

Kunal Basu is the Indian author of three acclaimed novels - *The Opium Clerk* (2001), *The Miniaturist*, (2003) and *Racists* (2006). His most recent work, *The Japanese Wife* (2008), is a collection of short stories, the title story of which has been made into a film by a fellow Bengali and filmmaker, Aparna Sen. Ahead of his arrival in the Netherlands to attend the Amsterdam India Festival (12-30 November 2008), Rituparna Roy caught up with Basu in his native Kolkata.

In conversation with Kunal Basu

RITUPARNA ROY

RR: You were born and brought up in Kolkata. How much has this city shaped your sensibility?

KB: Substantially. Particularly because I grew up at a time when this city was in turmoil - the 70's. The 70's brought together lots of different things: experimental theatre, a burst of poetry and poetry magazines, college activism; it brought urban violence, rebellious students. And all of that left its mark on me. I was a political activist; I was a theatre actor and director; I wrote poetry and brought out [poetry magazines]. I arranged film shows on campus and interviewed film directors. So, as an insider - the city seeped into me in every possible way.

RR: You have very illustrious parents?

KB: They were uncharacteristic for their age. They belonged to the middle class, but did not have typical middle-class sensibilities or values. They were avant-garde. Both had actively engaged themselves in literary, cultural and political works. My father was a member of the Communist Party and a publisher, my mother an actress and an author. Their friends were authors, poets, politicians, theatre people. And so, they were unusual for their times. Bohemians in their own way.

RR: And how have they influenced you?

KB: This was very much a household of the arts. My mother was a stage actress and my father was very broadly read. He knew many languages. So, he would bring the world to our dinner table. They were not different, but they had their own inputs into my cultural portfolio.

RR: You started with poetry, continued with the short story, then came to the novel. Did you set out to be a historical novelist?

KB: I started writing in Bangla. I used to write Bengali poetry. I am a bilingual author; not one of those Indian writers who practices his craft only in English. I was definitely influenced by historical novels. How can you not be when you are a Bengali? Romesh Chandra Dutta, Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. I'm sure they have all tainted my palette. Dickens, Zola, they must have tainted my palette in some respects too. It's not a question of taking a conscious decision, "I'm now going to write a historical novel. I'm now going to write a contemporary novel. I'm now going to write a Bengal novel." No, I just think of stories.

RR: How much of a scholar does one need to be in order to be a good historical novelist?

KB: One must tread with caution. If you are too good a scholar, then you lose the novelist in you. And if you are completely oblivious to research, you'll make mistakes and your readers will find out. I need research for two reasons: One, to make the story that I've contemplated in my mind believable to an audience. You see, if I wrote a story that is set in Akbar's reign and write, "Akbar was assassinated". OK. It would be so patently wrong that people will say, "No no no. This is wrong." And this confirmation of that historical fact will render my tale useless. I'll not be able to carry the reader with me. So, you need research in order to bring the reader along. The second reason why historical research is interesting for me is that it fertilises my imagination. I read about different things - maybe a snippet of a character somewhere, maybe a small event - and I say, "What if that event was positioned differently in a story? How would that turn out to be?" So, it fertilises imagination, but one shouldn't be too hung up with historical research.

RR: Which novel has been the most challenging in terms of recreating the past?

KB: Each have been challenging in their own way. When I was writing *The Miniaturist*, a friend of mine said, "How are you going to write dialogue for them? You haven't seen the Mughals. They were Muslims, you're not. How would you write dialogue for them". And I said, "Hopefully, the story would seep into me enough that when I speak with my pen, it would be the words of Bihzad and Zuleikha and others." I shouldn't try too hard. If I tried too hard to construct what the sentences should look like, I would miss the thread. *Racists* was particularly challenging because it's a novel of

the 19th century. Very little of Asia. Very little of India, in fact. Not only was it a challenge with history, but also a challenge of relationship. A romance between a European man and a European woman. How would I be able to recreate their romance? So, that was a challenge in itself.

RR: Is romance essentially different in different parts of the world?

KB: I think that fundamentally it isn't. But I think its manifestations are different. You know, when it rains, we romantic souls from the valley, we conjure up certain manifestations of romance. Like we have Radha-Krishna, etc. etc. But when it rains, what does a European conjure up? And a lot of communication is non-verbal. I intuitively know how I would communicate with somebody I was romantically interested in, in the non-verbal sense. Would it be the same for the Europeans?

RR: Reading your work, I think two qualities stand out: You seem to have no overt thematic preoccupations. Your first book was about opium trade in Asia, second about a Mughal artist, third about racial science. In terms of time, place, theme, they have nothing in common. Secondly, nothing of your personal life is transmuted directly into fiction. Do you see these as fundamental qualities of your writing?



The Amsterdam India Festival takes place 12 - 30 November 2008.

For more information www.indiafestival.nl

KB: Some commentators have said that a thread that runs through my writing is the theme of compassion. And the power of compassion to overcome personal tragedies, personal circumstances, as well as civilisational challenges. In *The Opium Clerk*, certainly; in *The Miniaturist*, differently, at a personal level; and in *Racists*, at a cross-civilisational level. Again, you know, I don't consciously think too much about what the connectivity is; what the unifying themes are. I'm moved by stories. And I'm sure there's deep autobiography. You know, I would like to make a distinction between surface autobiography and deep autobiography. I'm a person moved by social justice, I'm a person moved by romance, by inspiration, by compassion. And those will somehow make their presence felt in my books. But I don't have a plan. I don't have a grand strategy.

RR: Who are the authors you most admire? And why?

KB: Many of them actually. I've said this many times. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. He, to me, is a complete package. His characters, his settings are unique and different. In some sense, curiosity evoking. He never wrote classics of the kitchen sink. Which is something that I often get into for trouble saying, but I say it. I'm not interested in writing classics of the kitchen-sink. And I think it is Bankim Babu's influence on me. He



Kunal Basu. Courtesy www.kunalbasu.com

can evoke visual, aural and situational cues - you can actually hear nature, you can see it. The sensuous quality of his writings is very strong, which I quite admire. He is great in creating drama. His dialogues are brilliant. And the way he steps out of his writings and takes the reader into confidence... *Rajsingha* - "Pathak, tumi ki byakul chakhhu dekhichho?" (Reader, have you seen anxious eyes?). So, definitely Bankim; no question.

I'm definitely moved by Dickens because of - again - the descriptive richness. In *Edwin Druid*, for example, that feeling that you are walking in the docklands of London...and remember, most of us who've read Dickens in India had never been to England. And he created a landscape which was very identifiable. Two people who'd read Dickens could identify that, in their mind's eye. So, definitely Dickens. And Dostoevsky - peeling the onion! The nuances of the characters are never quite what they seem to be. All of these people have been great influences. Somebody was telling me yesterday that I always name Latin Americans: Marquez, Llosa, Isabella Allende. But my writing doesn't resemble them at all. But I love them. And the reason I admire the Latin writers is because they re-affirm, for me, optimism about life and love. That, despite the darkest of despairs and circumstances, you can see the spark of life. You can laugh at things. They are mischievous, you know. There's a playfulness in that writing.

RR: I would like to come to *The Japanese Wife* now. It's a collection of short stories. Your first collection to be published in English. Was it a deliberate break from novels?

KB: It was purely circumstantial. When Aparna Sen [Bengali actor and film director] decided to make *The Japanese Wife*, it wasn't published, but it had been written, way back in 1996. It came up in conversation in 2006, and Aparna wanted to film it. It seemed to me that it would be odd if the film comes out "Based on the story by Kunal Basu" - but where's the story? And so, she got me to bring out my short stories from my desk draw and work on them. I wrote three new stories for the collection. The other nine were written at different times.

RR: Two recent novels - Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* are about epochs and characters that you've already covered. Akbar is one of the protagonists of Rushdie's novel. The Mughal Emperor, however, first made an appearance in Indian-English fiction in *The Miniaturist*, which came out in 2003. Ghosh's latest novel is set in the backdrop of the first Opium War. It's about the opium trade, which is again, something you'd dealt with in your very first novel, *The Opium Clerk*, published in 2001. Have you read these books?

KB: No. Not because I didn't want to read them but because - and that's the casualty of writing fiction for me, something I'm not happy about - in my other life, I also write academic non-fiction. I've no time to read other people's fiction. Which is a sad confession to make, but it's true. I'd be lying if I said otherwise. I've no time to read lots of great authors, lots of great books, cover to cover. I have only skimmed pages of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*; I haven't read Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*; I haven't read cover-to-cover, *Shadow of the Wind*, which is a very interesting book. I haven't read the latest books by lots of authors. There is a cost to everything. And the cost of my writing life has been that I haven't kept up with contemporary fiction.

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To read the full interview with Kunal Basu visit www.iias.nl/newsletter

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FULL INTERVIEW

Kunal Basu is the Indian author of three acclaimed novels - *The Opium Clerk* (2001), *The Miniaturist*, (2003) and *Racists* (2006). His most recent work is a collection of short stories, *The Japanese Wife* (2008), the title story of which has been made into a film by a fellow Bengali and filmmaker, Aparna Sen. Ahead of his arrival in the Netherlands to attend the Amsterdam India Festival (12-30 November 2008), Rituparna Roy caught up with Basu in his native Kolkata.

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We learnt about Engels when we were very young. I started reading Jean Paul Sartre when I was 12.

RR: That was precocious.

KB: Very precocious.

RR: But you understood it?

KB: I'm sure I didn't. I was reading *Being and Nothingness* which is one of Sartre's most difficult books. And my father said, "What are you reading?" And I said, "I'm reading *Being and Nothingness*." And to his credit, he said, "Oh".

RR: He didn't make fun of you?

KB: No. And so a lot of that was... the world being imported on our dinner table. My mother being a practitioner in Bangla Sahitya, my father, too, published a lot of Bengali authors. including **Manik Bandyopadhyay**, whose birth centenary it is this year.

RR: He published all his books?

KB: No. He published "**Uttarkaler Galpo Sangroho**" – his collection of short stories. He was very much known to our family. In fact, [my mother] has just written a small piece on Manik Bandyopadhyay - a sort of memoir. He died in 1956 - the year I was born. So, I'd like to believe that – if one believes in the transmigration of soul - he just might have migrated in my direction.

RR: You started with poetry, continued with the short story, then came to the novel.

KB: I started writing in Bangla. I used to write Bengali poetry. I am a bilingual author; not one of those Indian writers who practices his craft only in English.

RR: I will just interrupt you here and say that I find you and **Kiran Nagarkar a study in contrast. Because he started with Marathi and then left Marathi for English. As far as your novels are concerned, you started with English and are now (if I'm right) contemplating a novel in Bangla.**

KB: Yes, I would very much like to.

RR: In this context, I would like your take on the vexed question of 'English vs. vernacular' which has been raging in India for decades somehow and never seems to end.

KB: I'd disagree with you on that. I don't think it is a vexing question. It's a question which is quite irrelevant. Indians are a very strange breed. We are the only people on earth who are truly bilingual. And by truly bilingual, I don't mean people who can read and write a standard English and whatever their local language be – in our case, it is Bangla – but we live in two streams of consciousness. I mean think of our greats. Think of Rabindranath Tagore. Think of **Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay**. Think of **Michael Madhusudan Dutta**. A whole number of social scientists - think of Amartya Sen - have made great contributions in both languages. This is our suit. This is our strength.

A large part of the reading public does not care about these arguments. There'll always be detractors. Regardless of what you do, there'll always be detractors. And, you know, this is no bad thing. Sometimes you need to keep the pot boiling. And there will always be people who will take different views. I refuse to concede that this is a significant debate. It is not. Look around, who's debating it? A few journalists, once a year or twice a year, somebody would say something. I don't think this is an important thing in our consciousness.

RR: Did you set out to be a historical novelist – or it just happened to you because you were innately attracted to the genre?

KB: I was definitely influenced by historical novels. How can you not be when you are a Bengali? **Romesh Chandra Dutta**, **Saradindu Bandyopadhyay**, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. I'm sure they have all tainted my palette. Dickens, Zola, they must have tainted my palette in some respects too. It's not a question of taking a conscious decision, "I'm now going to write a historical novel. I'm now going to write a contemporary novel. I'm now going to write a Bengal novel." No, I just think of stories.

RR: But how do you account for the fact that 3 of your novels have been historical?

KB: Because I am in love with history. And my fourth one might still be a historical novel. So, who knows? My 12 short stories are not historical...

RR: How much of a scholar does one need to be in order to be a good historical novelist?

KB: One must tread with caution. Because, if you are too good a scholar, then you lose the novelist in you. And if you are completely oblivious to research, you'll make mistakes and your readers will find out. I need research for two reasons: One, to make the story that I've contemplated in my mind believable to an audience. You see, if I wrote a story that is set in Akbar's reign and write, "Akbar was assassinated". OK. It would be so patently wrong that people will say, "No no no. This is wrong." And this confirmation of that historical fact will render my tale useless. I'll not be able to carry the reader with me. So, you need research in order to bring the reader along. The second reason why historical research is interesting for me is that it fertilises my imagination. I read about different things - maybe a snippet of a character somewhere, maybe a small event - and I say, "What if that event was positioned differently in a story? How would that turn out to be?" So, it fertilises imagination, but one shouldn't be too hung up with historical research.

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RR: At the end of your first novel, you cite sources. And I observed that in the next two you haven't. Is it because you were more confident of your material? Or is it that it didn't matter to you anymore?

KB: Actually, in the first novel – the sources fertilised my imagination a lot. The clipper ships, Canton, reading about Canton, Kuching – which I've never visited. Therefore, the literature was a very significant part of my writing.

I don't think I read as much for *The Miniaturist*. I don't think there were those very significant non-fictional works that I read and said, "Yes, actually I can trace my inspiration to that." But I can trace – I forget the titles now - the clipper ship journey from Calcutta to China in *The Opium Clerk* to some very boring, functional books that I'd read up about the opium clippers.

RR: And as an Indian, probably, you were already very familiar with Mughal history?

KB: That was the most surprising thing. That I completely forgot how much I knew about the Mughals, until I started working on it. And for **Racists** as well. I just wanted to read enough about Racial Science in order to locate the debate between Bates and Belavouix. But then I wanted to move away as far as I can, as far as I could from Victoriana – because I didn't want to sink in Victoriana. You can actually drown in Victoriana – there's so much literature, that I actually wanted to move away from it. So, the sources were not all that inspiring for me to list at the back of the book.

RR: Reading your work, I think two qualities stand out: You seem to have no overt thematic preoccupations. Your first book was about opium trade in Asia, second about a Mughal artist, third about racial science. In terms of time, place, theme, they have nothing in common. Secondly, nothing of your personal life is transmuted directly into fiction. Do you see these as fundamental qualities of your writing?

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RR: Which is your own favourite among your novels? Do you have one?

KB: I haven't written my favourite novel yet.

RR: Do you go back to them? Do you read your own books for pleasure?

KB: Very rarely would I do that. Once in a while, if I... when I feel depressed, I go back to parts of *The Miniaturist* because it reminds me what Bihzad went through. Because, in many ways, that is the challenge of all creative people. Creative people want recognition. "See me. Read me. Love me" – that's what people want. And that's what he wanted. And never got it. But it took a long time for him to realise why was he engaged in painting, anyway?
I haven't reached that stage yet.

RR: I would like to come to *The Japanese Wife* now. It's a collection of short stories. Your first collection to be published in English. Was it a deliberate break from novels?

KB: It was purely circumstantial. When Aparna Sen [Bengali actor and film director] decided to make *The Japanese Wife*, it wasn't published, but it had been written, way back in 1996. It came up in conversation in 2006, and Aparna wanted to film it. It seemed to me that it would be odd if the film comes out "Based on the story by Kunal Basu" – but where's the story? And so, she got me to bring out my short stories from my desk draw and work on them. I wrote three new stories for the collection. The other nine were written at different times.

RR: And how was it like working with Aparna Sen?

KB: I didn't write the screenplay - she wrote the screenplay. I would give her my impressions and my views. She would write parts of the screenplay and e-mail it to me. We had copious e-mail exchanges. Sometimes we met as well. When I was here [in Kolkata], passing by.
It was great. I think she recognised the story for its essence.

RR: She calls it 'a modern-day fairy tale'.

KB: We were both on the same page - in terms of what the essence of the story was - there were no quarrels, there was no falling out, because we knew that this is what the story is about.

RR: Your association with films has been a long one. You've acted - as a child – in Mrinal Sen's films; you've written, narrated and directed documentaries. But which have you enjoyed more?

KB: I don't enjoy being a director. In fact, my directorial foray was very limited. I think filmmaking is very arduous. It's very challenging. For me, it's working with lots of people and getting everybody to move in one direction and get something done. I can barely live with my own mind, let alone the minds of so many people. So, that's not my forte at all. But I quite like the notion of an author who has a toe into cinema largely because I think the sibling arts are important for me. You see, I'm not attracted by authors who never dip into art or into performances or into music, or by artists who never read anything.

RR: You've acted on the stage. You know, a critic likens you to one of the characters in your novel, *The Miniaturist* - the character called the Afghan. He's a sort of chameleon, and the critic says, "Basu is a bit of a chameleon himself, a shape-shifter." Do you agree with that?

KB: Not any more. I think that when I was growing up I was into many different things. If that makes me a chameleon, I'm happy to be a chameleon. But if a chameleon means a

dilettante, I don't think I'm a dilettante. Whatever I've done, I've done fairly seriously and reasonably well. But I think writing is my key passion.

And what do you think about publishing in India? Is it looking up?

I'm hugely optimistic about publishing in India. Publishing in India will show the world what publishing should be in the future. In the rest of the world, publishing is jaded. In India, publishing is like an infant which is just learning to crawl. So, it's full of ideas. It wants things. It wants to gobble up. It wants to grow. Sometimes it does things that, you know, some people would say, "Well, this is not the right things to publish. This is not the right way of doing a book." But regardless, it has life and enthusiasm. Whereas in the UK, and in other parts of the world, for a whole variety of reasons, publishing is cautious, publishing has aged and it's risk averse. It wants to ensure everything – which is why it's moved into the domain of imitation. If Harry Potter works, create 200 Harry Potter's. If Dan Brown works, create 200 Dan Brown's. The safe way. Whereas, in India, people want to read new things. I'm hugely optimistic.

RR: So, will there be a reverse trend now? Previously, at least as far as Indian-English authors were concerned, you first had to publish outside to get attention here.

KB: It's already changing. There are so many authors from India and Asia who are being shortlisted for the Asia Man Booker Award. I think the pendulum has started to swing. I think the rest of the world - not only in technology and other hard-core domains, but in the arts - is beginning to turn towards the East. And I'm very happy for that. There's one other thing I used to say about this: that the Britishers have lost their Empire, but they control the literary pages of this world. You know, I don't think that's going to be the case. In a few decades, Indian publishers and Indian readers will form the core of readership in this world.

And what's your next novel about?

It could be about one of 3 different things. One is a contemporary novel – set in some of the most dangerous parts of the country - Chhatisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar - some of the more dangerous parts. It could be a contemporary Indian novel based in those parts. I won't tell you the story – but it's located there. It could be another historical novel which is set away from India, with no Indian connection whatsoever and I've thought of a story like that. And the third one is slightly controversial... I don't want to say anything more on that.

RR: Two recent novels – Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* are about epochs and characters that you've already covered. Akbar is one of the protagonists of Rushdie's novel. The Mughal Emperor, however, first made an appearance in Indian-English fiction in *The Miniaturist*, which came out in 2003. Ghosh's latest novel is set in the backdrop of the first Opium War. It's about the opium trade, which is again, something you'd dealt with in your very first novel, *The Opium Clerk*, published in 2001. Have you read these books?

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RR: Kunal Basu, thank for your time and conversation.

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