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Zafar Anjum / May 27, 2016 / Authors

## The Lure of the Written Word: Interview with Kunal Basu

3 Votes

By Pallavi Narayan



Kunal Basu exudes warmth as one listens to him speak about his work privately or on stage. Even over email, I feel connected with this affable author of historical fiction whose writing encompasses disparate subjects with seeming ease. His first novel, *The Opium Clerk*, is set in the time of the Indian Mutiny of 1857. *The Miniaturist* transports the reader to the landscape of the court painters of the Mughals

in the sixteenth century. *Racists*, a novel set in the Victorian period, deals with two infants—one black and the other white—left to grow up on a deserted island and prove, definitively, the superiority of race, was nominated for the Crossword Book Awards in 2006. Lisbon and Peking of the late nineteenth century dance in vivid description woven into the narrative in *The Yellow Emperor's Cure*, which delves into traditional Chinese healing techniques versus Western medicine. His recent novel *Kalkatta* draws the reader into the shadowy everyday life of the gigolo in the crumbling Kolkata of migrants set against the glittering city of the elite, established Kalkatta-wallahs. The critically acclaimed film *The Japanese Wife* is based on the title story of his collection of short stories.

In elegant, descriptive prose, Basu transforms the strange into the familiar. A teaching

**and** research fellow at the University of Oxford, he has published extensively in the areas of branding, marketing, consumer behaviour and advertising. He identifies most closely, however, with his fiction, in the writing of which, he asserts, he connects with the world.

### **What moves you to write?**

The lure of the written word, I suppose. Having grown up with a mother who was an author and a publisher father, I was infected very early. As a voracious reader, I marvel entering an author's mind and deciphering the thrill of creativity. Personally, I find nothing more exciting than this inward journey. Also, it's the only way I know to connect with the world around me—both the euphoria and the disenchantments of life—raising my pen against injustice and inequality, or to celebrate the marvels of humanity.

### **How does your academic career impact on your writing practice?**

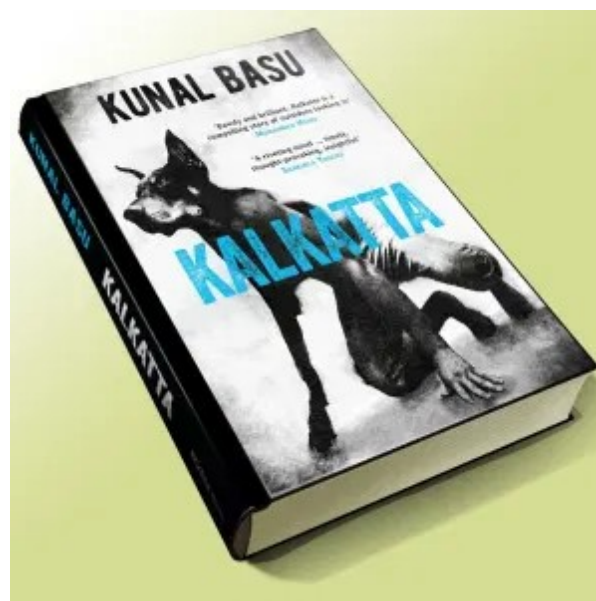
It provides me with a livelihood, as it's nearly impossible to sustain a life purely through one's writing. As I've said elsewhere, for me there isn't a conceptual or aesthetic connection between academics and literature. The former represents a choice I had to make to earn a living, while the latter stands for my core passion—one that propels me to rise up from sleep every morning.

### **From *The Opium Clerk* to *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* to your recent novel *Kalkatta*, what propels you to choose subjects so removed from each other?**

I don't choose subjects. Stories appear to me, god knows from where, and demand to be written. I am not a historian, an anthropologist or a sociologist, and as such have no point to establish successively through my books. My stories are simple manifestations of my wildering imagination.

### **Which writers do you look to for inspiration?**

There are too many to list, especially the classics. Dostoevsky, Dickens, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. There are many contemporary ones as well: Coetzee, Ondaatje, Llosa, Pamuk, and so on. I continue to draw inspiration from a wide variety of vernacular



writers as well.

**Your novels are fairly descriptive. What kind of research do you do to attain familiarity with the context?**

Every novel dictates its research. Historical novels, obviously, demand textual study. Also, travel to places, where the story might be located, for texture as well as unexpected details. For a contemporary novel such as *Kalkatta* or for some of my short stories, I've spent a fair length of time immersing myself in the daily world of my characters and seeking out their secrets almost like an investigative journalist.

**How effective is travelling for your writing? Do you write while travelling?**

I am an inveterate traveller. Travel fertilises my imagination, and sometimes provides subtle leads for stories. I take notes—I shall most certainly leave behind scores of notepads full of scribbles! I believe I should be able to write under any set of circumstances, on the road or at my study.

**Do you need to be in a certain kind of mood while writing? And do you ever write in anger and edit later?**

Half a writer's life is spent editing—so, yes, I do edit and rewrite quite a bit. A famous Bengali novelist—one I admire a lot—Samaresh Bose once said it's important for an idea or thought to settle in your mind before you write it. I tend to pass my emotions through the “settling chamber” before I begin crafting.

**Is there a certain space where you feel you write better?**

I am fortunate to have two lovely studies—one in Kolkata and one in Oxford—both suitable for long hours of writing. But I've written in all kinds of places—hotel rooms, on trains ...

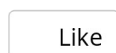
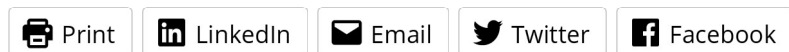
**What is your writing schedule like when you start work on a new novel?**

As a late riser, I start writing after most normal people have gone to work. But I don't stop before midnight. Whether it's a new novel or one that is ongoing, I write for about ten hours every day with breaks for walking and cooking dinner with my wife Susmita.

**What is your writing aesthetic?**

**I** need to be surrounded with books, masks and some of the paintings that we've acquired over the years. An orchid or two helps as well.

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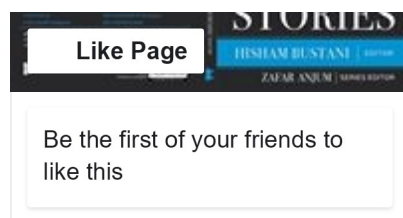
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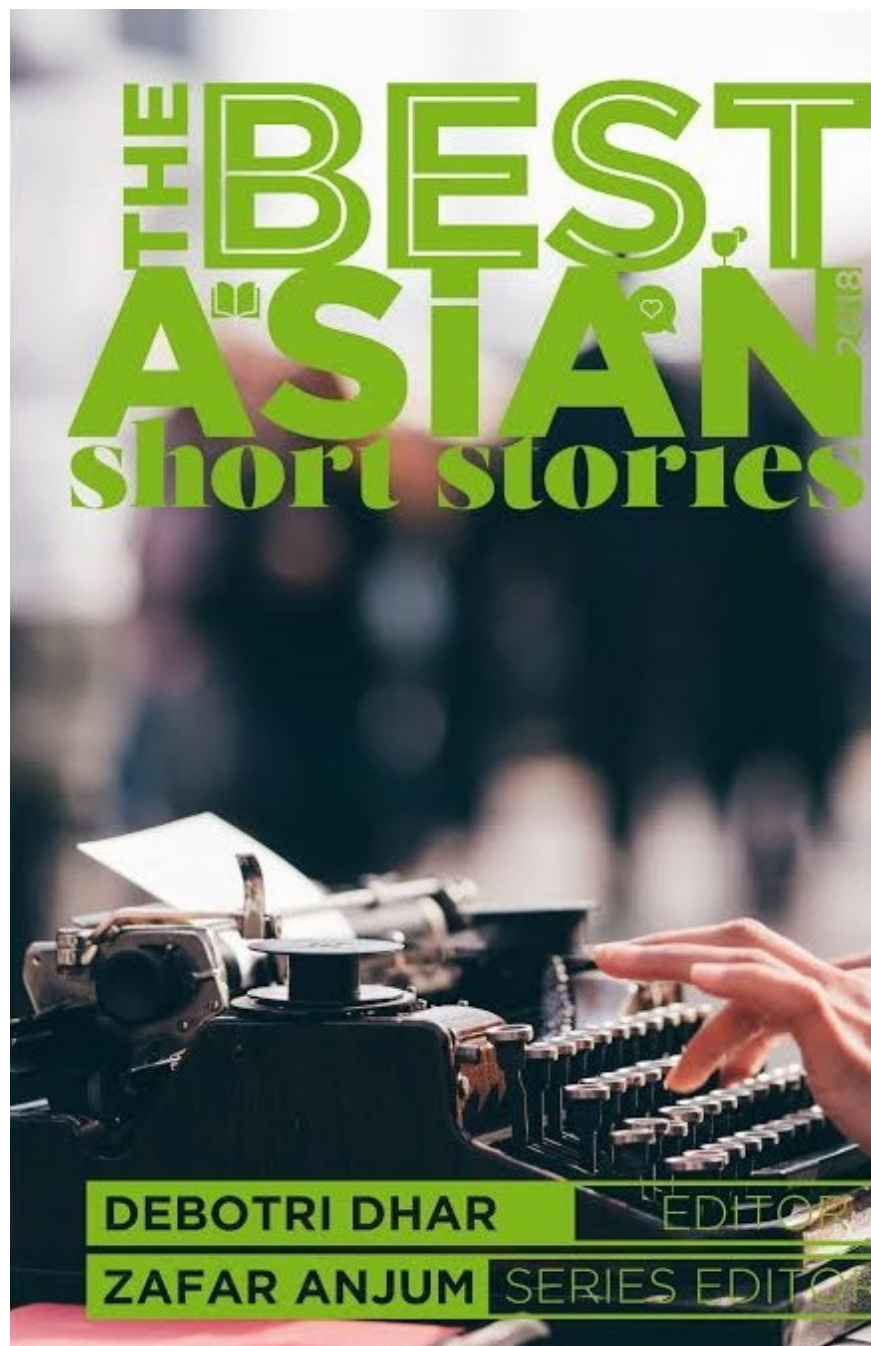
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