

SYNOPSIS of “JERMAL” (Long)

Jaya (12) just lost his mother and is immediately delivered to the only member of his family who is alive, his father, Johar (48). Johar works in the restricted and remote area of the *jermal* where hard labour and isolation is the daily routine. A dark past hovers over Johar that forbids him to return to land. Exactly 12 years ago, Johar learnt that his wife was unfaithful, and so assaulted the man she was having an affair with and left him for dead. Johar will surely be arrested if he ever returns to land. Jaya arrives on the *jermal* by boat only to be immediately rejected by Johar who is shocked by the information that Jaya is his son. Fully aware that he cannot return to land to bring the boy back, Johar is forced to accept Jaya as a worker on the *jermal*.

Coming to terms with the news, both man and boy don't know how to manage their newly found situation. Jaya tries to blend into the crowd of other boys on the *jermal*, but fitting in is an arduous task. With his boyish looks and schoolboy demeanour, he is a visible contrast to the sun-drenched hard working boys. Jaya spends the day working hard and adjusting to the harsh and new environment while secretly desiring the approval of his father. Instead, Johar completely denies that he has a son, even when provoked by his friend, the cook, Bandi (45). The situation is further aggravated by the boys who taunt and bully Jaya to no end.

Jaya can't seem to adjust quickly enough to his new environment, and Johar is no help. By denying the fact that he has a son, Johar destroys Jaya's expectation of ever finding a haven he has hoped and longed for. Feeling dejected, Jaya attempts to escape, but fails. He is brought back to the *jermal* and is punished. The boys are taken aback by Jaya's bold move and gains a little bit more respect from them.

Life on the *jermal* continues, but this time Jaya decides to take fate into his own hands. He gives up hope on being accepted by his father and concentrates on surviving on the *jermal* instead. Jaya learns the skills and attitudes needed to survive on the *jermal*. Jaya increasingly becomes like the other boys: tough, rough---a survivor. Johar observes the change in Jaya, and gradually opens up to the past through letters from his wife that he never opened before.

Faced by remnants of the past that one cannot escape, as well as the unrelenting limited space of a location such as the *jermal*, Johar tries to make amends by slowly opening up and showing initiative to get to know his son. Jaya, however, has become increasingly numb emotionally, losing the sensitivity and warmth that he had before.

Eventually, Jaya's survival efforts go beyond boundaries. His character gets harsher and harder, and it finally culminates into a big fight, where Jaya beats another boy to a pulp. Johar is reminded of his past and sees history repeating itself. Johar reveals his dark secret from the past, and Jaya breaks down realizing what he has become.

Johar recognizes that Jaya's place is not at the *jermal* and that the boy has the potential to be much more than what he is now. Johar makes a plan to leave the *jermal* so Jaya can go back to school, but Jaya says that Johar should not think about such things, especially with the knowledge that he will be captured once he reaches land. Nevertheless, Johar insists that they leave. He is tired of hiding and he wants to do something for his only son.

Johar accepts his past, while ignoring all the risks that come with it. In the end, man and boy set for land not as strangers, but as father and son.

NOTE: The time span of the story is about 3 months.

THE CHARACTERS

JAYA (12): A timid boy who is used to the warmth of a house and a mother who loves him. He is cheerful and is good in school. He likes to read and spends most of his spare time reading them in a corner rather than playing outside with his friends. He is rather introverted and keeps to himself most of the time. He has a friendly face that people like. He is not used to the outdoors, he gets sick easily, and has no skills for hard labour. He is neat, clean, and proper. Everything around Jaya must be in place (belongings and his own appearance). He dislikes fights, and is a responsible person. He is a little stiff and formal, and gets jumpy and awkward in new environments. He is attached to what he is familiar with (his clothes, his belongings, his books, his insect board, his pet cricket etc). He doesn't like people tampering with his things. He dreams of being a scientist one day. He loves insects, and often studies them by collecting strange creatures and pinning them on a board.

Development: In the *jermal*, Jaya starts off being an outsider. He sticks out from the crowd because he looks, acts, and thinks different. He cannot work, he is tender, and he is educated unlike the other boys. Later he gains courage to escape. He decides he has nothing to lose, and this attitude makes him stronger. Personally, Jaya grows from being timid to being more self-assured. From being a naïve schoolboy, he learns the ways of the workingman. Externally, he becomes harsher and harder. From a timid outsider he develops into a surviving insider.

JOHAR (48): A harsh, strongly built man who is a loner. He has denied his past and lives for the day. He is authoritarian, needs his own space and doesn't talk much. Since his wife's betrayal, Johar is afraid of intimacy. As a result, he builds a wall around him and lets nobody in to show his inner self and vulnerabilities. He uses his hard shell to protect himself from hurt and pain. He doesn't like to be touched or talked to and spends most of his time just giving instructions to the young boys at the *jermal*. He is paranoid because a dark past looms over him. This secret keeps him afar, detached, and aloof. He is an escapist, and anything to do with his past, he rejects (Jaya, letters etc).

Development: When he reads his wife's letters after all these years, and sees his son becoming more and more like himself, Johar slowly changes from being a hard man with an outer shell that shies away from intimacy to someone more open to the truth, the past, and to his only son. By the end of the story, Johar becomes vulnerable and gives himself up to the past. Jaya touches him in more ways than one.

BANDI (45): The nothing to lose, relaxed Cook. He seems indifferent, but actually cares about what is going on around him. He is provocative because he is not afraid of Johar. He confronts Johar whether Johar likes it or not. He tries to draw Johar out of his dark hole by making him confront the past. Bandi is Johar's only friend, and there is an intimate relationship between them. Bandi will do anything to confront and provoke Johar when it's a necessity. He ties a towel around his neck at all times.

GION (17): He is the leader of the pack, always stirring up trouble on the *jermal*. He picks on people and has his followers do things for him. He is mean and has no empathy or compassion for others. He bribes, steals, kills, cheats, and sees nothing wrong with it. His attitude is: anything is legitimate in the name of survival.