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## The outsider-insider

8-10 minutes

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*Kunal Basu and I were students in Jadavpur University some three decades ago. When we met recently, Kunal certainly had achieved a lot, having distinguished himself as an academic teaching Business Studies at Oxford University. He's recognised as an author too, having written three novels — The Opium Clerk, The Miniaturist and Racists — and a collection of short stories, The Japanese Wife. Picking up the threads meant getting to know the person again through his work. Many years ago, we'd shared the same friends, interests... and gone our own ways. It was interesting to meet again and explore the possibility of working together on a project. Intimacies is, in a sense, our tribute to a shared home and its people.*

**Ina: After *The Opium Clerk*, the work that brings you back to Calcutta is *Intimacies* (the text that will accompany Kushal Ray's album of photographs). It is a project that draws from the city and its people in an intensely intimate way...**

Kunal: I have written four short stories set in Calcutta since *The Opium Clerk*, two of which are in *The Japanese Wife* collection. But

I'm excited to write for *Intimacies*. It'll be a haunting collection with an old house in Bhowanipore as the centrepiece, along with generations of inhabitants. I've always had a love affair with old houses, and with this project, I get to renew my sibling bond with yet another art form besides cinema and painting. Plus, what's less well known is that I had met my wife quite some time ago as I was preparing to take photos of old Calcutta homes, armed with a camera myself.

**Ina: You have often said that writing for you is an encounter with the unknown. Do you ever worry about the potential drawbacks of such an approach?**

**Kunal:** When I was writing *The Miniaturist*, a friend asked me how I'd write dialogue for my characters: inhabitants of the 15th century with a religious culture quite unlike my own. I wouldn't want to ignore the challenges of writing about something that's beyond first-hand experience, but it doesn't act as a 'deal breaker' when I think of a story. If anything, it causes a surge in adrenaline. Lack of depth or texture or nuance — 'thinness' — could result just as well if an author overlooks essential details of a context that's all too familiar; overburdening the narrative with superfluous details, equally, could lead to the opposite problem: padding.

As always, it's a question of what one puts in to create a believable context that'd immerse the reader in the story. The trick is to turn into a sleuth and discover material that provides first-hand experience, such as diaries, reports and letters. There are, of course, situations when nothing helps, such as describing a Mogul harem, situations where one's own fantasy is the best and only guide.

**Ina: Your interviews reveal a somewhat romantic self-image — that of an outsider...**

Kunal: This is not an 'outsidership' I've crafted, but one inherited by virtue of the locus of my life and travels. Not simply a geographic feature, it illustrates too my varied spheres of work. Despite a masters in engineering, I don't fit in as a techie; few would describe me as a quintessential professor notwithstanding a doctorate in management and a 25-year career as an academic. This is not a 'romantic self-image' but a perceptual conundrum — for others.

My self-image is that of a cosmopolitan who is no less an insider than a long-term resident. The outsider-insider, if you wish. I put great value to belonging as well as distancing — both capable of endowing an author with rare insights. It is a necessary tension, painful at times, especially when it comes to leaving behind a place or people one loves. Even after 31 years of living abroad, I suffer routinely from culture shock when I arrive at a Western airport. After all these years, I can find my way blindfolded in every city I've lived in and grown fond of. 'Outsidership' has less to do with not being up to date with things, but with a state of mind — a cultivated transience.

**Ina: Do you see yourself publishing in Bangla at some point? Any thoughts on why you happen to write in English?**

Kunal: Just a few years back, I almost started to write a Bangla novel set in Florence in the 15th century. It was to have no Bangali or even an Indian as a character, simply Florentine merchants, artists, mask-makers, vagabonds and thieves. I felt excited at the prospect of stretching the limits, and writing in Bangla about a world bereft of any Bangaliana whatsoever. Of late, a different story set in

the Northeast has been gnawing at me, demanding to be written in Bangla.

Yes, writing in Bangla is a perennial temptation. I am not an Ingrej-Bangali, but a Bangali. Having said that, the last time I published something in Bangla was a foreword to my mother's (Chabi Basu) selected works in 1995. I have managed to lose my early college prose and poetry in Bangla, and so have nothing much to show for my avowed bilingualism, except promises. But the desire is real. So far, I've staged my novels and short stories in different continents and travelled metaphorically across cultures, which perhaps explains the invasion of the lingua franca. However, I'd like to believe that *The Miniaturist* had been written in the Urdu dialect of English, just as *The Japanese Wife* would ring with the Bangla of south Bengal in the ears of the readers.

I don't consciously think of an audience. The biggest challenge is to please myself — a reader who's wondrous and willing to go on a heart-rending adventure, sensual and emotional, ready to feel the surge of civilisations in his veins. Once I met a young boy on a train, a hawker of pirated books, who tried to sell me a copy of *The Japanese Wife*. It was a "story about waiting", he told me. I'd like to believe that I write for anyone who cares to read, although some days I think I'm writing for my hawker on the train.

**Ina: Which of your female characters would you say really breathe or sigh?**

Kunal: An author must have sharp ears to listen, as each woman sighs differently. The author must be an agony aunt of sorts — to empathise with the motley characters. The birdwomen (*The Miniaturist*), I must confess, are my favourites. I absolutely fell in

love with them while writing...

**Ina: Still, the male characters in *The Accountant*, *The Opium Clerk* and *The Miniaturist* leave a more lasting impression.**

Kunal: I'm glad I've displayed no gender bias in this regard! The trick to writing a successful male character, I think, is to discover his central tendency — the locus of his outer and inner life, that is. For a woman though, that search is fruitless as nuance and complexity define a mature female character, where the core and the periphery are in constant flux. The difference calls for a change in method.

**Ina: You've been associated with cinema as a child actor, and then Aparna Sen's *The Japanese Wife*. Would you agree that your work lends itself to cinema?**

Kunal: I've always been enamoured by cinema, although I don't recall much about my child actor days. *The Japanese Wife* was an out-of-body experience. It was quite unbelievable how a whole crew went about creating the very scenes I had written a good decade ago, sitting at my desk in Montreal as a snowstorm raged outside. The characters were like people I had known from an earlier life. It's a testament to Aparna Sen's genius that she turned me into a laughing and crying viewer to my own story.

Like many Bengali children, I had grown up with Abanindranath Thakur. Painting with words and thinking visually define my sensibilities: to describe a character, I'd invariably rely on light and shadow rather than facts. I researched for *The Miniaturist* primarily to discover foreground details that'd let me imagine the courts, the artists' studios, the desert after a storm, the slave market, the harem... to lend shapes and colours with which I could build my story.

The draw of theatre came later, during my college days and my association with Utpal Dutt. It alerted me to the power of surprise and the need to balance a story's tension. To this day, I'm an avid reader of plays and it reminds me that dialogue is the pivot on which characters turn and scenes take shape. I don't know if my work lends itself easily to cinema, but I see my stories as cinema as I write them.

*Which is your favourite Kunal Basu book? Tell t2@abpmail.com*