



INTERVIEW

“Cosmopolitan Sensibility... the Best Way to Describe Me”: An Interview with Kunal Basu

Interview by

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Kunal Basu, the much acclaimed Indian author of *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* (2011) and *Kalktta* (2015), writes fiction in both English and Bengali. His novel *Racists* had been shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award, 2007 and his novel *Rabi Shankar* won the Anandolok Puroskar in 2017. He is a University Reader in Marketing at Said Business School, University of Oxford and currently resides in Oxford and Kolkata.

* This interview was sent to this journal before 14.06.2019.

This interview was conducted on a beautiful Sunday afternoon in December 2018 at Kunal Basu's Lake Road residence in South Kolkata. Basu delves into a large number of topics pertaining to his novels and the influences that shaped him as a novelist; the genres he has written in and his bilingual status as an author; his subject position in transnational framework and how he negotiates transnationality.

Question: *How would you like to describe Kunal Basu, the person, not the novelist? What were the influences that played a major role in the making of Kunal Basu, the novelist?*

Kunal Basu: I am a Kolkata boy, I grew up in Kolkata in a house full of books, because my father was a publisher and my mother was a highly acclaimed writer in Bangla, Chhabi Basu, my parent's friends were writers, poets, filmmakers, dramatists, politicians, and my parents were both from the left milieu, the IPTA movement. As a consequence, I grew up in the hothouse of art and culture as it was.

My parents were early influences. They instilled in me a love of reading. I grew up in a bookish family. So there were conversations about books, arguments about books. Also there were other influences as well as I was growing up, I grew up in a political family, so there was a thread of ideological notion in my mind. I went to study in Jadavpur University in the 1970s, which was again the hothouse of politics of the time. Although I never read English in college, Ranajoy Karlekar, who was a very popular teacher of English in Jadavpur, was a very inspirational person for me. Academically, I was very far from it, but my heart really lay in the arts and I had strayed by mistake over to the sciences and then to engineering. There were other senior students, *dadas*, with whom I got involved in the literary society in Jadavpur, the film club and so forth. Mrinal Sen was somebody who I associated with; I was a child actor and had acted in two of his films. There were two *cha er dokan* (tea-shop), *Sutripti* and *La Cafe*, these two places, particularly on Sunday mornings was a dabbling spot for writers, poets, filmmakers, dramatists, the culture milieu of Kolkata so to speak. They were places where people would vent their anguish and grouse and express disaffection with the world and I would go from time to time and absorb all of that. Filmmakers Barin *kaka* (Saha) was a frequent visitor, Subhas Mukhopadhyay, the poet, Satyajit Ray,

Radharaman Mitra, so my circulation through eminent cultural personalities and practitioners, as I was growing up through school and college in many ways shaped the kind of person I have become. So those are the kinds of influences I have grown up with. Impersonal influences were many. These were personal influences. Impersonal influences were from books, from cinemas, from theatre and so forth.

Q: *You live in UK as well as in Kolkata. How far do you consider yourself as a transnational?*

KB: You know, terminologies are less important to me, largely because they carry meaning. Cosmopolitan sensibility, I think perhaps the best way to describe me in this regard. The cosmopolitan sensibility actually grew out of the household that I was raised in. *Biswanagorikotto, ei biswanagorikotto amar kachhe khub joruri* (the ideals of global citizenship is very crucial to me). Transnational is a demographic description. It perhaps is more valid for people who are NRIs, I don't consider myself to be a NRI, I am a resident of this world. But the diverse streams of sensibilities from different cultures have somehow and I don't quite understand how, have blended within me.

So you are more transcultural in that sense?

Trans means going beyond, from one culture to another, I am more an assimilator; it's as if these different streams have found a point of convergence in me.

An engineering student, a management professor, and a writer by passion - how do you do justice to each of these roles?

A choice of a career at least in the time when I was growing up in the 1970s was not really a volitional thing. I grew up in a middle-class Bengali household, where I had to get a job. This was the time in the 1970s of extremely high levels of educated unemployment in Bengal. When I was studying engineering, a large number of my fellow students had no interest in engineering but they were studying engineering for similar reasons. We used to say it in Jadavpur University, the most culturally active part of Jadavpur was the engineering department, not the arts faculty. Because these were all frustrated souls like us, who did not study Shakespeare in class and therefore they performed Shakespeare in plays. And

which is why I said that the real me was the cultural person but studies and career flew along the lines society dictated.

Right now is it tough to balance between them?

No I don't have to balance any more. I chose early retirement from Oxford ten years before I was due to retire. So now I have only a teaching post in Oxford. And my teaching is very light. But no I haven't found it to be difficult because two reasons, one, is I have consciously not tried to think about this decision, this junction. You see everything happens in your mind. I have kept these completely separate and my academic writing is a part of my job which I have done, I have made tenure at McGill, at Oxford, published at the highest levels but that's a separate part of my life. The second is, I am a very stubborn person, so I have written eleven books in the last eighteen years and if I work with my mind to it I will write.

You used to write poetry in Jadavpur.

In the 1970s, a significant stepping stone to a cultural path would be through poetry. So I wrote really bad poetry I think in Bangla, but read a lot of poetry which in a way has I think influenced my writing sensibilities.

You also write novel and short story. What is your favourite genre among novel, short story and poetry and why?

There is no favourite genre. I don't write poetry on an ongoing basis. I write poetry sporadically, but I do write fiction every day of the year. Either read or write fiction every day of the year. I mostly write novels but which is not to say that I am partial towards novels from short stories. It depends upon what is really top of the mind at that moment. What I am most moved to write at the moment. And it turns out that I would be mostly moved to write novels.

You are one of the very few bilingual authors that we have in India right now. Why did you choose to write in both languages?

Look, *ami bangali, ingrej bangali noi* (I am a Bengali, not an anglicised Bengali) and I grew up in a Bengali milieu. My first language in school was Bangla. My first published writings, inconsequential as they might be, were in Bangla. I have always considered myself to be very proudly to belong to that milieu of Bengalis who have grown up truly bilingual. The real bilingual are the educated Bangalis.

Because, for the educated Bangalis the two cultural streams flow within the individual. And we can jump from one to the other without any difficulties. Now the point came when I thought that I have been saying these things but I have not really ever written a full-length novel in Bangla. In fact, the only person who has written a full length novel in English and full length novels in Bangla is Bankimchandra (Chattopadhyay) in the 19th century. So when I thought of the story of *Rabi Shankar*, I said, well this warrants a novel in Bangla. And once I had written that, the seduction of Bangla started growing on me. Because I was born here and I have always been in touch with Bangla, I kept on reading in Bangla; we speak Bangla at home, so I have written four novels in Bangla, the fourth I have just finished which will be published next year.

There is often a debate regarding the quality and quantity of literary work produced by the vernacular writers and the writers writing solely in English in India. Being a bilingual author, what is your take on this?

It is hard to make those judgements. In every genre, in every stream, there is good writing and bad writing. Now the false argument is when you take an example of good piece of writing in one language and compare it to the bad piece of writing in another language. So pitting Bangla against English or English against Bangla, is a cheap trick. You see when we were growing up; I didn't have to choose between (Charles) Dickens and Bibhutibhusan (Bandopadhyay). Why would I choose? And the whole thing in being a cosmopolitan is the entire world languages of literature are mine. So (Leo) Tolstoy is as much mine as is (Emile) Zola as is Manik Bandopadhyay. It's only in recent times that our minds have shrunk. And one of the shrinkage in the domain of discourse about literature in this part of the world is, if Bengali writers are getting their due compared to people who write in English, which is better and things of that nature. For me, this is irrelevant discourse.

Does the work of your contemporaries have any impact on your work or on your research undertaken before writing a novel? Any contemporary Indian English writer whose work has an impact on your research?

Contemporary non-fiction has an influence on me. I am a meticulous researcher. So whatever I research, even if it's a contemporary topic, I would read substantially to educate myself. I will give you an example from my third Bangla novel,

Tejoswini o Shabnam, its set in the domain of the Iraq war. Now from journalistic sources, we all understand a bit about the Iraq war, we watch it on television. But I needed more than that to write a novel. I needed to understand how journalists who participated in that war to cover it, what did they make of the conflict, what was their psychology, why did they go back taking immense personal risk, what effect did it have on them and their families? So I read substantially, there were memoirs written by journalists who had covered the war and so on and so forth. So did they have an influence? Yes, in terms of educating me, in terms of alerting me as to what I should be looking at. Writers, I won't use the word influence but there are some writers that I feel inspired to read. Their writing has very little resemblance to my writing, I mean Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and how could you not be inspired reading Marquez? Is my writing like him? No. I make no effort to. John Coetzee is a favourite writer of mine; Michael Ondaatje's writing inspires me in some ways for the kind of lyricism that he engages in. I wouldn't use these as influences but inspirations. And I am inspired to read good writing.

No. There are one or two books that I have found interesting. When *The God of Small Things* came out, I read the novel, although the writing of the novel is not particularly to my taste, it may be to the taste of others, I found the story engrossing.

A writer's personal experiences and thoughts are often reflected in their works. So how much of Kunal Basu, the person, do we find in the novels you write?

I think 100% and 0%. Let me explain both the answers, the 0% is easier to answer. You see there are some writers whose writing is basically camouflaged autobiography. So essentially, the characters that they know, the situations that they have experienced, are written up as fiction. I call this surface autobiography. In my writing there is very little surface autobiography. People have asked me the question, is there any character in your novel that resembles you? Fair question. The only one I can reasonably think about is a character called Mahim in my first novel, *The Opium Clerk*. Now in terms of deep autobiography, every writer's work is an autobiography, because it's a reflection of his/her consciousness. So my consciousness, which is a result of my journey through life, it's manifested in my writing, it has to be. I don't think there is a central theme, but empathy emerges as an important theme in my writing. And the reason I empathise is

because my journey through life makes me an empathetic person. And therefore in that sense its 100% autobiographical. But in terms of the narrative, in terms of characters, in terms of surface autobiography, there is almost nothing.

How do you get the story and inspiration for your novels?

This is a most complex question to answer because for me the origin of novel or any piece of fictional work is the story. But where stories come from is the most difficult thing because they are formed at a subconscious level and then they gradually filter up in your mind. So I would say stories are result of day-dreaming. I will give you a concrete example which explains this process, but you can never completely describe the process. So several years ago, I was in Beijing to give an academic talk. One of my ex-students, she was the Director of the School for Public Health, attached to the largest hospital for traditional Chinese medicine, she invited me for lunch and I went and sat down for lunch, lots of fellow professors were there and then they said, upstairs we have a museum for traditional Chinese medicine, are you interested in seeing that? I love museums, I said yeah, so they took me up and put on the lights, there was dust everywhere, they left me and they all disappeared. So I was left alone to walk in that museum. I was walking through the museum and these glass cases inside which there were these strange things, the head of a deer, dead snakes, and roots of trees, which are all used as ingredients of Chinese medicine. So I was walking around and thinking, why am I so full of wonder looking at these things? Because in the 21st century we know about Chinese medicine. Then I said, look, if I feel so struck by this, how somebody from the 19th century would feel if they came to Beijing and they were seeing this. I was still walking and saying, well, what if a Western doctor comes here and is walking around and is seeing these things, he would be really struck, right? Then I said that, why would a Western doctor come here in the 19th century? Well, what if he was here to find the cure for a disease for which there was no cure in the West. Okay, that makes sense. Now what would that disease be? Syphilis! For three hundred years there was no cure for syphilis and people were dying in the West. So maybe a European doctor comes to China to find a cure for syphilis and I had the starting point of my story. Immediately dashed back to my hotel, cancelled all other appointments and started writing down the plot of the novel. It's a real situation where a story is born.

We find that the contemporary Indian-English fiction scenario mostly deals with the affluent, tech-savvy, metro-living youth or the NRIs. Being a part of this literary milieu, was your decision to shift to topics widely different from the abovementioned, taken consciously?

No, I never look at the world and say I have to be like this or I have to be different from this. I do not benchmark myself with respect to the world. I do what I please and the result may be good or the result may not be good. So definitely it's not conscious. I am bored by the world that I know; I don't want to write about the world that I know. I am excited by the unfamiliar. A lot of people are really comfortable when they write about the familiar. So if you are Indian writers of English fiction, if they come from the upper classes, chances are they would be writing about the upper classes. If they are NRIs, they would be writing about NRIs. I get asked this question a lot that, I have lived away from India for thirty-five years, why don't I write a NRI fiction, the obvious comparison is Jhumpa Lahiri. Because I don't find NRI life to be interesting, I find it awfully boring actually.

So your historical novels can be interpreted as a kind of escape from the humdrum reality that you are experiencing?

Your work can be explained by anybody in any way. So can it be explained? Could be. Do I see it as that? Perhaps not. *The Opium Clerk* is not an escape from the Indian environment, historical novels are not escapes. First of all, there was a small debate sometime; people who write historical fiction are escaping from reality. Well, try saying that to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, if he was alive or try saying that to Saradindu Bandopadhyay, if he was alive. So writing historical fiction is not an escape from reality, it is a genre of fiction.

The contemporary Indian English novels dealing with the themes of displacement, alienation or nostalgic longing for homeland are often considered as "saleable" and "safe" options in the literary market. How do you perceive this phenomenon?

Well you know, if they are safe and saleable, those who want that, let them do. I have no qualms to that. There is no framework or rulebook in writing which says that you should do this, you shouldn't do that. If that's what you want to do, do it. I have not felt the pangs of a homeland because I have never left home. Again as I said, life is lived in the mind, not simply in your physical circumstances. So Susmita

(Kunal's wife) and I have been away from India for substantial periods of time, but we believe that the fiction that we have created for ourselves is that we are travellers and because we have been travelling for so long, our suitcases are a bit heavy. But our minds are everywhere that we are fascinated by, places that we have visited, and things that intrigue us. So I don't have this NRI angst. I am not saying these are bad impulses, but I am no Hanif Qureshi, I am no Salman Rushdie. I am very much a Bangali with my feet here. But my mind for some very strange reason is everywhere.

There are no Indian characters or any reference to India in Racists. Even in The Yellow Emperor's Cure, except a few references to Goa, there is no Indian connection, something that is rarely observed in writers of Indian origin. So was this move to completely do away with any hint of Indianness, a deliberate strategy? Or your transnational status is responsible for such a standpoint?

No, it's because of the story. You see when I thought of the story of *Racists*, how can you bring an Indian connection? There was no race science conducted by the British or anybody in India in 19th century. The only Indian connection is, you know, in craniology they were looking at these measurements of skulls and there were some Indian skulls there as well. As in *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* the story did not demand a connection in India. So how could I bring it artificially?

Since the mid 20th century, literary works are interpreted and analysed based on some particular literary theory. As a writer, how do you react to this phenomenon of judging a text from the view-point of a literary theory?

I am completely bored by literary theory. There's this famous saying by (Jorge Luis) Borges, Borges said, God should not be asked to be a theologian. So I am not saying that I am God, but what I am saying is that creator is not necessarily the person who explains his/her work through literary theory. There are some writers who feel happy traversing those, certainly John Coetzee does, Milan Kundera does, to some extent Umberto Eco when he was alive did that and there are some other writers who feel they want to be in that domain. I don't feel particularly excited trying to locate my work, discuss my work, explain my work in the context of literary theory. Literary theories have validity of course, they have excitement and interest value to people who practice them. I am a practitioner of fiction. So my real excitement is towards making the fodder for literary theory.

What according to you constitutes the idea of the marginal or the minority, in the context of your novels? Why are you constantly depicting marginal characters in your novels? In your transnational life, do you have any feeling of being a minority? Any instance of racism that you have faced?

You see, life is lived in the margin. Basically the margin is more exciting than the core, in every society, in every time. The poor in many ways is the status quo, is what is being going on. I am not saying it's bad, it is what has been going on for a long period of time, where relationships are settled, where transactions are known. It is certainly possible to write about the core and people have. But in some ways the bubbling excitement happens in the margin. Either people are trying to break away from, upset the core or people are trying to join the core and there is urge and desire and thirst and they are failing to do so or people were questioning the centrality of other people or other thoughts. So characters that are at the margin tend out to be more exciting to write. So if you think about the opium enterprise in the 19th century, the most profitable business in the world. Who were at the core? The core was the imperial power that ran the business and controlled the business. Who were at the margin? People who actually ran the business or executed the business. Lascars, the ship captains, the clerks in the Auction Houses, the addicts. So these were the people who were actually populating the world and the core of which is the Auction House and the people who transact buying and selling of opium. So the margin in many ways reflects not simply itself but also the core. So I am drawn to that kind of dynamics.

Not personally. Again I don't see myself as an Indian living in England, or an Indian living in America or Canada, where we have lived. I don't have a minority syndrome etc. But to answer your question, am I drawn to characters in the margin as I go through life? Absolutely. So for example, when I go to a literary festival, my eyes are drawn to, my mind is drawn to people who actually don't care for what's happening on stage. They are not interested in literary festival at all. But their livelihood comes from that. So we think it's very important that I go and present my work and other people appreciate my work. The people who are organising it don't have any interest or clue, for me those are the real people. And my mind is constantly drawn towards them. I want to know their stories.

Personally no. Could happen when I go back this time. You see, it could have happened in Britain which is a deeply racist society. But if you are an academic in Oxford, people don't tend to consider your race very significantly.

Was the humane depiction of the marginal community in your novels done consciously, because often that part is missing in many contemporary literary works, where they are merely depicted as stereotypes?

Yeah, absolutely. If you write a novel, how can you not have a humane face? A novel is not a conceptual treatment. You couldn't just say, that there are so many clerks and write a treatise about clerks, you have to give it a life, describe the person, describe the relationship. If they don't jump out as humans on from the pages of a novel why the reader would read it?

Your novels could be a perfect case study for "minority studies", be it ethnic, racial, religious or sexual minority. Does this exploration of minority issues and bringing them to the forefront hold any special significance in the present scenario of intolerance and hate-crime against the minority?

Again, not consciously so. My approach into a big piece of fiction is not thematically driven. So I would never say now is the climate of deep intolerance in Indian society, let me write a novel about intolerance. My starting point is always a story, a human story about people, situation, circumstances, a peculiar incident, and things like that. Now having said that, because I live in this world, these themes also live within me. So it is possible that when I think of a story, some of these themes that bother me or excite me or agitate me also find their way into the narrative.

Regarding Kalkatta, I had a strange feeling, the cover is not smooth, and it's something rugged, I can feel, I had a kind of uncanny feelings when I took it in my hand. Have you noticed it? Is it a conscious attempt?

It is Pinaki's jacket, so Pinaki (De) would be in a better position to answer that. But the theme of a man and a canine is something that manifests in the novel and I have spoken to Pinaki about it but the work is his, it's not mine. And the notion in that juxtaposition of the man and the canine is, you see there are two parts of it. Imagine yourself walking down the street at 12 o'clock at night here. It's all dark, the shops are closed, the house lights are off, and you see a pack of dogs. So you

are feeling a bit nervous, will it charge at me? Will it bite me? The dog is also feeling nervous. Will you pick up a piece of rock and hit it? So the relationship between parts of our society is shrouded in this mutual anxiety and fear of each other. This is the centre and the periphery. The centre is as much afraid of the periphery as the periphery is afraid of the centre. And it plays out to the life of Jamshed Alam. And therefore this juxtaposition. And I have said as much in that book too, we think this is Kolkata, it's very genteel. Are we the centre or are we the periphery? If you think about it, we could be the periphery and Zakaria Street, Kidderpore, Ekbalpur can be the centre. 55% of Kolkata's population is non-Bengali. So people think it's a Bengali city. It's not. And there is a disturbing relationship at times.

Some of your novels toy with the idea of social justice- the injustice meted out to the marginalised in Kalkatta, or the racial minority in Racists or the queer in The Miniaturist. How relevant is the concept of a socialist society or social justice in the present scenario? Is writing a form of social activism for you?

Social justice is very important to me. Don't misconstrue this to saying that I am saying social justice as a theme is important, so I need to write stories that manifest this thing. But is social justice important? Very important to me. Is empathy important? It's very important to me. Is tolerance important? Very important to me. It is the kind of person I am.

No, as I again said my methodology is not that. Here's the theme therefore I should write a story or a novel to reflect that theme. I have always believed politics is important to every human being but literature is not a handmaiden of politics, atleast for me.

Your novels celebrate the power of human love and compassion- in the love and bonding between Hiran and Douglas in The Opium Clerk, the nurse and the children in Racists, birdwomen and Bihzad in The Miniaturist, Jami and Pablo in Kalkatta. With respect to the current situation of intolerance all around, how significant is this celebration of pure, selfless human love?

Very important to me. You see, human compassion is singularly a quality which we are losing faster than the ozone layer in this world. For climate change, the ozone layer is depleting, very fast depleting is empathy and tolerance for each other. So I think which is why they manifest in my novels through characters, through

situations or circumstances and also empathy for people who are unlike you. Most often we feel empathetic towards people who are like us. The notion of *Racists* was really troubled by the notion of similarity. So when there is similarity, we feel very close to each other, we express empathy. But for somebody who is dissimilar to us, there is distrust and this distrust can even lead to prejudice. Why is similarity such a powerful driving force for us human beings? This is the question for which I don't have an answer. That in many ways is the driving for *Racists*.

Your novels have a very humane depiction of the lives, feelings and the hardships faced by the eunuch, bisexual or transgender in various time period and place- be it 16th century Moghul court, 19th century China or present day Kolkata. So can this be interpreted as your subtle support to the LGBTQ community?

I am not doing this as a conscious pattern. What I am saying is, see, if you read Edward Said, you will see that in the Islamic tradition in the Middle Ages onwards there has always been a very significant social role performed by the eunuchs and it was equally true in the Moghul court. So a eunuch as a character, Hilal Khan, suggested himself to me. And it seemed to be an appropriate character because here is this eunuch who is actually the friend, philosopher and guide to Bihzad, is a repository of wisdom. You don't see a eunuch depicted as a repository of wisdom. But because he has seen it all, he has seen the dark side of the court, he has seen a lot of life from many different perspectives, and he becomes in some sense Bihzad's friend. Likewise eunuchs were a significant part of Chinese court life and so they would naturally suggest themselves. It is right to see these patterns across novels and I think each of these, they have been marginalised in society, as much Hilal Khan as much as the two eunuchs in *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* and Rani in *Kalkatta*. But is that the driving force of my writing that I want to write about transgenders? No.

Your novels faithfully capture the extreme bigotry practised by the Western world towards the Eastern (as in The Opium Clerk and The Yellow Emperor's Cure) or the Black (in Racists), in the era when colonialism was at its peak. How much significance does this topic hold in present day?

It's significant to the extent because if we look at it, when *Racists* was published in the UK, it generated vitriolic response. I was a bit surprised by it. So it had absolutely polarised responses in the press. So *Guardian* says, the most important book

written about racial science. *The Financial Times* and *Telegraph* says, this is awful, why is he corrupting the minds of readers with outdated race theory. Remember the year it came out, 2006, was the year of riots in Europe, in France, in England and in other places, which meant that racism wasn't dead. But there was a tendency among certain sections of the Western world to say, oh you know we have gone beyond racism, racism doesn't exist, and it's something of the past. These prejudices may have originated during colonial times, but do we see them manifested in society in different formats? Absolutely. Their impact on the psyche of present day citizenry in the Western world, the white world, is very prevalent.

Your male protagonists- Hiran, Jami or Bihzad, has to face a lot of turbulences in life and their fate is ultimately sealed by their circumstances. In your personal life, how much of a believer are you in the concept of predestined fate?

In personal life, I am not. In personal life, I am ambivalent because who knows where this journey ends and where this journey goes? Some of it is within the control of the actors; some of it is not within the control of the actors because there are so many other forces, which are not within my control. So perhaps through Hiran, through Jami, through Bihzad, I am also trying to see the manifestation of the human spirit under conditions where things are not really particularly favourable to these human beings. I was asked this question, giving a talk in Mangalore- why should Jami have to die? I said, it's a piece of fiction so it could have many alternative endings. One ending for this novel could have been that Jami takes the offer to go to Dubai and he goes to Dubai, end of story. So he forgets Pablo, he forgets the life here and he goes to Dubai. Not satisfactory to me because then it becomes professedly a story about escape. I could have Jami marry Mandira, interfaith marriage. Unsatisfactory ending from my perspective. So in many ways, Jami, who has made his life in Kolkata and has wanted to be in Kolkata becomes a *pucca Kalkattawallah*, more so in death than he was in life. So this is the way I have seen it. Could it be seen in other ways? Yes it could be. So it's not predestined in that sense, it's not in a Greek tragedy sense. But perhaps to show, to indicate that in any given environment these myriads of forces and human intention is trying to manifest through those.

There have been some indeed strong female characters in your novels like Ammi in Kalkatta, Zuleikha and the birdwomen in The Miniaturist. Was it partly due to the influence of growing up under a feminist mother (Chhabi Basu)?

Yes, absolutely I think. And also my feminist father, fathers can be feminist too. And I have been very lucky to have been in the company of very strong women, Susmita (wife), our daughter Ajlai. Actually for me writing character of a woman is on the margin more exciting than writing a character of a man. For two reasons, first is again the unfamiliar is more attractive to me and secondly, I think in the historical sense, in many ways, women have been suppressed and marginalised within patriarchy. You see, people who are marginalised develop a finer sensibility to deal with life, because they have to survive. And so women are better survivors than men because they have had to develop defence strategies, coping mechanisms and as a result, their sensibilities.

While some of your female characters are feisty, some others are elusive, rather shrouded in mystery like Zuhra in The Miniaturist or Fumi in The Yellow Emperor's Cure. The reader never knows what makes the characters act the way they are, thus making them impermeable. As a writer, what attracts you to creating such characters?

Because I think I am drawn to not simply things that are concrete. Some things in life, some encounters in life, some persons in life, are very concrete. You know where somebody's coming from, you know what they want even if it is not like that. There are some characters incredibly well defined and therein lies their power. But I am also drawn to characters that are a bit nebulous, you see them and you don't see them, they are wispy, they are bit like smoke. And in those characters, the other characters see themselves, rather than those like them.

The protagonists in your English novels are all male. Whereas in Tejaswini o Shabnam the protagonists are female. Any specific reason for this? How would replacing the male protagonists with a female protagonist, change the course of the novel?

Who is a protagonist? There is one way of looking at protagonist is who has most amount of page time. But another way of looking at it is which are the characters which occupy central gravity. So if you look at *Kalkatta*, it's said in the voice of Jami, but there are several other central gravities which are not male. Is it the case that there is more male presence in my English novels? Perhaps so. Why I don't know.

I don't know because I am driven by stories. I haven't seen the story of *Kalkatta* as the story of a sex worker; I have seen it as a male sex worker story. If I had purely seen it as a sex worker story, then I could have made Jami as Jamila, there would be substantial differences, because female sex work and male sex work are completely different. So it would change the nature of the story dramatically. Have I considered these alternatives? No. Because for me, creating a story is not trying to find a puzzle. I will always write that novel which has an emotional connect with me. So I couldn't answer your question, what if this was that? What if there was a female artist in *The Miniaturist*? I don't know. I have never considered that possibility; the story didn't appear to me as so.

Many characters are enigmatic till the end or their life is not followed in its entirety e.g.

Fumi, Xu and Hiran. Any reason for this phenomenon?

Yeah, look at Shakespeare, a play which has many characters. Some characters are focal and then they recede, other characters become focal. Particularly if you are writing a novel on a large canvas, which is the nature of life. So some characters will be on the forefront, over a period of time may be their value in the context of the narrative will diminish and there will be other characters who will come and populate them. Hiran's story after the first two chapters is not interesting in itself. It's what happens to the enterprise of opium and who then are the driving forces where Douglas plays a role.

You are considered to be one of the foremost writers of historical fiction in post millennial Indian English literature. What was the reason for shifting to the contemporary era in Kalkatta?

No reason. You see my publisher, my agent in England had said number of times, why don't you write a contemporary novel set in Kolkata, because I am a Kolkata person. And I said I will only do so when I think of a story which keeps me awake at night, which I want to tell. And so it happened with *Kalkatta*. It is not the case that I am wedded to historical novels. If you think from *Kalkatta*, everything else that I have written is contemporary. So again because my mind wanders from place to place and from time to time, it is likely to grab a story from any of these domains, either a contemporary domain or from historical domain.

I think historical fiction is your forte. How do you deal with the ever mounding pressure of the tension between historical authenticity and fiction, which becomes a critical

point of analysis for the readers and critics alike? Historical novels also play an important role in generating people's interest in historical past, which often the current generation is not avidly aware of. How far do you consider your novels have been successful in getting back the younger generation to history books?

This is a very substantial methodology question. There is a level of historical validation that you absolutely have to ensure. So there are certain kinds of historical facts that we know, that you can't transgress as a writer and I have not. But history is a fascinating domain, so my favourite subject in many ways. History is full of incomplete stories, history is full of characters that suddenly disappear, which means it has within it all kinds of things that are half grown, not fully developed, some things that are hiding under bushes, so you can fashion, you can create a tale out of that using your imagination, that does not contravene historical facts, but actually creates a world out of them. Is there any record of a Bengali clerk going from Calcutta to China to help the opium enterprise? No. Could there have been? Yes. If somebody says, is it historically validated that a Bengali boy goes from Calcutta to Canton during the opium wars? No, I don't have any historical record of that. I am writing fiction, but the enterprise of opium must be historically well described. The ships that take him to China must be historically well described, that's the clipper ships. The enterprise of opium in Canton must be historically accurate and that's why I had to do research on that. But Hiranyagarbha Chakraborty is completely fictitious.

Very hard for a writer to answer that question. I am always surprised that people still talk about *The Opium Clerk*, *The Miniaturist* and so on and so forth. So the readers, they must have found them interesting, may have picked their curiosity about that period and things of that nature. Remember that the impact of a book on society is very limited. Even very successful books, very well-known books. So I don't know what impact my writing would have on the consciousness of readers.

It must be particularly difficult to recreate the past in your historical fiction - the conversations, etiquette, and discourse. How do you achieve that?

No, actually I find that exciting to do. My writing is very imagery driven and I want to bring the reader into the room. I don't want to tell the reader. I want to show the reader. So if you walk into the room, what would you see, what would be the lights like, what are the objects that would be there or how will people be dressed,

what would be their manner of speech, what would they eat? I had to study so much about the history of Chinese cuisine when I was writing *The Opium Clerk*, had to spend so much time trying to understand what life might have been inside the Moghul harem when writing *The Miniaturist*. So that is a part of writing, the surface details of writing, of creating that kind of world, and that is fascinating to me.

Your novels bear marks of a well researched scholar. How important is scholastic study in writing a historical novel? And how do you gather materials for your contemporary novels, considering the fact that it hardly has any scholastic material for research?

It is important, but its importance must be treated with caution. Why is that? There have been tons and tons of scholarly materials written on lot of these things that I have been talking about. If you read so much and if you read everything, then it is going to impact and curtail your imagination. You only need to read enough and being an academic helps me because I know how much to read and when to stop. Because if we don't stop, the novel will read like a treatise, it will read dry, there won't be a story in it. This is the delicate balance.

No, research is not necessarily textual, for example, *Kalkatta*. I spent two years trying to befriend male prostitutes. Lot of interviews were involved, lot of observations were involved, and lot of going to some places were involved. So there is research in all of my writings, but the research is not all textual.

What kind of resistance did you face while researching for your book Kalkatta considering that it deals with the hush-hush life of gigolos?

This was the most difficult challenge, first of all, how do you get to meet a person like that? Male prostitution is not brothel based; it is based on sms messages, personal contacts, and a network. How would a person like me enter into such a network? So I went to the Commissioner of Police in Lalbazaar, he helped me through connecting me to somebody who was in charge of the anti-trafficking cell. They were able to track down some of these people who had faced arrest in the past and established telephone contact with me. They wanted to speak to me over the phone but not meet me, not show their face. Because they were afraid that I was a journalist. Most of them are married, their wives don't know this is what they do for a living, their parents don't know. They lead double lives. And it was a huge

thing to break down the resistance. I was not exploitative, I explained very clearly, this is why and what I am trying to do and then gradually people started talking and meeting and discussing and so on and so forth.

How far are your writings similar to and different from past practitioners of the genre of historical fiction, both in Bengali and English?

I haven't made even a conscious comparison, so won't be able to say. In Bangla I have great admiration for Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Saradindu(Bandopadhyay) too and also Ramesh Chandra Dutta. So I am really drawn towards those types of writers. How can I compare my writing to the greats? It's inappropriate of me to do so and I don't even have the tools to make those comparisons.

Your novels are replete with sensual imagery- be it visual, aural or nasal. How important do you think are the sense of smell, taste, vision in contributing to the setting of the novel?

Very much so. You see, again as I said, I want to show, not tell. I want to take the reader in the situation. My agent said, when she first read *Kalkatta*, Kunal it seems that the world of Zakaria Street is full of food, isn't it? I said how do you know? She has never been to India. She said, but you know there's so much smell of food, I can smell it. Yeah because sensuousness, touch, smell, sound, all of these are very important. Because they evoke the moment, they evoke the place, and within which the narration happens. So I pay very special attention to that. When I happened to write *The Miniaturist*, for a whole period of time, Susmita and me in Oxford, we cooked and ate only Moghlai, as a result we both put on weight, it was unfortunate consequence of that. Because to the extent possible we immersed in that world, so that can come out in the writings somehow.

You have mostly shown remarkable restraint in the depiction of erotic scenes in your novels. The subtlety and elegance of the sexually charged scenes of your novels mark a grand respite from the graphic portrayal of sex scenes in present day literature. Was this done keeping in mind the Indian sensibility?

No, it's my sensibility. It's one of the most difficult things to do. Because you don't want to titillate but you want to create a kind of visceral arousal or attraction. And the parallel I always draw is with respect to eating. What's actually happening inside your mouth is a very mechanical motion of breaking down food with your teeth

and jaws and your tongue. But what derives from it, what it surrounds is, *khete valo lagchhe khachhi, kintu* (I am enjoying my food, so I am eating, but) the actual biological process of breaking down food and passing that into your olfactory senses and elsewhere is actually not a very interesting process. Now really good sensual writing does not focus on the act of eating but in some sense the anticipation of eating and the consequence of eating. And that, if one is able to capture well, I don't know whether I have been or not, then one creates that fascination towards an erotic encounter without going through the mechanics of the titillation.

No common thread binds your novels in terms of time, place or subject- they are vastly different in every respect. What is the reason for never repeating any time-period or subject in your literary work?

Yeah, some people like that, some people don't like that because after *The Miniaturist* came out, there was an expectation that I would write another Moghal novel. Frankly I am very taken by the Moghals. And it would help me if I did so because I have read a lot about the Moghals, I love painting, art collections, music collections etc. But the thing is I think my problem or rather notion is, I have got a wildering imagination, it goes from place to place to place, searching for the unfamiliar and stories come out of that unfamiliar for me. I have not done a sequel in terms of periods and domains, because I am not really attracted by a period or a theme, I am interested by stories.

There are words or sentences used in languages other than English, in your novels and no annotations or footnotes are provided to explain their meanings. This keeps the readers guessing about the true meaning of those words. Is this ploy to use indigenous words scattered in between English, deliberate, to keep the local flavour intact?

Yeah. If you read Salman Rushdie, he will have some lines and some things which are written in Urdu or Hindi. As long as they are used sparingly, they actually heighten the flavour of the place and things. I hopefully haven't done too much of it. If you do too much of it, then you lose the reader. But if you do a little bit of it, it actually sort of spikes the environment.

Your short story The Japanese Wife has been made into a film by renowned director Aparna Sen. How much were you involved in the screenplay and other aspects in the making of the film?

Not very involved. Because my view is, the film is somebody else's work though it's based on my novel. So I don't want to stand and peer over the shoulder of the director, can be very uncomfortable for a director. Aparna did ask me if I would want to write the screenplay. I said no, but I do want to read her screenplay and provide feedback and comments, which I did and she was gracious enough to accept them. And I basically went to shooting on two occasions; I didn't even know I was being asked to do a cameo. I deliberately wanted to stay away from it.

'Kite' has been a recurring motif in your works - Bihzad flying kites, Pablo and Jami bonding over flying kites or Pablo drawing Jami as a kite or the kite-flying sequence in The Japanese Wife. What is its significance?

Here there is an autobiographical connection. I was a great kite flyer when I was growing up and the reason is, I was a very sickly child, *amar duto boro osukh hoyechhilo* (I suffered from two major ailments) when I was young, *ekta te banchar kotha e chhilona* (one of which was potentially fatal). My parents were very scared, which actually cut short my acting life. So for long periods of time, may be two years, I was not allowed to go out and play with neighbourhood boys. Football *khelte parchhina, karor sathe khela-dhula korte parchhina, ami barir chhade ghuri oratam, bikel hole chhade giye ghuri oratam, prottek din* (couldn't play football, couldn't play with anyone, so I used to fly kites on the terrace, every afternoon). So naturally I became a very good kite flyer and also *ei ghuri orano ta* (this kite-flying) became my passion and excitement. So I think it comes in from time to time when I write.

There are constant references to the 'faceless man' in The Opium Clerk and the grave of Charnock in Kalkatta. What is their significance?

In the case of the 'faceless man' in *The Opium Clerk*, it is very deliberate. I was trying to create a character in Hiranyagarbha Chakraborty who was bereft of desire. But desire came to him in the end and the desire was the love for Douglas and missing Douglas. And in the lack of features, metaphorically, to me means an incomplete person. Lack of desire is incompleteness, lack of feature is incompleteness. So that's the kind of metaphorical connection I wanted to draw. In case of the grave of

(Job) Charnock, it was much more of a literary ploy. So for me, Jami who is trying to become a *Kalkattawallah*, in some sense his alter- ego is Charnock who became a *Kalkattawallah* in death. And in some sense, I am sort of in a very oblique way saying, may be Jami too will end up like Charnock.

Most of the child characters in your novels are deprived of a normal childhood- Bihzad, Hiran, Douglas, Jami, the two children in Racists or even the children in Gungmahal in The Miniaturist - does this have a effect on their personality as they grow up?

There's somebody who wrote to me once saying why is it that you have so many orphans in your novels? Frankly speaking, I don't know. I was never an orphan, I grew up in a loving family, I didn't know too many people who were orphans. So I don't know the answer to that question. But I will say this that, again driven by empathy, I am very drawn towards orphans, people who have not had the benefit of having parents when they were growing up. My heart goes out to them. These are children, who need perhaps most of our attention.

The bond between a mother and child is often celebrated in art and literature, but in your novels it is the father figure- child bond that shines e.g. Mahim-Hiran, Mahim-Douglas, Hiran-Douglas, even Vinny-Douglas in a particular scene, Quartley-the children, Bihzad- Jamal/Jamil, Pablo-Jami. Was this shift deliberate?

I don't know what the deep psychology is. But I think paternal love is important to me because, first of all in our societies it tends to be understated, *mere paas maa hai* (I have my mother), people would say, *mere paas baap hai* (I have my father), nobody says that, right? So in some sense, even for a man whose exterior seems to be quite tough, see Jami, Jami falls for what? Not for a woman, he falls for a boy who has no future. And it is in many ways, this love for Pablo actually destroys his own life, his profession and what he could have become. So this element of grown up man and his love, his affection for a child must hold a special place in me. Why I don't know.

In the character of Bihzad, we find the conflict between commercialisation of art, of art being dictated according to societal conventions and the real creativity of art, the freedom of an artist. Do you, in your personal life, feel the same conflict?

Oh, absolutely. See in many ways, *The Miniaturist* is very close to me as a novel because what is the essential question that Bihzad is asking when he leaves the court, when he is thrown out of the court- what is the value of my art? I couldn't please my father, I couldn't please the emperor and I couldn't achieve status and fame in life. People say I am a great artist but what has art given me? What could I do with art? So he blindfolds himself, says I don't want to paint, won't draw. So in many ways, it's a very relevant question. What has writing given me? What does writing mean? Does winning the book a prize mean that's what writing is about? Is it writing best sellers and becoming incredibly famous, is that what writing is about? Or is it about something which is so deeply personal that you just simply can't do without it, even if you hate it, you want to run away from it, it won't allow you to run away from it. This is a question that not simply me but lot of people who are in the creative arts ask themselves and as I do too.

Whenever Kolkata is represented in any creative art, it is mostly about the Bengali intelligentsia. Why have you moved away from this prevailing trend to represent the dark, filthy underbelly of the city in Kalkatta? Any specific reason?

First of all, it's not filthy, it's not dark, it's the way life is. It may not be the life the Bengali intelligentsia leads, but it is life, nevertheless. People have to go about their business, they have to take care of their children, they have their aspirations and dreams and it is as in Sankha Ghosh *er kobita, ei Kolkatar moddhe ache arekti Kolkata* (as Sankha Ghosh's poetry says- inside this Kolkata there's another Kolkata). You know, no metropolis is really one, Kolkata is no exception. So I am not really drawn by the Bengali intelligentsia per se because I happen to be a part of it. Infact in *Kalkatta* you would see that as a writer I have not been very favourable to Bengali intelligentsia. I have made snide comments about Bengali intelligentsia. I don't quite like Bengali intelligentsia or some kinds of Bengali intelligentsia.

In the genre of refugee literature, both in Bengali and English, we have earlier come across the trials and tribulations of the Bengali Muslim community migrating to Bangladesh or the Bengali Hindu community migrating to India. The double migration of the Bihari Muslim community is really under represented, despite them forming a significant proportion of the migrants. Despite not being an insider how do you manage to give an authentic portrayal of the community?

By the way, it's not simply here; it is not also in Bangladesh. In Dhaka Literary Festival I was reading from *Kalkatta* and people were very surprised because the Geneva camp is in Dhaka and Bengali writers have not written about it. See, this is the thing, often times writers, everywhere in the world they write about the world that they know and they don't cross the boundaries and explore worlds that they don't know even if they are at their doorstep. So it took me, a person who lives partly in Kolkata and partly in Oxford, to write the story of Geneva camp inhabitant. See, they are classic people without a country, *keo oder nyaini* (no nation accepted them) and they are stuck.

You place your characters who are common men and women close to common chorus of life in extraordinary situations. What is your philosophy related to that? Is such a placing deliberate?

No, there's no reason. What I am saying is that people expect extraordinary things to happen to what? To celebrities? Actually extraordinary things happen in the lives of ordinary people. For people who are celebrities, usually extraordinary things don't happen. Their life is very boring and charted. You think Shah Rukh Khan leads a very extraordinary life? No. Whereas it's the common person whose life is full of all kinds of extraordinary events etc, most of the time which go unnoticed. All I have done is that I have noticed the wonders in the life of ordinary people.

You try to capture some of the groundbreaking discoveries or some grand historical moments in your novels e.g. invention of penicillin and the Boxer rebellion in The Yellow Emperor's Cure, Darwin's theory in Racists, death of Akbar in The Miniaturist, Opium war in The Opium Clerk. Do these moments serve as deus-ex-machina in your novels?

No. It's because when you write a historical novel, the context is important. The significant historical events of that context actually root the novel very powerfully. Could I have written *The Miniaturist* without the death of Akbar? Of course, I could have. But in this narrative it is particularly important because Bihzad has his draw towards Akbar and Akbar also recognises Bihzad for who he is really. So he says this line in the end, saying you are not an artist Bihzad, you are a saint. Because only a saint is truly blind, seeing none but the God inside him. That's his ultimate recognition. This is what he was looking for. Which is why Akbar's death and that moment becomes an important moment in the novel.

Will you say something about your new novel which is going to be published?

Which will be published? Actually don't want to talk about a novel before it is published.

But the Bangla you will see next year, *engreji te toh* (in English) the publication process is long, international publishing takes longer. So you'll see it in early 2020. In 2019 you'll see the Bangla novel.

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