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A city ignored by Kolkata and Calcutta

Saikat Majumdar | Updated on January 19, 2018 | Published on February 12, 2016

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Invisible entities: Kalkatta will be treasured as a moving and vivid story of a world that not only the Bengali, but the urban bourgeoisie in general, has not even bothered to look at. Kalkatta; Kunal

Photo: Arunangsu Roy Chowdhury - The Hindu

Kunal Basu's new novel confronts the dehumanising of the immigrant and its implications for Kolkata, that prince among paranoiac cities

While I was reading Kalkatta, social media pulled up a blog post about the cover design of the novel. It was an outburst of toxic anger that went on to list “4 reasons why this is the worst book cover ever

and an insult to the city of Kolkata.” I was intrigued, not only because I was halfway through the novel and was soon due to talk about it in public, but also because I had followed the work of the illustrator, Pinaki De, for several years now. I’m yet to see a cover by De that has not left me mesmerised — including, I should say, the one he did for my first novel, *Silverfish*. It was strange, then, to hear the sound of abuse.

The author of this anger, I noticed on his blog, was based in Delhi, and from his last name, was of north Indian descent. He was angered by the half-man, half-dog creature on the cover that to him, was meant to represent the city. The ‘sick logic’ behind that symbolism, as he read it, derived from the play of ‘Kalkatta’ with ‘kutta’, or dog in Hindi.

Kalkatta, the evocative title of Kunal Basu’s new novel, is also the name of the city as given to it by its Hindi-speaking residents. While the name-czars were fighting the Calcutta-Kolkata debate (a meaningless one for the bilingual Bengali), the city’s avatar as ‘Kalkatta’ went unnoticed. Which is why I think this outburst of anger at the cover is misplaced. Because in my eyes, the disturbing, quasi-canine, quasi-human creature, poised on the ground, ready to snarl and pounce, is not the city. In my mind, it is meant to represent the most marginalised section of the population that calls it ‘Kalkatta,’ such as the impoverished Bihari migrant who is easily elided in the conception of the city; just as easily as ‘Kalkatta’ is left out of the polemic between ‘Calcutta’ and ‘Kolkata.’ This is a figure whose humanity is easily missed by the more comfortably ensconced members of the city.



Is this representation moral? Surely it is not meant to be normative — that the poor Muslim Bihari immigrant in the city should be read as a dog; but rather, depressingly empirical — that (s)he does end up, in the real and sick politics of economy and culture, like a dog or a bitch, forgotten and beaten down but threatening at the same time. Through this cover, De has etched a rich and disturbing narrative, as any true artist should — far more disturbing than one might have simply imagined the city as a kutta.

The un-noticing of the dog, dangerous and beautifully sinewy, trampled but richly alive, is the subject of Basu's engaging novel. It is the story of Jamshed Alam, aka Jami, ancestrally from Bihar but born in a refugee camp for Bihari Muslims in Bangladesh, reborn — illegally of course — as an Indian in what is eventually to become his home city: Kalkatta. Bearing the burden of his beautiful body — people don't notice him but upper-class Bengali women cannot help salivate after his flesh — Jami enters the life of a gigolo through the (apparently respectable) backdoor of a massage parlour. Much of this brutally honest novel is about the gigolo — multiply marginalised as poor, Muslim, and a Bihari immigrant — staring at the dark underbelly of Bengali respectability, especially of its affluent, cocktail-sipping society in Alipore. It is also about female lust,

something that this society, or for that matter, its liberal avatar in the ‘bhadramahila’ tradition would be too squeamish to own up to in public. But Jami knows all about this lust as he feeds it daily, forming memorable friendships as well as odd and disturbing relationships on the way.

A seasoned novelist working at the height of his powers, Basu has created a real and engrossing world populated with rich characters. These are characters which are, to use EM Forster’s influential formulation, round — with multiple dimensions just like people in real life, capable of unpredictable, idiosyncratic behaviour. Sometimes the best way of creating such characters is to build them atop recognisable social types, giving them little unexpected twirls and twists. Such is the young Bengali intellectual Ani, Jami’s smoking buddy at his first workplace (a somewhat shady travel agency) and unexpectedly, his genuine friend. The loud and lyrical Monica Goswami, straight out of the world of Shankar’s Chowringhee with a sharper, more sinister 21st-century twist, is the first, and in some senses, the arch-client whom Jami pleases, initially with his massaging hands and very soon, with his entire body. And then there is the key character of Mandira, a breath of fresh evening air in a bitter and claustrophobic world, Jami’s Banalata Sen — if indeed he thought like those “cultured” Bengalis he sometimes thinks really owns and runs Calcutta. Her son, Pablo, suffering from leukaemia, drives Jami to become the person he becomes for the crucial, last third of the novel.

True to its title, Kalkatta will be treasured as a moving and vivid story of a world that not only the Bengali, but the urban bourgeoisie in general, has not even bothered to look at. My only criticism remains about the moral weight that the author throws behind Jami

— and to a lesser extent, the rest of his family — with an unswerving single-mindedness. Jami starts as, and remains, to the end of the novel, the innocent who is abused by the world he finds himself in. His own humanity, soaring far above those who claim and exercise power over him, is unscathed, only enriched by the feet that trample him. Did Jami really have to be such an oppressed god? Do we detect, in his creation, the social conscience of the liberal Bengali with the guilty aftertaste of a hegemonic consciousness? How then, does that social conscience sit in the wilderness that is the soul of art?

Saikat Majumdar's most recent book is the novel 'The Firebird'

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