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### A rich inheritance

SWATI DAFTUAR

 Kunal Basu. Photo: Special Arrangement

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The Hindu

*We are all products of the books we read and he has been particularly lucky in this regard, says Kunal Basu. He opens up to Swati Daftuar on his latest novel, **The Yellow Emperor's Cure**, to be published this week, and his evolution as a writer.*

*Kunal Basu's first two novels, **The Opium Clerk** and **The Miniaturist**, were both set in different Asian contexts. His third, **Racists**, was set in Victorian-era Africa. His books have no geographical boundaries, and his words are enough to carry the readers across any part of the world. This time, the master of historical fiction is back with **The Yellow Emperor's Cure**. Perhaps his most ambitious novel, it deals with a culture and time period that is exotic and tantalising, unfamiliar and attractive, where you come across philandering surgeons and deadly diseases, alluring women and a web of mysteries that keep you hooked. Extracts from a conversation...*

#### What germ of an idea gave birth to this particular story?

Novels are born in unlikely places. Several years ago, I had visited a museum of traditional Chinese medicine in Beijing. No local or foreign visitor was in sight, and I was left to roam the halls all by myself. Fortunately, the glass cases holding the exhibits had English labels, and I spent a bewildering hour browsing around the 'remedies' for every imaginable disease on earth. Fans whirred and the smell of disinfectants was overpowering. Dead and disembowelled animals were displayed prominently among giant mushrooms, octopus and coral. Despite the growing influence of Chinese medicine in the West, the setting surprised me by its alienness and made me wonder how it would've appeared to early European visitors. Among museum publications, I found a solitary English volume: **The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine**, by the German-American historian Ilza Veith, published in 1949. It was, as I came to learn later, the first foreign translation of the oldest medical book in the world. And then, quite suddenly, I glimpsed a European doctor in my mind's eye — in the late 1900s perhaps — wandering bemusedly in Peking in search of a Chinese remedy for syphilis, a disease that had ravaged the world for centuries.

As the story of a young European doctor visiting China to find a cure for syphilis started to take shape in my mind at the museum, I thought about the usual things: motive, character and setting. Why would he have come to China unless he was tempted by a strong suspicion of an Eastern cure? Might he have been a patient himself, or struck somehow by the tragedy of syphilis? Who could've helped him meet a Chinese master? I imagined him living in Peking's Summer Palace which was then the residence of the Empress Dowager, her court and her guests. Foreign visitors had frequently described it as the most romantic spot in all of China. He'd receive his education there in a private pavilion from his teacher — a young Chinese woman dressed in a peasants' smock. In the beginning, they'd argue over Chinese and Western views of health and sickness, then the student would submit to his teacher as she taught him to read the 13 pulse beats, and the 12 channels that carry yin and yang. She'd trace the channels on her body with her fingertip, then challenge him to do the same. As their lessons advanced, he'd become possessed by her; the mystery of his teacher would surmount the mystery of syphilis.

*Voilà!* The story was born, and I dashed back to my hotel to madly scribble down the plot.

#### All your books are historical fictions and this particular one has a setting that is both exotic and compelling, but also a distant world, both in terms of space and time. How was it, writing about this particular period and space in history?

Although it wasn't fundamentally dissimilar to writing about Mughals in the 16 century or the opium trade in the 19, the added dimension with this novel was seeing the story from both European and Chinese perspectives. There was mutual distrust about almost everything — medicine, politics, social mores. Yet there were intriguing trysts as well. I have always felt drawn towards "insiders" and "outsiders". In parts of this novel, the Europeans are the insiders, the Chinese the aliens; and in other parts their roles are reversed. The hermetic world of Peking's foreign legation with its tea parties, tennis matches and secret affairs was fascinating to write about, just as the Chinese world of palace intrigues, eunuchs, and of course, the Boxer Rebellion. Being neither Chinese nor European, I felt wonderfully liberated, flitting from one set of costumes to another.

#### You've created a protagonist that enters an outside world, an alien world that he tries to unravel and understand. Tell us a little about him?

Antonio Maria is the quintessential alpha-male: talented, arrogant, and an incorrigible playboy. Raised by a single father, he's a "man's man" for whom love equates to conquest. Self-assured as he is, he gets the shock of his life when he discovers his beloved father is dying of syphilis. While in China, he doesn't suffer as much from culture shock as he does when his Western medical views are challenged. The puzzle of China takes on a very different shape when he encounters Fumi, and begins to question everything about his life that he knew before to be true.

## **You've set the book during the Boxer Rebellion. What was it about this particular period in history that drew you to it?**

The aftermath of the opium wars had brought a record number of Western merchants and missionaries to China, but her hurt pride erupted in the Boxer Rebellion directed against all foreigners. A ragtag army of villagers advanced onto Peking to liberate China from the residents of Little Europe, the foreign legation. Unlike our own “freedom movement”, it was a peasant rebellion, misguided and brutal, but naive. My Portuguese doctor would be caught up in the rising tensions and intrigues that plagued the international community, threatening to distract him from his grand ambition. Church burnings and the torture of Christian converts would form the backdrop to his daily lessons, ending in a siege trapping student and teacher inside the Summer Palace.

The Boxer Rebellion was symptomatic of the “outsider-insider” syndrome. In that sense it served to underline a key leitmotif of the novel. Also, I've always been excited by the prospect of letting loose my characters in historically turbulent times. A wider climax sharpens the choices we make as individuals. I didn't wish my protagonist to sail through calm waters, testing him instead with dangers to reveal him fully to me and to my readers.

## **There is of course a parallel that can be drawn between the disease ailing Antonio's father, syphilis and the current pandemic of HIV/AIDS. Was this deliberate?**

The period in which the novel is set suggested the disease. There was nothing like the horror of syphilis that had been a universal scourge and the most shameful of taboos since the 15 century. Columbus was blamed for importing it from the New World; Charles VIII for spreading it throughout Europe with his mercenaries, and God for deigning such a fitting punishment for “sinners”. It gave birth to the most audacious feats of quackery as doctors toiled unsuccessfully to treat their patients. By the late 19 century, syphilology had surpassed tuberculosis and insanity as the leading topic of medical research.

The parallel between syphilis and HIV/AIDS is unmistakable: similarity in their cause, in the suffering and despair; the taboos, and the search for a miracle cure. A great many projects in human civilisation have been guided by threats to bodily survival. I did not wish to dwell on this similarity with a firm authorial hand, but do hope that it emerges with the unfolding of the plot. Connections such as these might help to bring the time and place of the novel closer to the reader.

## **How would you describe your own growth and change as a writer from *The Opium Clerk* till now?**

The funny thing with growth is that the person growing doesn't realise it. It is the observer who does. My four novels are set in different times and places, warranting a constant need to rediscover myself. It has fed my excitement for research and kept me away from a tested formula. I've almost had to become a different author with each book. Writing these novels must've changed me too as a person. Hopefully, the pigment has deepened within...

## **Could you tell us about the authors you read? Any particular ones that have become inspirations?**

I have grown up with a staple of classics — in Bengali, and world literature through English translations. Rabindranath, Bankimchandra, Saratchandra, Manik Bandyopadhyay, alongside Dickens, Dostoevsky, Zola, Tolstoy, Balzac....the list is endless. My greatest inheritance is my parent's library in Kolkata, which alone helps me to preserve my own centre of gravity. It is hugely inspirational to hold the first edition of a classic in my hand. In a way we are products of the books that we've read, and I'd like to believe I'm a product of several moth-eaten volumes on the verge of falling apart at their spines.

I read several contemporary authors with admiration, including John Coetzee, Michael Ondaatje, Mario Vargas Llosa, Orhan Pamuk. And Marquez, of course — the only one who can describe the death of a loved character in a way nothing short of celebratory!

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