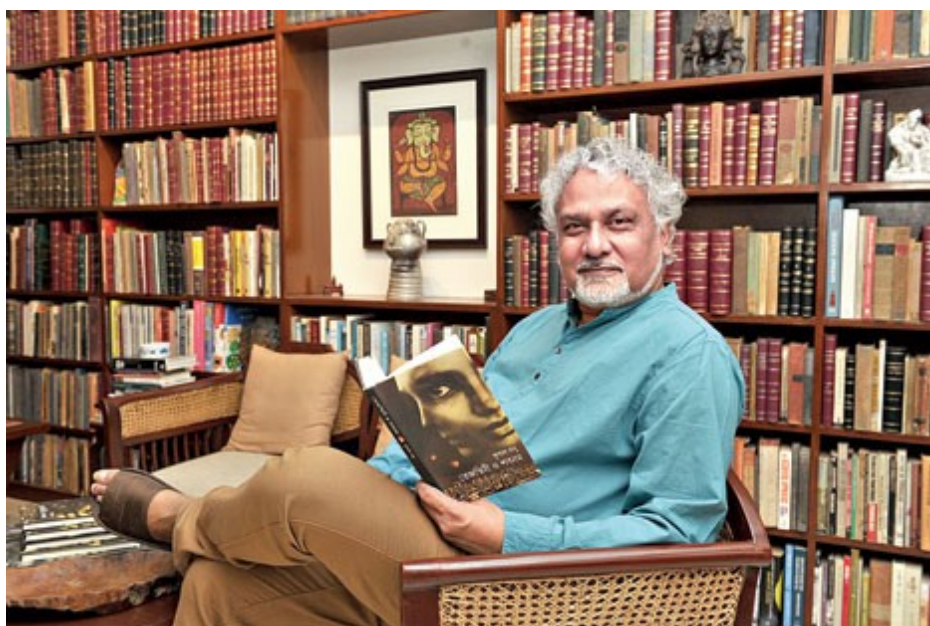


[telegraphindia.com](https://www.telegraphindia.com)

Kunal Basu's next

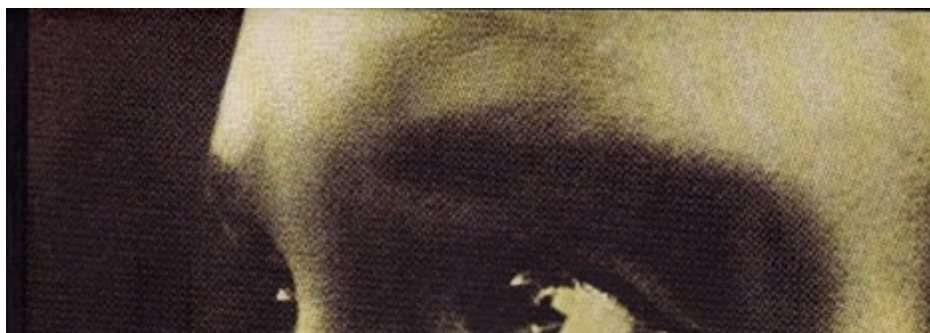
By Samhita Chakraborty

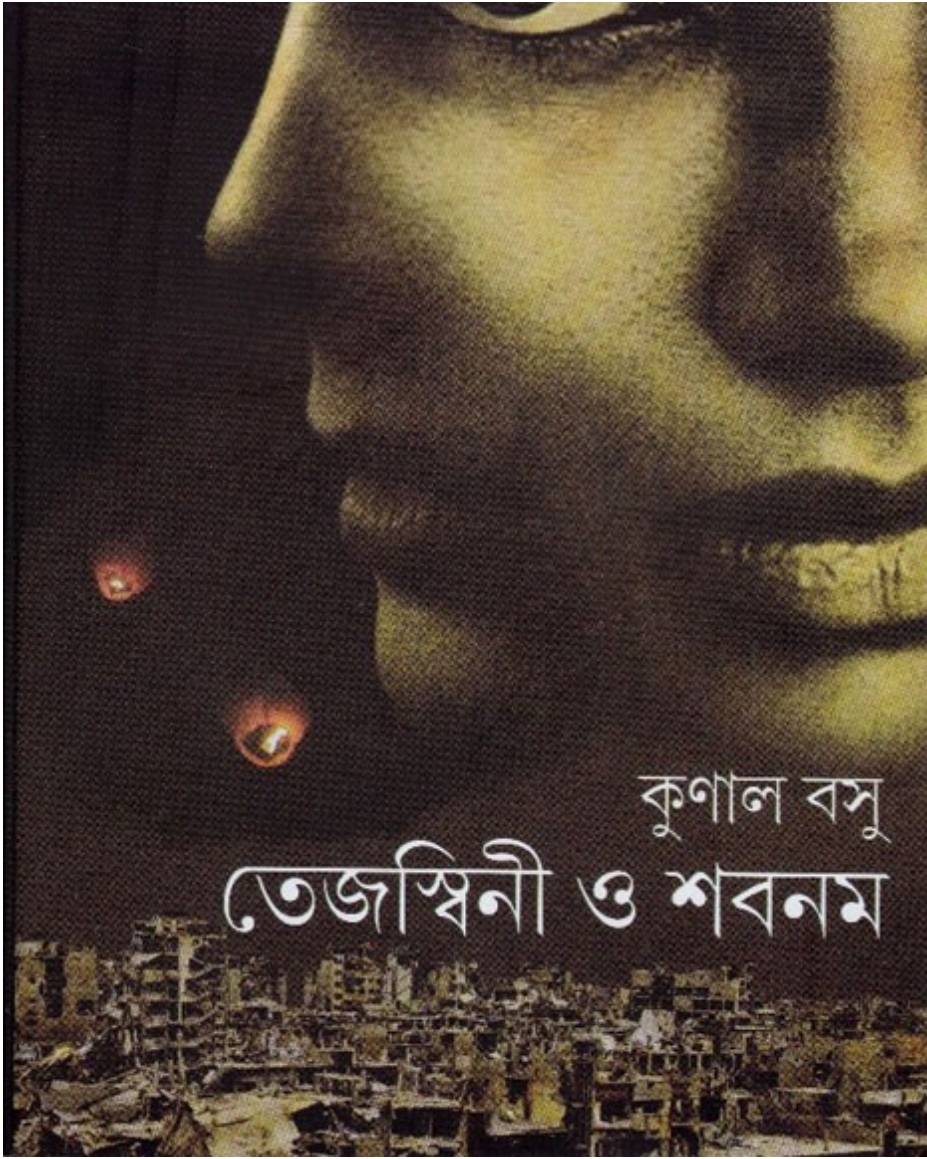
11-14 minutes



Kunal Basu at his Lake Road house. Picture: Pabitra Das

Kunal Basu, the writer of short stories like *The Japanese Wife* and five novels in English, is all set to launch *Tejaswini O Shabnam* (Dey's Publishing, Rs 200), a novel in Bengali. Over coffee served in beautiful ceramic mugs fashioned by his wife Susmita, the writer chatted with t2 at his book-lined home on Lake Road...





Tejaswini O Shabnam will be launched on June 5, 6pm, at Gorky Sadan

From a right-winger, you've become a full-time left-winger! We say this because the last time we were here, we noticed you've kept your English books to the right and Bengali books to the left in your study...

Well, it depends on where you sit (laughs out loud)! I've actually been "both-wingers" in my life. I was very fortunate to be brought up in a household where both the literary languages — Bangla and English — flourished. Growing up, I never felt that I had to make a choice. My mother (Chhabi Basu) wrote in Bangla but we were avid

readers in both Bangla and English. So in my bookshelves, to my left is Rabindranath (Tagore), to my right is (Charles) Dickens; to my left is Jibanananda Das, to my right is (T.S.) Eliot; to my left is Michael Madhusudan Dutt, to my right is Bertolt Brecht. There's more than peaceful coexistence, there's great harmony between these two great languages of literature.

Tejaswini O Shabnam is your third Bengali book on the trot (after Rabi Shankar and Bairer Dorja). Are you permanently shifting to writing in Bengali?

I used to boast to my friends abroad that Bengalis of a certain kind are the only bilingual tribe left on earth. A person can be bilingual in the sense that they can read, write and speak two languages in a way that is grammatically correct. But to be truly bilingual means having two literary streams flowing within. That one can effortlessly swim from one stream to the other without thinking that I have abandoned one and I have adopted the other. So when I wrote the three Bangla novels on the trot, never for a moment did I feel that my life as an author of English has come to an end. In fact, the novel that I am writing now is in English. And in all likelihood, the one after, that I am already hatching in my mind, will also be in English. At some point I can come back and write in Bangla again. So, I think it is a gift that I received from my upbringing, from the kind of city that Calcutta once was, and the kinds of parents (his father Sunil Kumar Basu was a publisher and his mother a writer) and friends of my parents that I saw in our house, that led to me being really promiscuous in these two languages.

There is no other writer writing in Bengali and English, is there?

If you look at non-fiction, there's a very healthy tradition of people writing in both English and Bangla. Rabindranath has. In contemporary times, Amartya Sen. There are very fine writers in economics, political science and all kinds of other disciplines as well. When it comes to literature, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay was the last Bengali to have written full-length novels in Bangla and a full-length novel in English — *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864). To the best of my knowledge, after Bankimchandra in the 19th century, I am the second Bangali to have done so. Plays and poetry, Michael (Madhusudan Dutt) has written in both languages, Toru Dutt has written in both English and French but I think her English novel was incomplete when she passed away.

There are some examples of people who have written in two languages but they are a handful in number. For example, Milan Kundera (Czech and French), Vladimir Nabokov (Russian and English), Samuel Beckett (English and French)... just a handful.

Tell us how the story of Tejaswini O Shabnam came to you...

About a year back, I was researching this whole phenomenon of trafficking for a writing project, which ultimately got shelved. But being the kind of writer that I am, I go places, I interview people that I have never met in my life... so I went into the rural interiors of south Bengal with the help of some NGOs and met with some young girls who had been rescued from trafficking, rescued not just from Delhi, Gurgaon or Bombay but as far as Dubai. And the image is indelible in my mind, that one afternoon when I went to a school building in Sandeshkhali. A ramshackle building with the roof caving in, no tables or chairs, it was in awful shape.

When I entered the room and met with these girls, I fell silent. I felt

utterly grief-stricken. I couldn't ask them any questions. And these young girls — much younger than my daughter (Ajlai, who is completing her PhD this year) — were silent as well. But their eyes spoke. They had been subjected to a kind of misery that you and I cannot ever imagine. I started wondering, can you imagine a young girl from South 24-Parganas ending up in the Middle East, many parts of which have terrible wars raging? How do they cope with this? What sense do they make of it? What future, if any, do they envision? And thus Shabnam of this novel was born in my mind.

And how was war correspondent Tejo born? She is fascinating!

Now Tejaswini Ray (Tejo) is again a Bengali woman. She is raised abroad (New York), has gone to the best of universities (Columbia), is self-confident. The reason she becomes a journalist is not simply because it is a profession, but because she sees a connection between her and the awful state that the world is in today.

As you know once you've read the novel, there is a very real thread that connects the two women who are poles apart. It is this chance encounter in the theatre of death that, for me, has been the propelling force for this novel.

This is such an international story, from New York to Iraq to Kuwait to India... why did you decide to write it in Bengali and not English?

This is a question that my agent asked as well. It's a very difficult question for me to answer. Because the choice of language for me is not a strategic choice. I never ask myself, 'Is this a story that should be written in English or in Bangla?' Or questions such as, 'What sort of audiences would most likely be drawn to this?' I am

drawn by a kind of instinct that is hard to explain. When I went to Sandeshkhali, the words, the kind of phrases that were coming to my mind, the kind of texture of the novel that manifested itself to me was Bangla. Could it have been written in English? Of course. It's just that my instinctive response to the story that I thought of was in Bangla.

Just as well. Because contemporary Bengali literature hardly seems to venture outside of Bengal...

You are absolutely right. The Bangla sahitya that we read is intensely parochial, is intensely about our own world, our own context and not beyond. Once in a while you'll have a North American NRI character who wanders in and out of the story. It is not important for me that you have foreigners inhabiting a novel for it to be in any way global. What is important is a cosmopolitan sensibility pervading through the novel. A view of us connected with this world, sharing similar griefs, similar tragedies, similar triumphs, similar thoughts.

Unfortunately, Bangla sahitya — and I am saying this as a reader, not as a writer — in the last few decades, has not ventured out of its backyard.... It's a thought that's been at the back of my mind, that to be a successful novelist practising in Bangla, we also need to connect with not simply our own sensibilities but sensibilities from around the world.

Is one of the reasons for this domesticity in Bengali literature the dearth of Bengali equivalents for many modern English words? Like “suicide vest”. Or “satellite phone”. Or “beer”, to take some words from this book...

You know, we don't necessarily have to have exactly the Bengali

equivalent. In fact, searching for Bengali equivalents of every word in English or in other languages stultifies the language. So I don't think the limitation is in vocabulary.

This may sound slightly controversial but I am going to say it anyway because I believe in it, that language is an important tool in the arsenal of a writer, but it is not the most important. The most important is the mind of the writer. You may have tremendous facility in any language but if the mind is banal, you'll write banal stories.

How did you get your war reporting right? Reading this story it seems as if you have been an embedded journalist in Iraq yourself!

Pagol naki, ki kore jabo?! When I thought of this story, I had to do fairly meticulous research, reading the works of war correspondents from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan. I read a ton of books on the Iraq war, like, *Naked in Baghdad* by Anne Garrels; *Embedded: The Media at War in Iraq* by Bill Katovsky and Timothy Carlson; and *Reporting Iraq: An Oral History of the War by Journalists who Covered It*. I interviewed war correspondents in Britain and tried to imagine the reality of being in this war. It's not just the bombs exploding, but also what happens among the reporters in the (army) camp. The backbiting, being great friends one moment but becoming incredibly competitive as soon as there's a sniff of a story, sharing personal details that they would never do in peaceful circumstances.

As you know, I love research. For my current novel, I need to understand DNA testing. So I spent three hours yesterday at KPC Hospital with two PhD students. It's fascinating, I tell you! There's drama at every step of blood testing.

Like The Japanese Wife, this story would lend itself well to cinema. Do you have anyone in mind to play the title characters?

(Laughs) No, actually, it does not. The setting of this novel is in dangerous terrain. So in terms of a real film project, it'll pose a few problems. Which is not to say it can't be shot in a location which is not Iraq. So, casting, hmm? I would say Kangana Ranaut and Deepika (Padukone). They could play either role.

What are you working on currently?

I am working on a contemporary novel set in Calcutta, but it's a very different milieu to Kalkatta (his last novel in English, 2015). It's again about certain parts of the city which I don't think are commonly dealt with in our fiction. I would like to see it as a sort of rollicking story, a dark comedy but also raising some philosophical questions.

And the one after that?

Well, I am drawn to historical fiction as you know, I've written four of them (The Opium Clerk, The Miniaturist, Racists and The Yellow Emperor's Cure), and now I'm drawn to a fifth. For me the draw of history is perennial, I think I am a failed historian... should have studied history in college!

What are you reading, in English and Bengali?

I am reading a lot for my writing. But one of the books that I am reading which is not related to my writing is Jerusalem: The Biography by Simon Sebag Montefiore. It's a big, fat book on the history of Jerusalem. It's fascinating to read, obviously because Jerusalem is a fascinating city. The reason I am reading is also

because Susmita and I plan to be in Jerusalem this summer.

Do you binge-watch shows on Netflix or Amazon Prime?

I don't. Let's put it this way, I am actually addicted to my writing. I write 10 to 12 hours every day, and Susmita has to drag me out of my desk just to go for a walk to the Lakes (laughs). So, no, I don't binge-watch, I binge-write (laughs out loud).