

Mastering the historic novel

Kunal Basu shows great skill in evoking the extravagance of Akbar's court without turning his novel into the cheaply exotic

Shoma Chaudhury

KUNAL BASU'S new novel *The Miniaturist* could easily have been a gaudy period piece, an opulent but synthetic fakery. Few writers can freight their books with a brutal emperor, homoerotic love, rampaging elephants, art, perfume and patronage and come up with anything more. Basu has.

Set in the reign of Akbar, his book teems with a convincing Mughal aesthetic — *majun* evenings, smoky harems, the extravagant gesture, the sensuous couplet. But it is also a taut and gritty tale, fascinatingly contemporary.

A few years ago, in his award-winning novel, *Cuckold*, the Marathi writer Kiran Nagarkar had taken Mirabai's husband — a footnote figure in history, a cipher about whom nothing is known —



The Miniaturist
By Kunal Basu
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and turned him into a compelling psychological portrait, a suffocating study of jealous love. In doing so, he had skilfully imbued an epic scope with an almost Dostoevskian intimacy. Basu does something similar. *The Miniaturist* is set on a grand scale: the Mughal empire is at its zenith, 16th century Agra and Fatehpur Sikri dazzle with gems and tame leopards, the emperor is weighed in gold. But pegged down by a circle of keenly drawn characters, none of this ever billows into the cheaply exotic.

At the heart of the book lie two unforgettable figures. There is the



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MASTERSROKE: Basu is working on at least two more novels at present

imperial Akbar — an ineffable presence, a reigning aura, both grand and brutal, inspired and cruel, a man who can sit impassively watching his favourite elephant burn in a cartwheel of flames, then turn to recognise an artist's canvas from a mere brushstroke. Basu never brings him on frontally, but just his shadow through the *Jharokas* is enough to dominate the book. The other is Bihzad. A tortured genius,

a questing non-conformist, he is the fictional character through whom the author telescopes the era into something closer, sweeter, more immediate.

Bihzad is the Little Master — an artist primed from childhood to inherit his father's prestigious mantle: the stewardship of the emperor's *kitabkhana*. But he violently resists the flattery and hypocrisy such a position demands; his brush

seeks his subjects' soul, following a dictate of its own. Deputed to oversee the illustration of the *Akbarnama*, he secretly paints a *nama* of his own: a series of intimate miniatures featuring Akbar and him as lovers: kissing, riding, bathing together, sealing their relationship with branded flesh. Discovered, Bihzad is exiled. He spends 30 years in a desert purgatory — living with eunuchs, cowering in brothels in an opium haze, marrying the maddening, sexually deviant daughter of a Central Asian satrap whose whimsy threatens to emasculate him. Through it all, he seeks only one answer: what must an artist do? Who must he be faithful to? Who must he please?

In essence then, *The Miniaturist* is a book about art and the nature of patronage. Through Bihzad's story, Basu explores the irreparable tension between the official and the personal, the artist and the patron. So deep is the wedge, the artist must blind himself, rid himself of his identity, renounce his past. Only then, pared to the spirit, he is made ready to paint his last portrait.

The core drama of Basu's story could have been set anywhere, at any time. Choosing the Mughal era is a masterstroke. Finally, *The Miniaturist* is much like the paintings it describes: lush, sumptuous, yet urgent. There might be some amateur strokes — strands of Sufi mysticism not adequately developed for instance — but with his first novel, *The Opium Clerk* and now this, Kunal Basu has proved himself one of the most skilled practitioners of historic fiction writing today.