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Book review: The yellow emperor's cure by Kunal Basu

Unravelling a mystery stretching from the opium fields of India to the court of the Yellow Emperor.



Geeta Doctor

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Each time Kunal Basu uncorks his magician's bottle of historical memory and desire, he brings forth a genie of such ambitious powers that the reader is left overwhelmed and not a little puzzled by its effects. In his latest book, set for the most part in China, just before the Boxer Rebellion of the late 19th century, Basu's story-telling skills find a subject that has all the gorgeous suffocating quality that an addict might experience in the brocaded chambers of the ancient Summer Palace of the Chinese capital. It's a citadel of mystery and oriental opulence at the centre of which presides the Empress Ci-xi, the Last Empress of the Quing dynasty celebrated in a book by the once hugely popular American novelist Pearl S. Buck. Buck was a child of missionary parents and for all her luminous descriptions of the plight of the Chinese peasants there is in her account a need to lecture and pontificate.

Some historians maintain that the sacking of the Summer Palace during the Opium Wars by the ruthless Lord Elgin was an outrage that has informed the Chinese response to the West ever since. It's as if a Bernardo Bertolucci had joined hands with Buck to collaborate on both the decadence and the deadly will to survive that are just two aspects of the Chinese puzzle.



The seeds of the Chinese scourge were of course planted in the opium fields of India. Once again, Basu follows its trail linking his earlier book *The Opium Clerk* and the dank imperial warehouses in British India to Macau and China, by way of Lisbon, this time where his hero, Antonio Henriques Maria, is first glimpsed.

Is it just the accident of a name, or do we imagine that the Portuguese Antonio is a shoo-in for the masked cape and caballero-wielding Banderas, who has only to narrow his heavy-lidded eyes to have the choicest young women falling into his arms? No matter. Suffice to say that this Antonio is a man with a scalpel in his hands, a western educated doctor who leaves for the Yellow Emperor's Court with a mission. He is looking for a cure for the Portuguese pox, as the Chinese call it, the Canton Rash as others do, or syphilis as more mundane souls know of it, which may well lie in the arcane signs and symbols contained in a Chinese manual of medicine.

It's entirely fortuitous of course that the one person, who might unlock these mysteries takes the form of a young woman named Fumi, an apprentice doctor, who not only uses her body to chart the channels of energy coursing through the Chinese system of defining both health and disease, but in the delicate acrobatics of love-making defined in Chinese by terms such as 'the Butterfly' and 'the Pigeon'. So much more erotic, one might note, than the mortar and pestle analogies resorted to by Indian manuals on the subject.

Basu's account is like that of a gilded butterfly fluttering in the Yellow Emperor's cage of curiosities. One more pipe of opium, please, Kunal.

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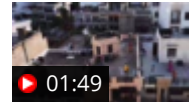
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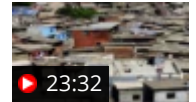
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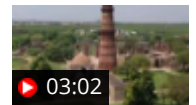
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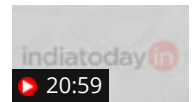


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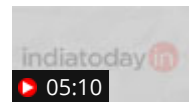


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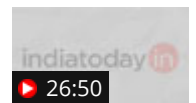
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