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The city without a map

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There are as many threads running through this richly layered narrative as in an embroidered quilt in Bengal's famed Kantha work. As everyone knows, traditionally it was the women who made these quilts. They unpicked the silken threads from old saree borders. New patterns and motifs were created on layers of fabric that were pieced together with tiny stitches that rippled along the surface as delicately as the waves dappling the Hooghly flowing past the city of Kunal Basu's *Kalkatta*.

In many ways, Kunal Basu's intriguing tale is about the 'maximum city' of its time. It was created by the dreams of Empire that were played along its silt-laden banks that carried argosies full with their paraphernalia of clerks and administrators, the touts and middlemen who negotiated this enormous loot of a country's resources.

Since that time, the city stands truncated into scattered territories of secret histories and enclaves of intrigue marked by extreme wealth or extreme poverty. Through the voice of his narrator Jamshed Alam, the quintessential flâneur, as hero, Basu explores both facets of contemporary society as it manifests itself in the venality of the rich and the vulnerability of the dispossessed. It is a city with many

memories, but little sense of belonging.

As one of Basu's characters tells Jamshed, "Kolkata doesn't have a geography. Like the very first explorer, you can draw up your own map if you wish." Jamshed is on his way back from a glamorous evening at the home of one of his patrons — a rich woman who introduces him to a life of debauchery as a gigolo under the quilt of luxury.

Jamshed Alam is a Bihari from Bangladesh, whose refugee family, twice dislocated from its roots, is scrambling to find a meaning and a place in Kolkata. Jamshed's immediate family consists of Ammi, the strong-minded woman who keeps the family together with her sharp tongue, her belief in her faith and her job as a *zari*-worker in one of the rooms managed by the owner of the tenement building where they stay. His father works as a tailor, but ill health forces him to fly under the radar. Eventually, both Jamshed and his lame but feisty sister Mir also find themselves pushed to the fringes of the city's crippling demography.

Though this sounds depressingly familiar, there is also a ferocious vitality about Basu's storytelling that lifts it from the usual view-from-the-gutter-of-life narrative.

There's even a kind of epiphany, as Jamshed stumbles upon the gravestone of an Englishman, Job Charnock, the founder of Kolkata. He feels a kinship with the skeleton lurking under the stone.

As Jamshed tells us: "A shudder passed through my body as I kissed the stone just as Ammi had taught us to do, and whispered to the skeleton below: Take me. I offer you Jamshed Alam."

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