

BOOKS

Book Review: An Enchanting Journey Through Kolkata, to Find 'Sarojini's Mother'

Kunal Basu's mingles the city's colonial past with the current era.



Photo: Pixabay

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Like a master weaver who weaves a web of motifs against the delicate background of a Dakkai Jamdani, Kunal Basu is

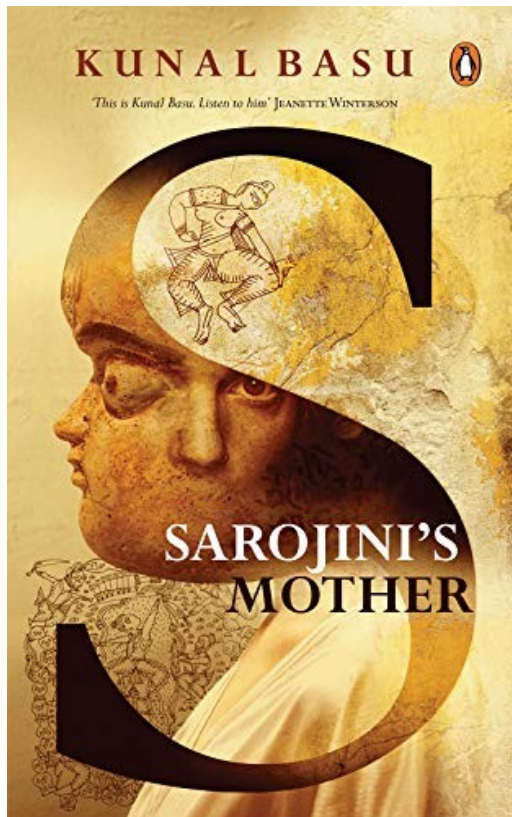
a master spinner of stories. He has used Sarojini – the eponymous heroine of his book *Sarojini's Mother* – as a recurring motif against the background of his favourite city, Kolkata.

‘Jamdani’ refers to a floral motif or more precisely, in Persian, a vase of flowers.

Using his characters like exotic flowers, or even just roadside ones, Basu places them against the deftly textured world that mingles the city’s colonial past with the current era. The plot itself seems like a vase, that he distributes very deftly from one table to another, with Sarojini hovering like a tender lotus bud waiting for a bee.

Sarojini herself prefers to tell us early on that her name means: “Someone born in a lotus lake. It’s the most heavenly sight in the world, I’ve been told.” That, we might sigh, is so very Jamdani, lotus blooms floating against the transparent sheen of water.

We also get a brief look into the life and times of the other Sarojini – of the freedom movement fame, the poetess Sarojini Naidu – and a few lines of verse that Saz (as the protagonist calls herself) manages to recite.



Kunal Basu
Sarojini's Mother
Penguin India, 2020

Sarojini herself has a double persona. She's 27 years old and has returned to find the traces of an almost forgotten past. She calls herself "Saz" because during the time of the "troubles" that rocked Kolkata, she was an abandoned baby who was illicitly adopted by a hippie mother named Lucy, taken to England and bought up like an English child. Does Sarojini/Saz represent the city's own fractured identity? After all, Kolkata was the earliest and perhaps most

successful of Indian cities to don the garb and graces, not to mention the architecture and gardens, of the early Nabobs and adventurers, before the dull routine of the Raj was imposed upon the citizenry.

As Basu shifts her from one vase to another, Sarojini dons her sarees or designer wear with an almost effortless ease and manages to attract a number of interesting men in the process – from a Japanese student she teaches English to in her spare time, to her guide and philosopher Chiru who is the storyteller, and the rather snake-like wannabe saviour and lawyer named

Basu divides his time between Oxford and Kolkata, and we get a sense of deep nostalgia as he revisits the favourite places of his youth in the character of Chiru Sen. Those who

recall the heady days of Sudder Street, which was the rendezvous of choice for hippies hitting the nirvana trail to Kathmandu and other such destinations with their tie-dyed T-shirts and guitars. There are also interesting asides on what to drink – coffee, of course – and what to expect when eating at the classier Kolkata Clubs, where the rigours of being properly clad are still in force.

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Very fortuitously, Chiru Sen is a tour guide with an Elvis Presley fixation that allows him to moonlight with a trio of musical friends. He can perform the old Presley favourites with an audio back-up because unlike his looks and his costumes, he doesn't have the Presley larynx, as we are told, to go with his personality. With an elderly mother who lives in one of those ancient homes for which old world Kolkata was famous, when it used to be Calcutta, and which are so vividly etched in our imaginary DNA by Satyajit Ray, Chiru is comfortable in his mansion.

His mother is a nurse and a widow, not averse to welcoming Saz into her home as a part-time guest. She is armed, we are told, with a bottle of Waterbury's Compound – that marvellously alcohol-imbued tonic that used to be in every granny's repertoire of remedies. Elvis, as he likes to call himself, is entrusted by a bookie named Suleiman – who marshals the race course – with the safe passage of Sarojini through her journey of hope. She is trying to find her birth mother, since Lucy did not feel obliged to enlighten her on such irrelevant details before she lapsed into a coma and left Sarojini with just a few clues.

Clutching these few fragments from her past, Saz and Elvis

trawl through the city – from the slums to Park Street – with seemingly endless amounts of money on Saz’s part and limitless patience from Elvis-Chiru. He takes her for rides on a tram, to the museum, to the planetarium where there is a partial epiphany, to hospitals and other more morbid areas, having found in true Bollywood style, not one but two candidates for a possible maternal match.



Kunal Basu. Photo courtesy kunalbasu.com

Needless to say, they are from two different ends of the social spectrum – Jamuna from the slum, who has an extraordinary can-do attitude and is even something of a feminist despite having a husband in jail and two troubled boys; and Urvashi who runs a boutique. Urvashi, we are told in a warning aside, is like a dolphin, smilingly winsome at times and inclined to bite at others.

Monty, or Manish Sharma is Urvashi’s social accessory and lawyer. Unlike the others, he realises that getting Saz to be on his side long before it comes to testing the DNA of the three woman is far more important than finding the truth.

While introducing a collection of his short stories in 2016, *Thrills, Chills and Frills*, Basu uses a quote from Lord Byron, “A little tumult, now and then, is an agreeable

quickener of sensation; such as a revolution, a battle, or an adventure of any lively description.” Basu then goes on to explain, “Taking away the humdrum of life but imbuing it with contemporariness is the primary objective of this book. While we all need to move away from the humdrum monotony of daily life, yet, by no means, should we immerse ourselves totally in a dream world. The world around us is vibrant and full of stories.”

Sarojini – with or without a mother – is a testament to that promise. Kunal Basu enchants.

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