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Back to the war zone: Kunal Basu's new book links a human aspect in tragedies across the world

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9-11 minutes

The first few pages of Kunal Basu's book *The Endgame* appear to be the story of war correspondent Tejaswini Ray who is driven by her passion to report the truth from the battlefields of the world.

However, as the narrative progresses, it delves deeper into the issues plaguing humanity. The book, a translation of the Bengali original *Tejaswini O Shabnam*, also touches upon the unexposed, ugly stories thriving in military camps.

In a candid interview, the author shares what moved him to write this tale about entangled human lives.

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He also throws more light on the research that went in and what he wants the readers to take away from *The Endgame*.

Why was the title *The Endgame* chosen? Considering the original was titled after the protagonists - *Tejaswini O Shabnam* - why wasn't this retained?

There is a circularity in this novel: the strikes of destiny that set into motion the divergent lives of the two protagonists appears to haunt them till the very end. The question that looms over the story of Tejaswini and Shabnam is: will their beginning determine the end? Or will human will succeed in transcending the apparent inevitability of life? *The Endgame* as a title seems to capture that journey, adding an extra philosophical tier to the Bangla title – which I love too, especially the phonetic appeal of the two names.

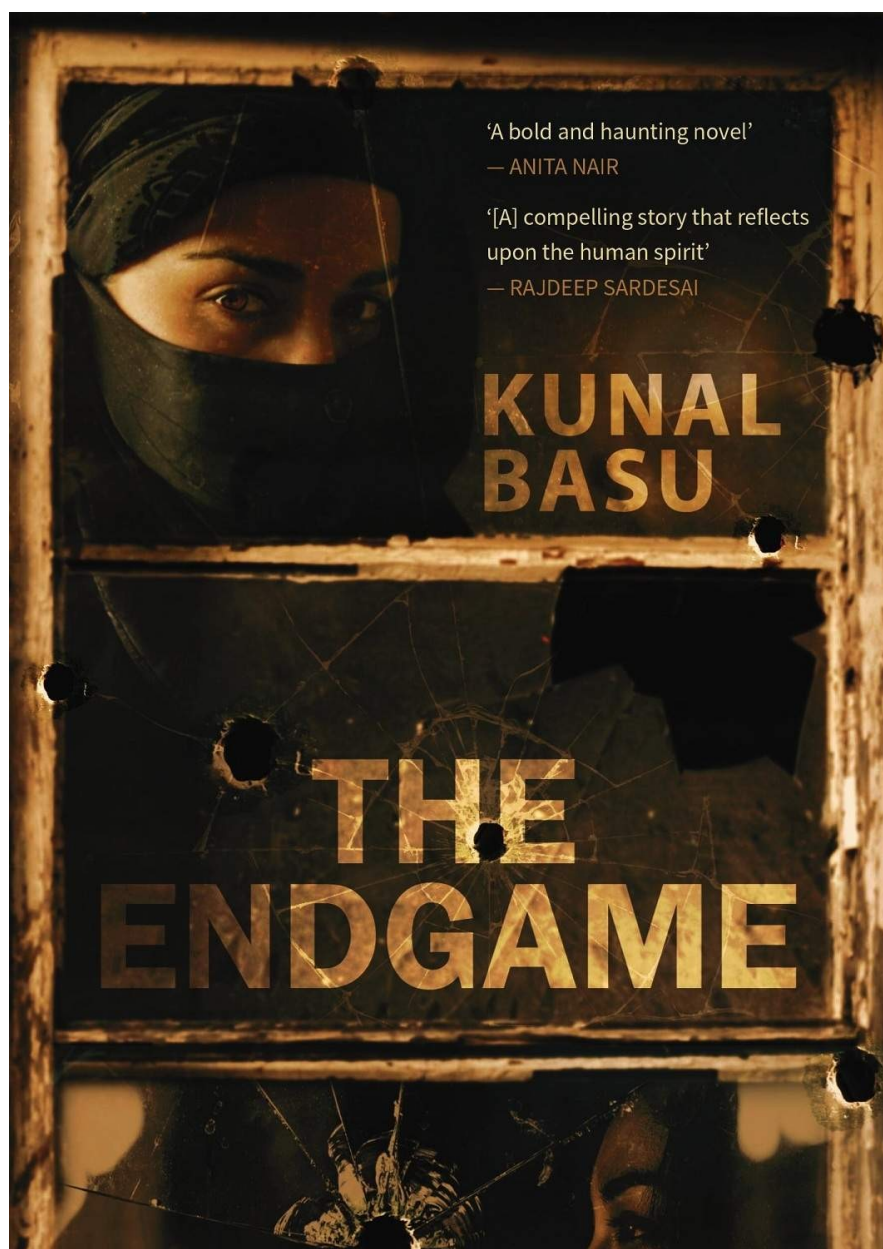
You have, in earlier interviews, spoken about the incident that compelled you to write this book... What pushed you to write this story?

A year or so back, a film production company asked me to write a story centred on trafficking for them. I was initially reluctant, as I don't "tailor-make" stories for cinema. But I wished to get a first-hand glimpse of this murky world and agreed provided they could arrange for me to meet with survivors of trafficking. I still remember the day I set out from Kolkata on a short hour-and-a half ride to Sandeshkhali in the city's suburbs to conduct my interviews in the company of an NGO.

I was taken to a ramshackle school to meet about a dozen rescued young girls. I had arrived well-armed with my writer's toolkit, but

when I met these girls – about 15 to 22 years old, I was paralyzed. The brutality of their plight hit me in the face. It is one thing to read newspaper stories about trafficking, quite another to meet real humans who'd been treated in the most inhuman way.

I was both traumatised and enraged. Politicians of every hue and their governments had failed them. Traffickers, I learnt, still operate with impunity, our children are still trafficked to brothels as far away as the Middle East, and we as a society have done absolutely nothing to end this curse. I broke down. A dozen pair of eyes merged together and gave birth to Shabnam.





The Endgame

Usually, translations don't do complete justice to the original, no matter how perfectly done. But do you feel Arunava Sinha's translation captures the essence of the original? Why didn't you want to translate it?

I have been very impressed by Arunava's translation. It captures not simply the nuances of the story, but the voices as well as the inner monologues of the principal characters. I find translations in general and of my own writing in particular difficult. Writing a novel brings to fore and exhausts all my passion, and it is hard for me to resurrect it all over again.

The protagonist Tejaswini aka Tejo is inspired by?

Not a specific individual, but a number of women journalists who have covered conflicts all around the world. They have been the unsung heroes of wars. The stereotype of a gonzo male journalist braving the front has invaded our literary and cinematic imagery for too long. It is about time we recognised that it is the women who have captured and conveyed to us the multiple aspects of conflicts.

Tejaswini's character and her war reporting have been described quite vividly and with precision. What kind of research went into this?

Researching for writing is vital to my practice. Besides reading up the voluminous memoirs of war correspondents, I interviewed a significant number of reporters in London who'd covered Middle East conflicts.

The purpose wasn't as much to uncover details of on-field incidents, but to understand the mind of the reporter, the relationships fostered by close proximity among those who on the one hand are competitors and yet vital life-support partners in crisis.

Why do they feel compelled to return to war zones despite the ever-present dangers, and the PTSD that most suffer from? I was after that elusive human quality that explains the inexplicable.

How did you familiarise yourself with the culture of different tribes and people of West Asia?

I am an inveterate traveller and have visited the Middle East on numerous occasions. I also feel a special affinity with this region, perhaps as a result of my Indian upbringing. We share so many social codes with the different ethnic groups, which help my accessibility as a writer. During my student years in the US, I had deep friendships with Palestinians, Iranians, and Gulf citizens, which must have informed my sensibilities in writing this novel.

Why didn't you pen this novel in English the first time you wrote it?

My agent in London had also asked me this question. Given its global setting, this story could very well have been written in English. But, as mentioned earlier, the genesis of this novel in my mind was undeniably tinged with Bengal roots. I heard voices speaking Bangla as I was writing – particularly the Shabnam segments – and the backdrop of Sandeshkhali pervaded my imagination.

Would you say you have written this book to inspire aspiring journalists?

I don't know if my writing has the power to inspire anyone. Perhaps one can view this novel as my tribute to journalists and an expression of my pain towards the victims of trafficking.

There are some insightful and strong statements in the book, like, 'There's no such thing as a career in times of war,' - what do you want readers to take away from these ideas/thoughts?

Every novel I write teaches me something about the world I inhabit. I found that our tragedies across the world are connected – the quest for world domination (as in Iraq by invading Western forces), is intimately connected to the control over human beings everywhere, particularly women and the dispossessed.

For too long, we have viewed wars being about winners and losers, when it is ultimately about human failings. We in India don't have a body of literary work that involves conflict, and I hope in a very small way this novel might address that vital aspect of our existence.

It's an open-ended story, so is there a sequel that you are working on?

No, I am not drawn to sequels. We live in unresolved times with “incomplete” stories, and I hope readers might reach their own endings as they reflect on the lives of Tejaswini and Shabnam.

How did being an academic help nurture the writer in you?

Being an academic has only helped me to travel around the world and meet a variety of people. Also, it has allowed me to navigate my employment responsibilities and carve out time for writing. But I have tried utmost to stay away from my academic self while writing novels. Stories, after all, are acts of imagination, while academics are often fixated on theories and analysis.

What are your reading and writing rituals like?

I write for 10-12 hours every day. That has been my life for the past two decades. I get up to write, and find it hard to wrench myself away from my desk even for a salutary walk! Writing for me is quite unhealthy! I live between two studies – one in Oxford, the other in Kolkata.

My desk is now cluttered with books I am reading to educate myself on the genesis of hate, which forms the crux of my next novel which is set in the present times, in the cauldron we know as India.

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