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## Hidden realities



Payel Dutta Chowdhury, January 10, 2016, JAN 09 2016, 21:41PM IST | UPDATED: JAN 10 2016, 00:08AM IST



Kalkatta , Kunal Basu, Pan Macmillan 2015, pp 318, Rs 599

Kalkatta  
Kunal Basu  
Pan Macmillan  
2015, pp 318, Rs 599

The City of Joy, Calcutta or Kolkata, has been the subject-matter of several books, paintings and movies. Kunal Basu, the renowned author of *The Japanese Wife* fame, chooses the city as his setting and theme in his recent novel *Kalkatta*.

Another version of the name of the city, the term Kalkatta is mainly used by the non-Bengalis living there, and by the North Indians too. Popularly identified as the "Cultural Capital of India", a vibrant place, rich with cultural ethos, the Kolkata in Basu's book, however, portrays many hidden and unknown facets of the city.

Basu's protagonist, Jamshed Alam aka Jami, is the son of Bihari migrants who were forced to leave their native land and live in a refugee camp in Bangladesh. When opportunity knocks their door to get back, they decide to take shelter in Kalkatta, the city of dreams. Starting life afresh in Zakaria Street in the house of a distant relative, Mushtaq Ahmed, the family aspires to become true Kalkatta-wallahs.

The family's first attempt at doing so is to get Jamshed a birth certificate which would erase the stamp of being a refugee forever. From then onwards starts Jami's struggle to establish himself in the eyes of his family, as well as carve a niche for himself. However, like for most people, it takes him a long time to understand that wealth, upward mobility and respectability in this city are not necessarily the outcome of decent hard work. Basu traces his protagonist's attempts at trying to evolve as the perfect city-dweller who is not looked down upon as a poor refugee.

A school drop-out, Jamshed manages to get hired as a sub-agent in a travel firm. Not happy with the underpaid and unsteady job, and desirous of affluence, Jamshed does not mind when he is urged by Monica, a middle-aged rich lady looking for paid sex, to shift to Champaka, a massage parlour by name, but an upper-class brothel in reality. Working as a full-time gigolo, Basu's hero is continuously on the path of being drawn further away from the dreams of respectability that his parents had hoped for him.

book, his client parties, the pretentious cultured Bengalis like Monica, her businessman husband and their circle of upper-class friends, his colleagues in the brothel, the three girls and the transgender, Rani, and many more. Basu's ability to bring the city alive is seen primarily through his wide range of characterisation, each person as perfectly and authentically portrayed as the other. All these characters portray different shades of the city — the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, the happy and the miserable.

Basu's Kalkatta is as much a character in his book as his protagonist, Jamshed. The author presents a squalid and despicable picture of the city — the other side of the coin in fact — full of misery, exploitation, corruption, and illegal activities. It is not only in Jamshed's narrative, but in the tales of all the other characters of the book that the negative side of this metropolis is brought to light.

Poverty in many forms, hawala rackets, gambling, drugs, fake documents, kidney rackets, and above all, the ever-present sex workers dominate Basu's book. However, Basu's sordid portrayal is quite authentic and easily recognised as 'behind the scene' picture of many big cities.

Basu's Kalkatta is at once a depiction of a depraved and wretched cross-section of society as also a rare portrayal of essential humanity of the dispossessed. Going against the trend, Basu's rendering of the marginalised of the society is not essentially as corrupt and criminals. His protagonist, Jamshed, no doubt craves to become rich, but that desire mainly stems from his urge to relieve his father from the burden of his poorly-paid tailoring job, his dream of setting his mother free from the stress as a zari worker and support his polio-ridden sister. He shows his golden heart after his life takes an unexpected turn when he meets the young boy, Pablo, a patient of leukaemia, and his single mother, Mandira.

Jamshed ultimately succeeds in transforming himself to a true Kalkatta-wallah, but in the process becomes a stranger to himself. His near-perfect life as a gigolo, providing him the satisfaction of financial stability, if not anything else, threatens to be destroyed, ultimately driving him away from his family and the 'city of dreams'.

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## Walking into a shadowy world

This is an earnest attempt to string together the struggles of trafficked women and children, but the narrative tends to meander



Parvathi Ramkumar, MAR 08 2020, 01:26AM IST | UPDATED: MAR 08 2020, 01:28AM IST

'Taboo' by Nirmala Govindarajan, is, going by the blurb, a novel that explores the dark and disturbing world of exploitation and human trafficking. The story moves from place to place and person to person in a quest to throw some light on the viciously shadowy world of crime and the struggles of those who are trafficked. There are events and observations that take place all over the country (and some in foreign locales). The mysterious Lady with the Slender Hands is introduced right at the beginning; she is a sort of thread that links the events of the novel together.

The tales weave in many characters, the 'mongers', who interject the narrative with strange observations, a certain Pascal Rebello de Fonseca, the Lady

...being, has suggested a some may, although those caught in the web of crime suffer the most.

**Too many adjectives**

Mixing first and third-person narratives, 'Taboo' makes use of an unusual writing style to move its story forward. There are references to current events, music, dance and a lot of Spanish.

The novel's experimental style, modelled on the 'stream of consciousness' technique, focuses heavily on allusions, metaphors and a great many adjectives.

**It does get a little confusing**

There is a semblance of a structure in there — of characters having lost their childhood, of their dreams and hopes being crushed, of certain entitled individuals demanding more than their share of what they cannot have. However, there are also too many words in capital letters, a play on place names and an attempt to inject rhythm in what could have been simple prose. At a little over 300 pages, the experimental style of writing turns out to be rather tiresome. Perhaps, it might have worked if the word count had been reduced.

Alternatively, given the seriousness of the subject matter 'Taboo' works with, and the obvious meticulous research that has gone into unearthing details, a more straightforward and direct narrative might have helped. As it is, the unusual presentation of the book sometimes seems to make light of its own story. The gravitas of its content is not as effective as it could have been, especially when everybody talks in a peculiarly sing-song way. That, along with the excessive capitalisation, makes the reading experience a wee bit bewildering.

**Trying too hard?**

The Greek-chorus like interjections of the 'mongers' is a bit too much. The nuances of characterisation are at times lost, especially because of the time and place jumps. The dreamlike reflections of Erendira, with their sprinkling of Spanish, are an unusual idea — only if you get an inkling of what she's talking about.

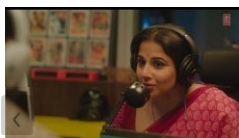
Overall, 'Taboo' is not an easy read and not just because of its story. It takes time to navigate the text and piece the story together because of its unconventionality. The story tries too hard to be cerebral, rhythmic and lyrical. As stated before, a shorter novel may have handled the experimental prose better.

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## A motherhood quest in the City of Joy

This is a book as much about a woman's search for her biological mother as about the city of Kolkata



Ahmed Sharif, MAR 08 2020, 01:20AM IST | UPDATED: MAR 08 2020, 01:28AM IST

Calcutta (Kolkata, if you must) is a crucible of tales of happiness, melancholy, tragedy, deception, history and culture — it's the city where oceans meet as well as drift apart.

Through 'Sarojini's Mother', Kunal Basu scripts a heartwarming, 'naked-truth' fiction whose parallel, in reality, haunts the City of Joy itself.

Saz (Sarojini), an Indian-born Brit, has stepped on to the land where she was born, to venture out into her unknown 'home' where she is searching for the woman who passed on an X chromosome to her. In her quest, Chiru Sen (Calcutta's Elvis) is her saviour, lighthouse and the window to us readers.

On her journey, Sarojini (the lotus in a lake) finds a sense of belonging in both the turbulent, yet calming waters of Jamuna and in a waft of glorious yet strong winds in which Urvashi drifts. Her choice is to either fight the snakes and float on the Jamuna or be carried away in the wind by Urvashi. Sarojini grows to bloom and takes in the love showered upon, fades but never withers; but when the perpetual darkness of the moment-to-choose dawns, she picks the tool that will tell her where the nourishing ground lies — a DNA test.

Basu avoids dealing with the underlying emotions and deep layers within which Sarojini's heart lies by choosing Chiru as the voice and eyes of his book, seeing a complex story through the open window of a body— here, the protagonist, in effect, talking volumes about Chiru's character and humours him to be the spotlight on Saz in the backdrop of Kolkata.

Basu is at his best when he describes the various settings in Kolkata, bringing alive a vivid scenery of the multifaceted city, which is also the backdrop of his earlier book 'Kalkatta'. His style is just like the cover of the book — eerie and easy, at the same time.

He also sprinkles the tragedies of the reality that dogs our world like the deaths due to hooch consumption and the burden that each slum dwellers carries — a label of harbouring a criminal mind.

The story treads on the lines of a Bollywood movie — for example, Chiru saves Saz from being harassed at a dance bar — and takes inspiration from reports where Indian-born foreigners have found their biological parents entrenched deep in poverty and residing in slums. However, it never falters despite clinging to cliches. Instead, it manages to add drama to the predictable suspense, which when revealed will make you sigh, knowing it was anticipated and easing the transition with the thoughts and introspection of Chiru on Saz's minds and the situation ahead. The author also adds humour crafted in such a fashion that forces one to think of the possibilities and get further involved in the life of the protagonist.

In the supporting characters too, Basu infuses life and brings out the essence of Kolkata's society. Chiru's circle of musician friends are unveiled like an onion through the book. Then there is Suleiman who evinces wisdom and Jamuna moulded as an archetypal Indian woman and others who show the diversity of the human personality while also forming the bedrock of Basu's book. Each of them can be a standalone story too, which readers ought to ask Basu to write about.

He puts in a message in each of the book's residents — Lily and Poly are the incorruptible twins whose profession is to match DNA strands; the twins stand for each of the DNA strands put together in a double helix. In effect, they bring out the truth and represent life.

Like them, others have their own story to tell and they leave a mark of their own on this tale, which brings together different worlds in an alloy that hits you hard with its simple language.

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## Nudge the boys to read about girls

You often hear men say they don't know 'what women want'. Well, why not make an effort to find out



Shruthi Rao, MAR 08 2020, 01:07AM IST | UPDATED: MAR 08 2020, 11:02AM IST



When I was doing the research for my book '10 Indian Women Who Were the First to Do What They Did', I studied a number of books and old letters, trying to dig deeper into the minds of these women I was writing about. I wanted to know what inspired their astounding achievements, especially in a world and at a time when nobody else had walked on that path. Some of these women wrote memoirs and letters, so I got a glimpse into their thoughts and opinions. As for the others, I found almost next to nothing about their personal lives. In fact, in a book about the first doctor, I found more information about her husband than about her.

It got me thinking about why there is next to no information about all these women achievers. One of the major reasons is that most historical and biographical accounts, both then and now, have been written by men, about men, for men. It cannot be that there weren't any remarkable women in history; just that their stories are lost to us because they haven't been recorded, most likely because they weren't considered important. How unfair is that! Don't more people, both men and women, deserve to know all these incredible stories?

### Is there men's fiction?

Yes. But the reality is different. It is a well-known fact that girls read books about girls and boys equally, but boys usually don't want to read books about girls. Some boys actually hide the fact that they like books about girls, afraid that they'll be mocked. This holds true in the world of adult fiction too. Women's fiction is a category in itself. Why is there no such thing as men's fiction? Does that mean that books with men or written by men are for everybody, while books about women or written by women are only for women? How does that make sense?

Some argue that boys cannot relate to books about girls. Are girls born with magical powers to make them relate to books about boys? If boys don't mind reading about mice and monsters, does it mean they can relate to mice and monsters better than they can to someone from their own species? (Whether we really need to relate to a book in the first place is another story.)

Men make a big song and cry about how 'they don't know what women want'. How will you know if you don't make an effort to find out?

This Women's Day, what if we nudge the boys (and men) around us to pick up a book about girls? It could be the first step towards a world where men see women as human beings, with their own lives, likes and rights! Perhaps, that would make a better investment into a brighter and more secure future for women; a more meaningful way of showing appreciation, rather than a token card or gift, or flowers that will wilt the very next day.

*The author got a master's degree in energy engineering and worked in the IT industry until her daughter dragged out the writer lurking inside her. She has written eight books for children and can be reached at [www.shruthi-rao.com](http://www.shruthi-rao.com)*

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DHNS, MAR 08 2020, 01:57AM IST | UPDATED: MAR 08 2020, 02:00AM IST

Hood Feminism

Mikki Kendall

Bloomsbury, 2020, pp 288, Rs 846

This book is both an irrefutable indictment of feminism — a movement that is clearly in flux today and also a clear-eyed assessment of how to save it.

Fearless Freedom

Kavita Krishnan

Penguin, 2020, pp 264, Rs 299

Is freedom really incompatible with safety? In this ground-breaking and radical book, the author locates the personal and political repercussions of erasing women from public spaces.

Lift Off: The Story of Conzerv

Hema Hattangady and Ashish Sen

Westland, pp 256, Rs 599

In 1996, Hema Hattangady took over as the CEO of Conzerv, an embattled family-owned firm based in Bengaluru that manufactured digital energy meters. Over the next 12 years, she grew it to a Rs 100 crore market leader. This is her story as much as her company's.

Hijab

Simon & Schuster, 2020, pp 304, Rs 499

A story about the dystopias that migration induces, this is a powerful fable about one of the most burning issues of our time. Is identity skin-deep or does it go beyond one's colour? And finally, what does being a migrant woman truly mean?

My Girlhood

Taslima Nasrin

Penguin, 2020, pp 336, Rs 599

Set in the backdrop of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, this book recollects Taslima Nasrin's early years. This is a powerful memoir of a free woman trapped in patriarchy and religious fundamentalism.

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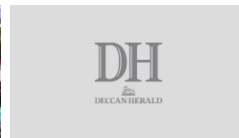
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