted to be formal, Nurse Tyler – am placing trust in the power of the printed word to reach many people. It is my ardent hope that Asha Ramchandin, at one time a resident in the town of Paradise, Lantanacamara, will chance upon this book, wherever she may be today, and recognise herself and her family. If you are not Asha Ramchandin – who could, for all anyone knows, have changed her name – but know her or someone you suspect might be her or even related to her, please present this and ask that she read it. Might I add that my own intention, as the relater of this story, is not to bring notice to myself or my own plight. However, I cannot escape myself, and being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of the events, I am bound to be present. I have my own laments and much to tell about myself. It is my intent, however, to refrain from inserting myself too forcefully. Forgive the lapses, for there are some, and read them with the understanding that to have erased them would have been to do the same to myself.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

The cereus in the yard will bloom soon. We planted a slip from the original cutting at least a year ago. That is how long it has been since I left my village on the other side of the island and moved to Paradise. I had to cajole Mr Hector, the gardener here, who thought the plant nothing but an unruly network of limp, green leaves. Too gangly, he said, to be kept in a garden under his charge. When, recently, deep alizarin buds pushed through, his curiosity was piqued and he now visits the cactus daily and pats the cow manure around its trunk.

Judging from the way things turned out, I am sure you will agree it was no coincidence that I and the eye of the scandal happened upon Paradise, Lantanacamara on the same day.

The town seemed empty and quiet when I arrived. That was because everyone had left what they were doing and taken off to the house on Hill Side to see for themselves what was happening. Even though Paradise is spreading out, inch by inch, and taking over the sugar cane fields that surround it, it remains one of the smaller towns in Lantanacamara, so small that merely the news of one stranger passing through can be enough to ignite a wild fire of curiosity and jabber among its citizenry. But my arrival was eclipsed by the scandal on Hill Side, the discussion of which quickly became Paradise's most favoured pastime. Even the days following brought me little notice; Paradise was clutched by a menacing cloud that hung low over the town for several days and would not budge. The only sources of light in the town were the electric street and house lamps that remained lit all day. In a situation like that I could not have expected to be noteworthy.

Copyrighted Material

Being an outsider at that time – and I suppose I still am and may well always be – I thought it best to exercise propriety. I was well aware what was unfolding but refrained from taking part in the daily dissections of new gossip and from helping its spore-like dispersal. By the time interest in the scandal had abated I was past being a novelty. Hardly any fuss was made of me when, in fact, I might well have been celebrated! I was, after all, the only Lantanacamaran man ever to have trained in the profession of nursing. I had taken courses abroad, in the Shivering Northern Wetlands where, to my astonishment, there were a number of men, albeit a small number, in attendance. But I was and still am the only man in the profession here. Not just in Paradise but in all of Lantanacamara.

Nevertheless, despite all my formal training abroad, and considering that nurses in Lantanacamara generally receive their sole training on the job, the matron of the Paradise Alms House, when assigning me my first chore, pointed towards a bucket, a square of cobalt-blue soap and a scrubbing brush, and sent me off in the darkness of the day to scrub the residents' shower stalls. So was the tone set for my duties. Later I was called by this one or that one to run errands and do menial chores. Regardless, every morning I presented myself wearing a freshly washed, starched and pressed white shirt and meticulously pleated trousers, both of which I had made from the same cotton as were the nurses' uniforms, all in the hope that I would be sent to tend a resident. What I really wanted was to make at least one old person smile or feel that she or he was of some value.

It is an interesting quirk of fate, I think, that for all the prattling by almost everyone at that time, sowing and tilling and reaping idle rumours about the Ramchandin family, and for all the scant attention paid my presence, I am the one who ended up knowing the truth, the whole truth, every significant *and* insignificant bit of it. And I am the one who is putting it all to good use by recording it here in the hope that any existing relatives of Mala Ramchandin, be it her younger and, to this day, most treasured

Copyrighted Material

sister, Asha, or anyone else, might come forward and pay the old lady a visit.

Three weeks after I arrived – the suffocating cloud had mysteriously lifted by then – I was out in the yard at Sister’s request, sweeping the path. The home’s regular yardboy, Toby, stood watching from afar, sucking his teeth and shaking his head and spitting low curses in my direction, when a black automobile pulled up. The arrival of any motorised vehicle was still cause for a gathering in this place, where people had not easily let go of donkey carts for labourers and broughams for gentler folk, but an austere, black police vehicle brought an added element of excitement. The gathering of nurses and residents – those alert enough to notice – watched anxiously as two slender men alighted, walked to the back and opened the rear doors. Even the gossipmongers among the nurses were silent when the stretcher slid out. On it lay the home’s newest resident.

Mala Ramchandin was never tried in court. Judge Walter Bissey had dismissed the case in minutes. Several times he asked the prosecution, ‘I’m sorry. I can’t seem to follow your logic. Tell me again, what is the evidence? What is the charge?’ He shook his head in disbelief that his time was being taken up in such a manner. He thought for a minute how to avoid insulting the police and the prosecutors, and finally said, ‘But you say you cannot present a victim. No victim! You say that there are no witnesses. No witnesses! And there is no evidence that a crime was ever committed. Regardless of what the police reportedly saw? And you want to put a crazy lady on trial. You don’t have a case. Am I missing something here? Hmmm?’ Had there been any evidence as alleged by the police, he explained, it would, in any case, certainly have been inadmissible due to contamination by the ravages of time. He was not about to have an old woman, a crazy old woman, tried in his court based on a lot of words and no hard-and-fast proof of anything. No victim, no evidence, no witnesses – no crime. A waste of the court’s time and taxpayers’ money.

Copyrighted Material

However, out of compassion for her health and welfare, he ruled that Mala Ramchandin be taken into the alms house in Paradise to receive proper care and attention until the end of her days. It is said, incidentally, that on the day of Judge Bissey's ruling, the life-robbing cloud began to break up and shift south over the ocean, letting light shine in Paradise once again. Even now a handful of people remain disgruntled about the dismissal and the ruling. They felt cheated of the rare opportunity to have a woman criminal in their midst. Some citizens believe that a crime was committed and that she was its perpetrator. Come to think of it – they scratch their heads, think a moment and pronounce – they remember this and that and the other. And for the constable in charge, the mystery of an unsolved death, evidence of which he himself saw, is like an infestation of ripe mites swarming under his skin, and the judge's ruling a cruel disallowal of his craving to scratch.

Sister, too. On hearing that hers was the chosen home for Miss Ramchandin, Sister went to Judge Bissey in protest. She was forced to accept his decision.

Now Sister's hefty heels clopped down the path towards the police vehicle. The two officers carried the stretcher, which appeared to be empty except for a white sheet strewn across it.

'Yes, we knew she was coming, but not *when*,' I heard Sister say. 'I should have been given fair notice. I was not notified. There is no room ready. You can't just come and drop people off like that. This is not a train station, you know. She is an extra mouth to feed. We have to plan for these kinds of things.'

'Ah! No, no, no,' an officer responded. 'That would be the least of your problems, in truth. Look at her. She does hardly eat. They leave a plate of fowl for her one day and when they came back, they find the plate and all the food scatter all over the floor. Then another day they give her salt fish and she didn't even go near it. She don't eat, in truth. Even a biscuit and some hot tea would be plenty enough for her.'

The two men carrying the stretcher approached me. They

Copyrighted Material

could not have been much younger or older than I, and they looked heroic in their uniforms. Observing the narrowness of their waists where their close-fitting khaki shirts slipped neatly into slim-belted khaki trousers, a fiery heat rose on my cheeks. I felt diminished by these two officers of the peace but rather pleasantly so. As they passed I averted my eyes and looked at the woman on the stretcher. Only her head was exposed. Except for a fan of yellowed silver hair, I was unable to see more because she faced away from me.

Sister kept pace with the two men, ranting that there was no room ready and no security in place. 'This is an alms house. This is for poor people. This is not the place for psychiatrics. There is no room . . .' When she reached me she grabbed my arm and pulled me along. At the entrance to the main office, the officer said, 'Well, Sister, we have to leave her here with you. Those are the orders. Later, I advise you, go and talk with the judge if you want. But right now we have orders. If you have a bed, we will carry her to it and save you the trouble. In any case she is not heavy, a child could lift her with one finger, she so light.' He spread his legs slightly and let go of one of the rods to show that, even with one hand, he was capable of hoisting the stretcher. He gave the impression of having Herculean size and strength, and a rustle of not-so-discreet ooohs and ahhs came from the gathered nurses. I was in full agreement with their admiration but I, more prudently, merely smiled good-naturedly.

Still perturbed, Sister watched the men gently rest the motionless body on the floor of her office. She reluctantly penned her signature on the court receipt.

On his way out, a policeman turned to Sister and said slyly, 'Don't 'fraid she. It have nothing to be afraid of. Unless, of course, you used to go and pelt her house and tief she mango!' Sister's head spun around so fast and her face paled so instantly that I guessed his arrow had hit its target.

The crowd of nurses, babbling low at the office door, parted to let the officers through. I was happy to see them leave. One can

Copyrighted Material

engage in the act of admiring for only so long before the frustrations of desire, envy and self-criticism begin to cast shadows across one's vision – or turn one's knees to jelly.

Sister dispersed the nurses, except for two whom she took to arrange Miss Ramchandin's accommodations. I was told to stay in the office to 'guard' the strapped-down figure. I had rested my broom against the wall but before Sister left, she grabbed and placed the broom in my hands. 'Keep this handy!' she told me gravely. I took the broom, proud that it was not assumed that I, the only man among the nurses, ought to be strong and fearless and without need of protection.

It was the first time I had been given such an important assignment, the first time I was asked to care for one of the residents. I had spent most of the past three weeks on my hands and knees scrubbing the concrete paths around the residents' bungalows. I had prodded and poked at spiders' webs in the high corners of all the rooms on the property. Out in the backyard I hosed down the garbage pails. I was assigned – only once, thankfully – to assist Toby with fixing a leak on the roof. (I will refrain from dwelling on the verbal rocks he tossed in my direction and say only that he made no effort to hide his disdain for my ways. At the end of the ordeal he told me plainly that he was going to leave the job if he was ever put to work with this pansy again.) Another time I helped Mr Hector move heavy furniture from one bungalow to another. I saw him watch curiously as I struggled with the weight of some items and the awkwardness of others. He kept a distance but at least he was more helpful than most. When I tried to fix a broken stool, he showed me how to hold the hammer's handle lower to get more leverage, and he watched to make sure I was not about to hurt myself or ruin the stool. But I was anxious to begin nursing again.

For such a tiny spectre of a being, the new resident breathed deeply and loudly in her drugged sleep. I squatted at the side of the canvas stretcher, peering at her. I expected her facial skin to be grey but it was ochre, like richly fired clay. Her skeletal structure

Copyrighted Material

was clearly visible, her thin skin draped over protruding bones and sagged into crevices that musculature had once filled. Even so, it did not take much imagination to realise that she must have once had a modest dignity. She slept on soundly. If she had slept through the trip over Paradise's dreadfully pockmarked roads, my peering was unlikely to awaken her.

The urge to touch overcame me. I rested my palm gently on her silver hair. I expected it to be coarse and wiry, qualities that would have fit the rumours. But her hair, though oily from lack of care, was soft and silken. This one touch turned her from the incarnation of fearful tales into a living human being, an elderly person such as those I had dedicated my life to serving. I needed to know the woman who lay hidden by the white sheet. Still clutching the broom, I inched the sheet off her shoulder. 'Flesh and bones,' I thought, but it was the predominance of bone that truly caught my attention. I wrapped my hand around the ball of her upper arm where it met her shoulder. It was like a large marble, and cold like a marble. She did not have the sweet yet sour smell I had come to expect whenever close to an old person. Instead, an aroma resembling rich vegetable compost escaped from under the sheet. I felt the skin on her neck. It was an old person's skin, in truth, nothing remarkable about its thinness or looseness, but damp and cold. I could feel the fear trapped in this woman's body, even as she slept under sedation. I was gripped by fury as I remembered the officer's words – 'a biscuit and some hot tea' – and I wondered if, after she rejected fowl and fish, tea and biscuits were all that she was fed or all that she would eat. Either way, I felt as though I were witnessing a case of neglect.

I drew back the cloth further. A pile of fine bones, starling bones, on my dinner plate at the end of a Sunday meal flashed through my mind. I dropped the broom and unstrapped the thick leather bands that pinned her to the stretcher. I am not a very strong man, physically; I never have been. And neither am I known to anger easily or to express anger directly. But that day, I slipped one arm under her shoulders and one under her knees and lifted

Copyrighted Material

Miss Ramchandin off the stretcher. Having judged only by her frail looks, I was surprised at her weight, forgetting for a moment the density of bone. Nevertheless, outrage gave me the strength and courage to descend the office steps with her in my arms. Making my way along the path, I again became aware of her odour. She had a curiously natural smell. The words of the officer came to me again, that the plate of fowl had been scattered and the fish untouched. I realised she had likely not eaten animal flesh in a very long time.

Needless to say, when I arrived with Miss Ramchandin in my arms at the door of the room being prepared for her, Sister and the two nurses shrieked. None of them would approach me and my human bundle. Sister demanded that Miss Ramchandin be taken back to the office. I suddenly felt her weight and began to buckle under it. When it looked as if my bundle would fall, Sister again shrieked and ordered me to deposit Miss Ramchandin on the bed, which had not yet been made, and to strap her down again. I hardly had opened my mouth to explain that Miss Ramchandin was too frail to inflict even a bad thought when Sister screamed at me for being insolent and blatantly disregarding her authority. I placed Miss Ramchandin on the bed yet still hesitated to get the straps. Sister scuttled out into the yard and came back shortly with a length of rope from Mr Hector. I raced back to the office, yanked the straps off the stretcher and returned in time to contain Miss Ramchandin myself. I made a production of pulling at the straps but in truth only loosely buckled them. Faced with the threat of losing my job, I agreed not to unbind her again. Sister did not want me anywhere near Miss Ramchandin's room, but no other nurse would tread there and neither would she. Miss Ramchandin's care was therefore left in my hands, and I was finally able to employ my nursing skills.

The sedative wore off slowly. As the weight of induced sleep lifted, sobs escaped my new patient. By evening she tried to turn but was too weak to fight the restraints. She had opened her eyes and seemed now to be almost afraid to close them again. Tears

Copyrighted Material