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I was haunted by the margins: Kunal Basu on his new book Kalkatta

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“Yes, it was a surprise for various reasons, not the least because the news came as I was about to leave for the airport to return to Oxford. Certainly helped to lift my mood!” This is what Kunal Basu wrote, responding to the news that his latest work Kalkatta was on the shortlist of The Hindu Prize 2017. He’s a senior teaching fellow at Said Business School at Oxford and a research fellow at Templeton College. This, despite or maybe because of having been a political activist at Jadavpur University during the Emergency when he was growing up in the city of decadence and desire that has exercised a narcotic hold on its votaries. Basu’s hero Jamshed Alam, the twice-exiled migrant from Bihar via Bangladesh, scrabbling for a leg-up between the interstices of the city, could be any refugee, any stateless person reaching out for the promise of a better life. Excerpts from an email interview :

You are reputed to have been born in a library, courtesy of a literary mother. Can you tell us what it was like having a bibliophile mother (Chhabi Basu) and a publisher dad (Sunil Kumar Basu)?

The “birth” was the result of an anxious author (my mother) rushing to finish a manuscript, and an impatient infant unwilling to be excluded from the sheer excitement of a bookish family! As far back as I can remember, my parents and their motley collection of friends — artists, poets, activists, filmmakers — were forever arguing over the things that really mattered: politics and culture. Growing up, they imbued me with a sense of wonder over ideas, and a willingness to embrace this world through my imagination. But perhaps most importantly, it fostered a precious human emotion: empathy.

Our household wasn't simply a literary salon, but a hothouse of activism. Both my parents were deeply involved in movements for social change, and had served time in prison for their ideals. It had made me aware that literary practice demands that we go beyond self-indulgence.

Ammi in Kalkatta is a wonderfully feisty figure, as indeed are some of the other women in your stories. Does she resemble someone in real life?

Ruksana Begum (Ammi) isn't a literary model of a living character, rather an imagined portrayal based on strong women I've encountered in life. Right through my activist days till now, I've seen families — indeed communities — in crisis, being held together by exceptional women through fortitude, love and humour. Obviously, it helped having a feminist for a mother, who wrote the very first treatise on women's struggle in Bengal.

How did you research the *maalishwala* aspect of Jamshed's life?

Although it was hard in the beginning, I managed to befriend young

men engaged in massage and sex work. It was a vital piece of experience to bring to light a slice of their lives that's hidden from most, including their families. Even more than discovering what they do for a living, I wished to explore what they thought and felt, how they saw the world through their own peculiar prism, what they made of things we hold dear, such as morality and unconditional love. I was conscious all through of avoiding a superficial and voyeuristic peep, but immersing myself into the "whole" person to develop a rich complexion of his life.

You're very keen on odours. Is it, as people say about Naipaul, a feature of your extrasensory ability as a Bengali and a Brahmin, a nose, as it were, for detecting otherness?

I am not a Brahmin! And I'm allergic to casteism and exclusionary principles of ALL kinds. But I am a sensualist who discerns each setting through light and shade, smell, touch and taste — in order to make meaning, I must sense my surroundings.

Kalkatta, of course, is resplendent with smelly food and gutters, and in the case of a *maalishwala*, the fragrance of flowers and flesh.

In many of your stories, there is a still, silent centre, a person, or an incident, around which the super-structure evolves. In this case, is it the Job Charnock moment, or maybe the final set piece, Herman Hesse *Siddhartha* style, when life is seen to be flowing in all its multitudinous felicity as you look down upon it?

My *Kalkatta* — like the city it's based on — eludes a defining principle. Its existence is its *raison d'être*. And yet, like a prism, it lends many angles to view what might masquerade as its core. In writing this novel, I was haunted by the margins perhaps even more

than the centre; the weight of everyday dreams and the grandeur of their failures; the secret chambers of dangerous desires; and inevitably, personal endings alongside the unending nature of life that I've left to overflow through my fingers.

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