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The Miniaturist, by Kunal Basu

By Amer Hussein

A lascivious genius glimpsed in fragments

A STRANGE trilogy, first published in 1935, periodically reappears as a lost masterpiece of English literature: *The Near and the Far* by LH Myers. Though set in the Mughal Emperor Akbar's India, it isn't a conventional historical novel. As Penelope Fitzgerald pointed out, "Myers wants us to look at his world of appearances and beyond it. Appearances cannot be dismissed as an illusion, for no illusion can be created except by reason."

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Akbar's triumphant reign (1556-1605)), and the world of appearances and reality, link Myers's work to Kunal Basu's very different novel. Mughal history has rarely been used as raw material for modern fiction by Indian writers. Readers such as myself, cultural descendants of the Mughal aesthetic, are familiar only with the cringe-inducing exoticism of western depictions, with their clamour of inauthenticity, and their lack of Myers's - and Basu's - underlying purpose.

Ultimately, Basu's is not a historical novel in the conventional sense either. Its early sections do, however, display the imprimatur of authenticity and the diligent scholarship of an outsider from another Indian tradition. His story of a miniaturist's apprenticeship in the tradition of Mughal painting has the sort of detail we associate with the sturdy historical fiction of Oldenbourg and Haasse. They, like him, observe a major figure from the sly perspective of relative insignificance.

Though at times all too redolent of research, there's also the thrill - particularly for those who know them - of rediscovering Agra and Sikri in all their marble and mosaic splendour. Like the Mughal miniaturists, Basu surrounds the central figure with exquisitely intricate incidental detail. Akbar, the presiding genius, is only glimpsed in fragments: the ruler, the visionary who tried to bring together India's clashing faiths, and (in this version) the often cruel and lascivious man.

Akbar the man ignites the miniaturist Bihzad's artistic fires. Growing up illiterate, Bihzad learns to retell stories which reflect his life. His dalliance with his stepmother (conveniently named, like Potiphar's wife in the Muslim version of the legend, Zuleikha) helps him to paint Joseph's story. But his fascination with Akbar amounts to transgression: he dares to stage the king as mortal and, worse, as the object of his own desire in a series of erotic miniatures. This hubristic act leads to exile, alienation and a departure from the historical confines of the novel's earlier sections.


The rest deals on one level with Bihzad's tormented attempt to deepen his artistic vision and reconcile "the near and

the far": the gap between illusion and reality. On another, it paints a Rimbaud-like season in hell. Bihzad leaves India for the fleshpots of Central Asia, encountering tender eunuchs, the lustful harem beauties who keep them as pets, and of course the tyrannical rulers of those parts.

A mystic, vaguely Sufi path, replete with references to Rumi *et al*, leads Bihzad (now, in search of the ultimate vision, blindfolded) back to Agra and his beloved Akbar's bedside. Finally, as this parable of appearances and the artist's quest returns to historical moorings, its hero sees the face of the beloved in its glory, learning the lesson of his art's journey.

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