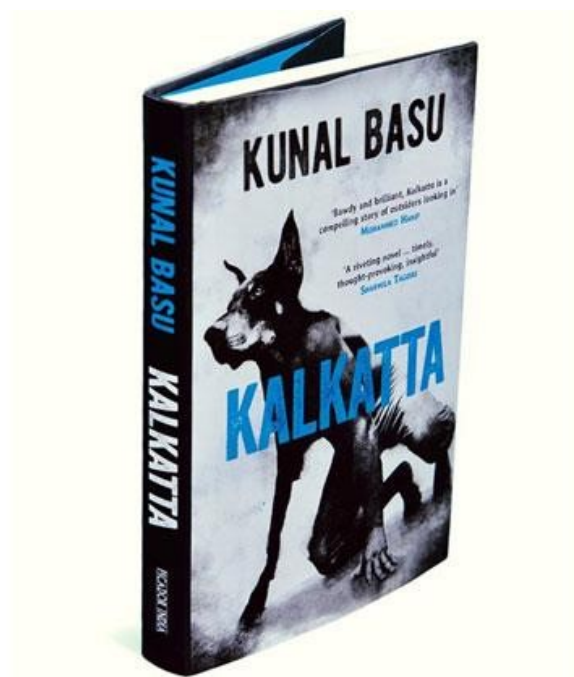


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Kalkatta-wallah: Narrative of belonging from the fringe of a metropolis

An Interview with novelist Kunal Basu (Question and Answer Format)

*Novelist Kunal Basu, the author of "Kalkatta", has captured the quixotic world of the gigolos in the underside of the metropolis. His protagonist, Jamshed Alam is a Bihari Muslim migrant to the city, who has returned to the land of his ancestors as a refugee from Bangladesh to become a Kalkatta Wallah on Zakariah Street. "Jami" in a outsider-insider. Basu describes the book as his first contemporary English novel set in the city, departure from his earlier works "The Opium Clerk", "The Miniaturist" and The Curse (and Cure) of the Yellow Emperor (two-part series). On a book tour of the metropolis, also his home, he took time out to speak to **Madhusree Chatterjee**, in his South Kolkata residence. Excerpts from the interview:*

Q Why did you name your latest fiction, "Kalkatta" — and not Kolkata?

A ...Because this city has several names. The antiquated name is Kalikata, the Anglicised name is Calcutta. The Bengalis refer to it as Kolkata. For the large non-Bengali population of the city, it is "Kalkatta". The title itself is a clear hint that the novel has been written from the periphery of the city for the centre of the city. I have tried to explore what is the centre, what is the periphery —the different worlds that inhabit Koolutala and Chitpore in context of the Hindi-speaking migrants to the city. Kalkatta is the true melting pot where different cultures clash and co-exist.

Q The novel uses "the refugee" as its narrative centre-stage. The protagonist of your story Jamshed Alam is a Bihari Muslim, who migrated to Bangladesh as refugee and returns to the land of his ancestors as a refugee to become a true "Kalkatta-wallah". Why did you choose the refugee and such a complex migration route to narrate your story?

A. This pertains to the collective amnesia of the sub-continent. A lot of academic study has been done about it but nothing has been written in fiction. The story is about refugees from three generations. They become refugees in Bangladesh and then travel back to India (from a refugee camp) to become refugees in the land of their ancestors. The back story is about Bangladesh and the displacement of millions during the Partition not caused by one tragic event but a succession of tragedies which makes it more poignant and complex. Our point of journey in the story stops where "Kalkatta" is made — for the large numbers in the city who are struggling to make this city their own, but cannot. This is a story which explores the interplay between the notion of the insider and outsider — who is the outsider and who is the insider.

In Chapter 3 of the novel, protagonist Jami meets Mandira, two beings from different planets. To my mind Kolkata is like a universe and we inhabit different planets. You are from Pluto because you are from Rajarhat, I am from Venus because I live in South Kolkata. The distance between Keyatala and Koolutala is the distance between Earth and Mars.

Q Where does it place your protagonist Jami?

A. Jamshed (known as Jami) is both. His profession — of a gigolo — makes him an insider. When he is in the posh Alipore neighbourhood servicing clients or in a five-star hotel in the city, he is an insider. But when he is out of his work environments and (professional) habitats, he is an outsider. He is an outsider, who is an insider. When he is in (leading lady) Mandira's home at a gathering of poets (sic you must not forget he is a gigolo by profession with free social access), one of the guests walks up to him to enquire where he is from. Jami says he is from Bangladesh. The poet (guest) says he is from East Pakistan. That dredges up the entire notion of who is a "Ghoti", who is the "Bangal (from Bangladesh) and who is the "Bangali (Bengalee). All of us

refugees from one part of the world or the other?

Q Can “refugees” be defined, if you consider Kolkata as a microcosm?

A. It is very difficult to distinguish between the “refugee” and the “exiled”. A refugee is a product of physical alienation. An “exile” is influenced by psychological dislocation — all of us who live in Kolkata are in exile largely because of complex political, economic and sociological reasons — it does not let the city have a heart, dividing the population into small tribes and small villages. Burrabazar is the largest trading areas in South-east Asia while the Writers’ is peopled by Bengali clerks, who are complete outsiders. Nothing in culture, politics and social life bring together people in different planets... as in the city. Khidderpore and Metiaburj have a lot of Bangladeshis — but Bengali speaking Bangladeshi. Zakariah Street has Hindi-speaking Muslim migrants... All this makes the city interesting as a writer. Large metropolises cannot have an unifying force— the only unifying force is when there is a bombing. Ask people from the Pali Hills and Dharavi in Mumbai — do they share the same soul? The city has always been represented by one soul — in fictions and films — the soul of the Bengali intelligentsia.

Q. Migration is an epochal social phenomenon of our time. How do you analyse the cross-cultural and geographical movements in the perspective of your novel?

A. Migration can be voluntary and involuntary by nature. The migration that we are seeing now is involuntary — disruptions of life by external factors such as wars, conflicts, social instability, and politics in contrast to people who are going to seek their fortunes from Kolkata to New Delhi to New York. I have never been excited by diaspora- the NRI (non-Resident Indian) factor has never appealed to me because the displacement and the fractures in the society are petty cultural clashes. Part of the Bengali society is in love with NRIs— when we were growing up the idea of relatives residing in “Videsh (foreign land) was not very prevalent. Now, every family has someone living abroad. They come laden with gifts. There is a great aura surrounding the NRI. The concepts are “Bengali *misti* (sweets), *deshe phera*”. Involuntary migration — what you are seeing now is involuntary migration. I live in Europe — and migration to the continent has been largescale (together with the consequences). I was near the Bataclan (in Paris) on 13/11 , I had passed by the Le Republic before the explosions. I was in Dhaka a day before two (famous) political war criminals were hanged. We are living in troubled times which make the stories of the people more poignant. As an author I wanted to engage with real stuff, the real crisis of humanity and the real splendor of the crisis. Jami is a product of the involuntary migration.

Q Do you think cities have been painted with a tilt or bias (in favour of elites) across popular cultures?

A. The poor and the marginalized have been edited out of contemporary Indian cinema and literature. New writers, publishers and film-makers are realising that we, the reading public, want to read about people like us — digitally savvy, smart and professionally adroit people. Question Mark: Do they (the other half) exist? Pimps, prostitutes, gigolos — the vast majority of the underbelly with legitimate jobs and the whole host of other professions (not in the mainstream). Do we the stable and “respectable” segment of Kolkata are aware that they are a reality. Nearly 70 per cent of the population is Bengali intelligentsia — our air time is more than anybody else. Durga Puja is more widely covered than Chaat Puja — to what extent have we been able to accept people who are not like us? As Jamshed’s Ammi (mother) tells him in the novel about the “rules of a Kalkatta-wallah”.

Q What are the rules of becoming a ‘Kalkatta wallah’? Is it about identities?

A The city has multiple identities — not to mould together as one but to find accommodation. How many of us from South Kolkata go to Zakariah Street — but only during (the Ramzan or Eid) to taste “Haalim”. They (the residents of Zakariah Street as the novel depicts them) should not be cast away, but treated with *understanding* — in that sense Delhi and Mumbai do not have these convergences. When Jami begins to befriend Mandira (his colleague in a travel agency), she asks him, “Why didn’t you speak to me”. To which Jami replies, “... Girls like you don’t like boys like me”. Mandira a member of the Bengali intelligentsia. Jami learns to be a ‘Kakatta Wallah’ as he grows up — moving into the profession.

Q What was the triggers for the novel?

A The triggers for the book was not the grand idea — my agents said when will you write an Indian novel. I wouldn’t say I wanted to write about Partition (as an essentially Indian novel would mean). The idea had been germinating in my mind after I completed writing the “Yellow Emperor’s Cure” in 2012-2013. I had time to creatively about my next book. I wanted to investigate the world of Zakariah Street, the world of gigolos — one can create agreements between the different worlds. The story gradually began to take shape in my mind. I needed to be out and about on the streets. I avoid travelling by car when I am in the city of Kolkata (he straddles Oxford University, where he is employed as a reader, and India) and I go out with Sushmita (wife) routinely to shop for food. I grew up in a middle class family I took a bus... I would see young well dressed men on motorcycles sitting outside five-star hotels and wonder who they were? I was curious. Out of these, ruminations came the story.

Q How did you stumble upon the tribe- of gigolos? They are difficult to locate in cities like Kolkata?

A.I had to pursue and find them. This was a hard challenge – how I was going to find gigolos? I needed to know their lives — what do they think if life, how do they react afterwards, their profession — the totality of their lives. I went to noted Bengali writer (late) Sunil Gangopadhyay (he was alive then). Being a writer, Sunil `da` realised I was in trouble. He put me on to a senior police officer Gautam Mohan Chakrabarty in Lal Bazar saying, "*Eta kono criminal case na*, (this is not a criminal case) help him. I went to his office in Lal Bazar – nobody even did a body check on me. How can I help you, Mr Basu, he asked? I am looking for a few gigolos, I replied. To his credit, he did not even bat an eyelid and explained that male prostitution unlike conventional prostitution was not brothel-based. It flourished by word of mouth and telephonic messages. Mr Chakrabarty put me on to a woman police officer from the anti-trafficking squad, who helped me track them down with the help of non-profit organisations, which work among them. I virtually lived with them for two years. I grew so close to them that on 15/1 (this new Year of 2015), the first greeting I received on my phone was from a gigolo- "*dada Bhalo Thakben* (brother, keep well). I inhabited their world, drank their tea, went to their dodgy bars and generally hung out with them.

They introduced me as their older brother, a friend. It was like no other world I have ever entered. Jami is not modelled on any one of them — his character has been drawn from aspects and elements of several people. Almost all of them are loyal to their families, love their wives and are suspicious of the media. They have regular concerns – they are real human beings. I invited several of them for book launch in Kolkata. I have finished my first full-length Bengali novel, it should be published in 2016.

Interviewed by Madhusree Chatterjee

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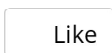
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