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## Exploring 'Kalkatta' with Kunal Basu

6-7 minutes

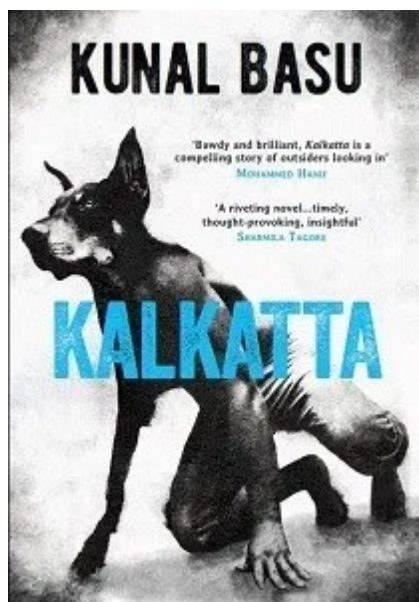
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### Library

Text by Huzan Tata. Author's image courtesy Swapnendu Kar.

Cover illustration and design Pinaki De

“There’s a greater emphasis on self-survival rather than the mad romanticism of wanting to change the world,” Kunal Basu on the Kolkata of today



**The Read:** Kalkatta

**Author:** Kunal Basu

**Publisher:** Pan Macmillan India

**What it is:** A look at the darker side of the City Of Joy, told through the story of Jamshed Alam. Dwelling over several problems like

displacement, refugees, disease, and illicit professions, the fictional tome follows Jamshed or 'Jami', a third-generation refugee in 'Kalkatta' through his life's adventures. His grandparents were displaced during Partition, and the struggle for survival continues with Jami. A gritty take on the underbelly of the city, *Kalkatta* is a lesson in history, politics and above all, humanity.

**Verve View:** For those who aren't fans of the genre, it may take time to warm up to the book. But Jami's story is thrilling enough, and all you want to know is what lies ahead. And if you belong to a metropolis similar to Kolkata, the novel is sure to remind you of your own city – it's real, gritty and oh-so gripping. Action, drama, emotion – *Kalkatta* packs them all in plenty. We'd recommend it in a heartbeat.

**Read it for:** A different take on the city of Kolkata, from a master storyteller.

### Q&A with Kunal Basu



Image courtesy: Swapnendu Kar

### **1. Have the characters or events in the book been inspired by people or incidents from your life?**

“Although I was born and raised in Kolkata, I was unfamiliar with ‘Kalkatta’ – the part of the city that is made up of migrants and refugees mostly from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Bangladesh; Hindi or Urdu speaking and predominantly Muslim. I’d go to Zakaria Street, which is a primary setting of the novel, to taste Halim during Eid. There were first hand experiences, of course, with other parts of the city visited by my story. This novel came out of what was already familiar and a great deal that was strange to me. I am driven by a sense of adventure in my writing, to go where I haven’t been before – in terms of people and place, but equally in terms of uncharted psychological terrains. Spending time with a very wide assortment of the city’s residents – traders, gang members, gigolos, political activists, socialites, policemen, poets and intellectuals –supplied the raw material for my cast of characters. Beside the 2013 assembly polls, the rest of the featured events have been drawn from my accumulated experiences.”

### **2. Who is your favourite character from *Kalkatta* – the one you enjoyed creating the most?**

“That’s a hard question to answer! How can I play favourites among those who’ve now become my kith and kin? But Miriam or Miri, Jami’s sister, crippled by polio but indomitable in spirit is one of my champions.”

### **3. Are your works set in reality or do you rely mostly on imagination – or is it a bit of both?**

“Reality is the fountainhead of my imagination. In order to write any piece of fiction, I have to think of a story – which always comes first.

Researching and revealing aspects of the real world spur on the story-making process, as well as lend credence to my tale. I dance intimately with the real and the imagined.”

**4. Many descriptions of ‘Kalkatta’ reminded me of my own city, Mumbai. What’s the most challenging part about writing a book that’s essentially a portrait of a city or place that millions identify with?**

“I have grown up with world classics. Be it Charles Dickens or Emile Zola, Leo Tolstoy or Rabindranath Tagore, the context of a novel is as much a character as the people who populate the story. Since Kolkata, like Mumbai, isn’t a single city but a collection of cities coexisting within a geographic boundary, readers are likely to search for the parts that they are most loyal to. I hope my *Kalkatta* will encourage Kolkatans to leave their comfort zones and discover parts of their city that they’d rarely explored before.”

**5. What do you hope readers will take away from the book?**

“Once published, a novel belongs to its readers, not to the author. No matter how diverse readers’ perspectives might be, I hope it fosters in them a sense of empathy towards those who’ve been marginalised by society, be it refugees or those in ‘illicit’ professions; struggling single mothers or men and women condemned and hounded by the state for simply following their faith.”

**6. What’s changed for you from the ‘Kalkatta’ you grew up in to the one you see today?**

“I grew up in the turbulent seventies with bombs, theatre, and poetry. Today’s Kolkata seems a tad tame in comparison. Also, there’s a greater emphasis on self-survival now rather than the mad romanticism of wanting to change the world. But Kolkata has

always been unpredictable – the next revolution might just be simmering under the surface.”

**7. There has been a drastic increase in the number of Indian authors writing in English since you began. Your take?**

“English is an Indian language, and the most vibrant practice of English is here – not in the British Isles or elsewhere. Not surprising, therefore, that there’s been a surge in Indian writing in English. My only concern is that it doesn’t swamp our rich vernacular literary traditions.”

**8. Do you prefer writing novels or short stories?**

“Both appeal strongly to me: novels as serious and prolonged affairs of the heart, and short stories as momentary but thrilling trysts.”

**9. Are you working on any new books?**

“I have just finished a draft of my first Bengali novel, also set in Kolkata.”

**10. Any advice for aspiring writers?**

“Never take any ‘advice’ seriously.”

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