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## History as canvas, invention as tale

Not willing to count himself as yet another non-resident Indian author publishing books penned with India of their experiences, Oxford professor Kunal Basu insists he follows the strange, not the known, the Quixotic, not the usual. Weaving fiction with history yet again, he has just come up with his second novel, "The Miniaturist". SANGEETA BAROOAH PISHAROTY catches up with the man with a "fetish for writing"...

Photos: Anu Pushkarna.



**Dishing out history with a taste of fiction... author Kunal Basu in New Delhi.**

HIS IS not the adulation of the familiar, but the strange, not the proverbial trail of the expected, but the wild goose chase of the Quixotic. No, you are not expected to deduce that of India-born Oxford professor and fiction writer Kunal Basu, he will opine that of himself to distinguish from the band of Indian writers in English bursting with pages after pages in all genres these days.

"Whether they are based in India or abroad, most Indian novelists in English weave their tales around their villages or towns, involving characters familiar to them. But, mine is different. I pen the unexpected, the unusual, the Quixotic," states Basu. In Delhi this past week for the India launch of his second novel, "The Miniaturist" by Penguin India, the Kolkata-born author, currently teaching management at the prestigious Oxford University's Templeton University, also do not consider himself in the same writing line as William Dalrymple though both can be called historical novelists.

"Dalrymple's books are purely historical fiction, but in mine, fiction bridges the gaps in the history," justifies Basu, the author of "The Opium Clerk", his first novel, wherein he had married Britain's opium trade with China and India to a fictional tale fired by his own imagination. In "The Miniaturist" too, the author takes the readers on an odyssey to the era when Moghul

Emperor Humayun was driven out of Hindustan and given shelter by the Shah of Iran. In Persia, he got ensnared with Persian miniature art and brought back with him some artists, one of whom became the chief artist at the court of his son, Emperor Akbar. The book concentrates on the son of the chief artist, Bihzad, who is mentioned in the history pages as the most gifted artist at a young age, a prodigy of sorts.

"Everyone predicted that he would slip into his father's position, but then, he is suddenly lost from the records. There is no mention of him thereafter in any history book, and here, history is taken over by fiction in my novel," informs Basu. The writer's pen then knits a yarn around this lost historical character, showing him as falling down in the eyes of the Emperor due to an unpardonable crime born of unrequited love. He is thereafter banished from Hindustan and years later, returns - blind and old - to paint the dying Emperor's picture.



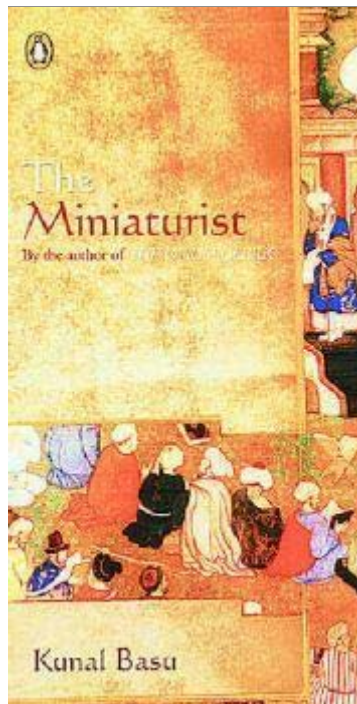
A richly imagined tale, one must concur, more so, if one glances at Basu's bio-data. Being involved in executive education for over 10 years in 11 countries and three continents, Basu is primarily an international management expert. A Ph.D from the University of Florida, he has published extensively on Brand Management, International Marketing, Marketing in Developing Countries, Consumer Decision Making and Advertising. One of his recent articles on Customer Loyalty won the Best Journal Article award from the Academy of Marketing Science. He was Associate Professor of Marketing at the Faculty of Management of McGill University, Canada, and has been awarded a Distinguished Visiting Professorship by Renmin University in China. He is a consultant to a number of international corporations and government departments and is joint programme director of The Oxford Advanced Management Programme.

Yet, Basu says, "Writing is one of my fetishes".

"Unfortunately, I was a good student. I belong to an era when a good student either becomes a doctor or an engineer. I opted for engineering and even got a scholarship to the United States. Still, I continued to love my first love - writing - and this passionate relationship has resulted in the flowering of these two books." With Bengali writer Shabi Basu as mother, a father running a publishing house, and visitors to the house like Satyajit Ray, love for the writings of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Charles Dickens and Feodor Doestovosky, a weak point for poetry and short stories became a natural phenomenon, he says. Basu also acted as a child in Mrinal Sen's movies, "Abashehe" and "Punascha".

Elaborates the man, "There are three separate reasons for admiring these writers. I am in awe of

Bankim Chandra for his descriptive brilliance, Doestovosky for the ability to get inside a person's mind and Dickens for his theatricality".



His first book took him two years to complete, but picking up pace, the latest book got over only in eight months. Still more, his third novel is almost ready. "I won't disclose much but it has nothing to do with India," he adds. Interestingly, the writer's plans include a book based on his memoirs on Tianneman Square movement of China.

"I was there in Beijing then. We were all evacuated to Japan. I have written all that I saw in my diary. I intend to publish it one day," says Basu. He also plans a novel in Bengali, based in a Northeastern town.

"That is one area not so much explored in our literature. I have not planned the place where exactly my novel will be based but it will definitely be North-East India", he says, adding, "You know, I love the Assamese folk dance Bihu. Where can I buy some Bihu songs here to take with me?" You do not know what to say, for you yourself do not know where to get them here. That perhaps speaks a bit for the degree of the region's intermingling with mainstream India.

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