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- [Decaf](#)
- [Home](#)
- [Discourse](#)
- [360 Degree](#)
- [World's Picks](#)
- [Metros](#)
- [Just In](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Technology](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [Photos](#)
- [Life](#)
- [Newsmakers](#)
- [More](#) ▾
  - [Books](#)
  - [Science](#)
  - [Horoscope](#)
  - [Age on Sunday](#)
  - [Delhi Age](#)
  - [Mumbai Age](#)
  - [Decaf](#)
  - [Discourse](#)
  - [360 Degree](#)
  - [Editors' Picks](#)
  - [Just In](#)

Menu

[Books](#)

## Of brothels and biryani

| [KANKANA BASU](#)

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**Kunal Basu creates a world that is gritty, grimy, smelly and cloistered and yet, paradoxically, shines with a warm innocence. Relationships between the residents of the warren-like building on Zakaria street are amorphous and splintering.**

The cover bites you in a soft place although the dog-man's expression is sheepish enough; this is the immensely talented illustrator Pinaki De at his edgy best. In keeping with the disturbing cover, Kunal Basu's new novel Kalkatta saunters down tricky terrain, a no-man's land poised between many extremes and where life is a constant grapple between being a "hazy" person or a "real" one, between being the eternal refugee or a pucca Kalkatta-wallah and ultimately, between belonging and un-belonging.

Jami (Jamshed Alam), a Bihari Muslim smuggled into India from Bangladesh with his family comprising his parents and younger sister Miriam, lands in the city of Kolkata. Giving the family refuge in his vast six-storey abode is his uncle Mushtak, a leader of the ruling Communist Party. Number 14, Zakaria Street, now Jami's address, is a honeycomb-like place in which, along with goats tethered in the corridors, reside an assortment of people — Jamal and Jamil, the carpenter brothers, Ghulam Kuddus, owner of the biggest gem shop in the area, Jami's friends Ashraf and Bakki, and his mother's best friend and fellow refugee, Samina.

The corridors are filled with the stench of slaughtered cows (from Bakki's father's butcher shop) which mingles with the aroma of spices (from Ashraf's father's spice shop) and biryani being cooked in the cubby-hole like houses. Toilets and clotheslines are shared by the residents and there is much interest and merriment generated by the outsized undergarments of the building's official femme fatale, Jahanara; Jami even succeeds in stealing a pair of her knickers! Jami's father, suffering from chronic flatulence, takes up a job as a tailor in a small-time tailoring shop while his mother is employed at the zari factory run by Mushtak's ageing mother, Dadi to all. Jami's younger sister Miri, of the acerbic tongue and bookish knowledge, decides to give up studies and embrace the burkha at 18, much to her family's consternation, and immerses herself in serving at an

orphanage for abandoned women.

So far so (precariously) good. Though a cash crunch always looms large over the family, food is never sufficient and there is the constant jostle for personal space in the cramped quarters. Jami, having flunked his exams, joins as an assistant to a passport forger and is gently encouraged by his Uncle Mushtak into helping him win the local elections. Tall, fair and light eyed, Jami is quickly picked up by an affluent customer, Monica Goswami. The swift and deceptive friendship that follows between the two turns into a physical relationship and Jami finds himself passed on to Monica's various girlfriends as a male escort. Soon, Jami moves on to a job as a masseur in a salon situated in a quiet lane of Kolkata which runs an undercover brothel and before he realises it, Jami has turned into a full-fledged gigolo.

What follows is a furtive double life — pleasing women clients while keeping his family ignorant about his shady activities and all the while grappling to stay clear of the law, and of rival gigolo gangs. Life for Jami continues on the fast track till a chance meeting with an old colleague, Mandira Gupta, throws his life out of gear. Abandoned by her husband, Mandira has a young son suffering from leukaemia. Life for the duo means endless rounds of hospitals and blood transfusions. The deep bond that springs up between Jami and the sick little boy threatens to jeopardise his old life and place him in danger of being exposed. At the insistence of Jami, Mandira resumes her office job while Jami spends his days tending to the young patient in his mother's absence. And just as the reader has heaved a sigh of relief, anticipating a moral reformation of the wayward protagonist, there springs a twist.

With a predominantly Muslim setting can the terrorist angle ever be left out Right enough, Basu's novel erupts into a near-attack scenario where Jami's polio-stricken sister is picked up by the police as a potential suspect and the novel spirals towards an unexpected climax.

Kunal Basu creates a world that is gritty, grimy, smelly and cloistered and yet, paradoxically, shines with a warm innocence. Relationships between the residents of the warren-like building on Zakaria street are amorphous, splintering and joining back constantly, harmonious one day and hate-filled the other. Jami's dubious friends, likewise, are genial one minute and ready to hold a razor to his throat the next. Nothing is predictable or safe in this land of uncertainties as the Alam family struggles to forge documents and gather proof that will make them official citizens of India, Kolkata.

The novel aches with the refugee's perennial need to belong and Jami's deep-rooted identity crisis. Basu juxtaposes the polished lives of affluent Kolkata Bengalis with ghetto culture using great skill. While the leafy lanes of the former are said to be aromatic — fry hilsa and Darjeeling tea, the latter gives off the stench of carcasses and pee. And yet, ironically, it is the spirit of the downtown residents that comes out sturdier than their la di da counterparts, Jami being the connecting bridge between the two extremes. What stands out in this novel is its non-judgmental tone; nobody is a hero here and nobody a villain, every individual merely being a product of circumstances and environment.

Jami, weak and strong in parts, confused, alienated, fiercely protective of his younger sister and constantly buffeted by changing relationships, is a well-etched character. His transformation from cleric to masseur and from masseur to gigolo is conveyed with a streak of detachment by the author; Jami's arguments with his own conscience and moral dithering are conveyed with clinical faithfulness. Of the three names — Calcutta, Kolkata and Kalkatta — the author chooses to use the last one, thereby, in a way, relegating the reader as well as the protagonist to the status of an outsider.

The women who flit through Jami's life — Monica, Susan and others — are like colourful butterflies, beautiful and flighty; it is Rani the eunuch who stays on in the reader's memory as a person of substance. Basu's prose is exquisite in its simplicity, the author being at his lyrical best while describing the city of Kolkata. One can almost breathe in the scents and catch the sounds of a city at dusk. With a rich vocabulary of cuss words and vibrant street lingo, one wonders how much of homework went into creating an imaginary urban underbelly. Did the author go traipsing down seedy lanes to capture the zeitgeist of a fractured city Lovers of vintage Basu will recall his previous works with nostalgia — The Japanese Wife, a delicate-as-a-moth love story, Racists, a novel hinging on sci-fi, and the history-laden Miniaturist.

With his new book, Basu reveals yet another facet and proves that when it comes to noir, he can get as down and dirty as the best of the best. Kalkatta is a rambunctious ride all through, although the novel in an obtuse way is a grim commentary on a failed society. A wildly riveting and relevant read that will keep one hooked all through the 300-odd pages. If you still haven't got yourself a copy, it's time to wake up and smell the mustard oil.

Kankana Basu is a Mumbai-based writer. Her published works include a collection of short stories, Vinegar Sunday, and a novel, Cappuccino Dusk.



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