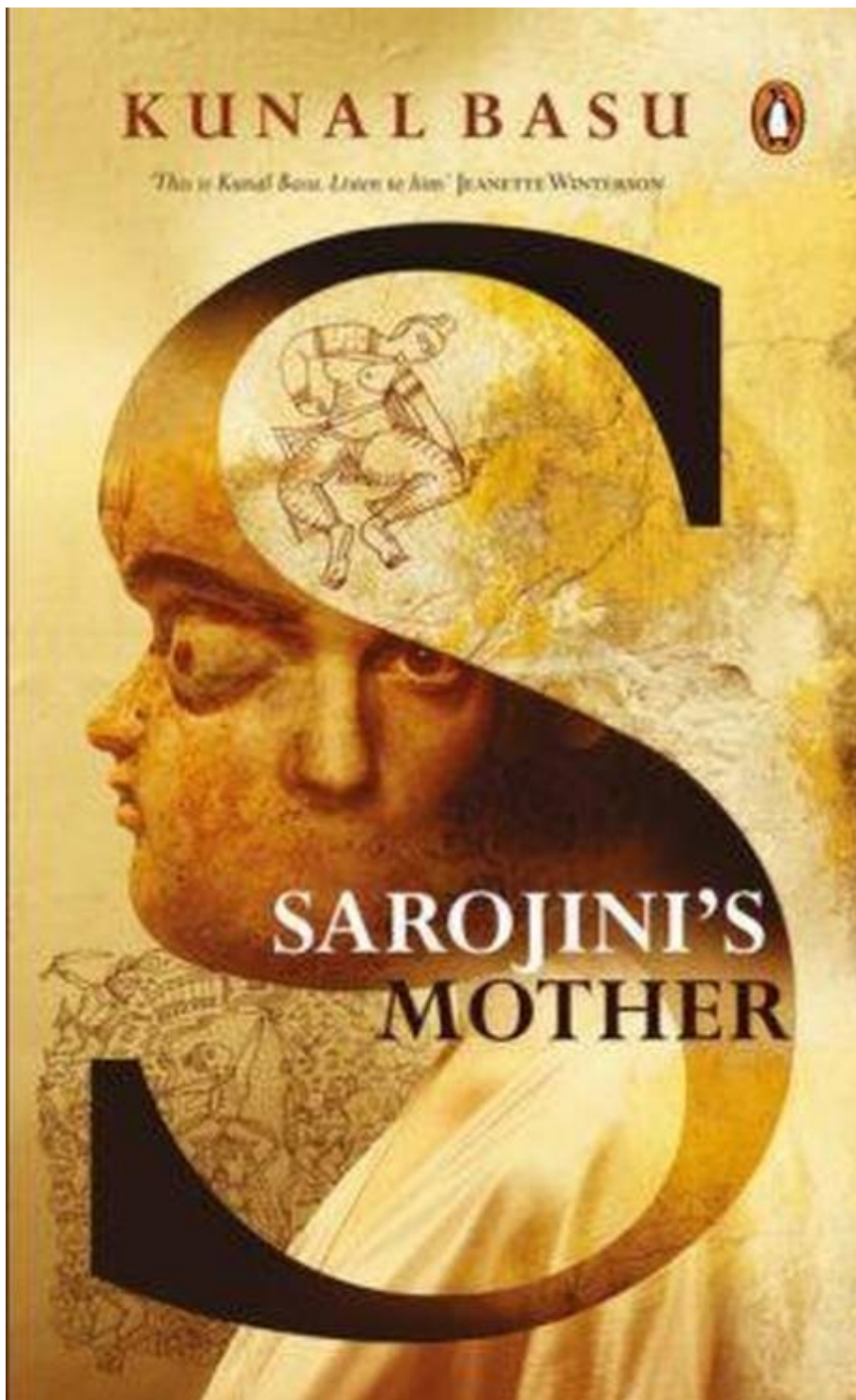


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A ride on Tram No. 36: Review of Kunal Basu's 'Sarojini's Mother'

Sudipta Datta February 08, 2020 16:00 IST Updated: February 07, 2020 12:29 IST

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Kunal Basu's latest novel is an exploration of the lanes of contemporary Kolkata

The literary world of Kunal Basu began, in his first few novels, with historical fiction that explored the British opium trade, Mughal

miniatures, racial science in the Victorian era, and the reach of syphilis. With his collection of short stories, *The Japanese Wife*, he delved into other genres and embarked on deep character studies. Then, with his fifth novel, *Kalkatta*, he turned to the contemporary, looking at people living on the margins of the city. Through the lens of a gigolo, a Bihari Muslim, Basu led readers to the underbelly of Kolkata — places which “smell of dead cows and pigeon droppings”, where mothers wonder why the streets are “paved half and half, with dirt and gold.”

In interviews, Basu has said that he is drawn to the unexplored and to life beyond the comfort zone. His latest novel, *Sarojini's Mother*, also set in contemporary Kolkata, tells the story of two people, a daughter looking for her 'real' mother and an Elvis Presley lookalike who helps her. In the periphery lurk others from poor and rich worlds, who steer Sarojini (or Saz) and her guide Chiru Sen (Elvis) towards their goal through the teeming city with its highs and lows.

Saz Campbell has arrived in India to search for her biological mother. She was adopted and taken to England when she was little but her 'hippie' mother Lucy cannot give her details of her past. All Saz can tell Elvis is that according to her mother, the orphanage was in a crumbling villa with a “smell of burning flesh”. With a stroke of luck, the villa is found. Saz meets Jamuna, who lives in a slum and claims to be her mother. “Slum is an ugly word. It makes you think of other ugly words. Like dark, dirty, dingy, dangerous.” The ominous alliterative warning doesn't bother Saz, who begins spending most of her time with Jamuna.

The twist in the tale occurs when another person, Urvashi, turns up, also claiming to be Saz's mother. Will Saz find her real mother? Will this give her a reason to live on? There are no easy answers, but

while we wait, Basu takes us on many a ride through the cobbled streets of Calcutta. And the ride on Tram No. 36 is just one of these.



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Sarojini's Mother; Kunal Basu, Penguin/Viking, ₹599