Representation of History in the Novels of Kunal Basu

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Thesis submitted to The University of Burdwan, West Bengal, in conformity with the relevant rules, to be considered for the Award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
This is to certify that Ms Enakshi Banerjee has carried on research leading to the dissertation entitled REPRESENTATION OF HISTORY IN THE NOVELS OF KUNAL BASU under my direct supervision, and that she has fulfilled all the requirements of the regulations of The University of Burdwan relating to the award of the PhD degree. It is also certified that this PhD dissertation now submitted fulfils the norms of academic standard for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (Arts) Degree in English of the University of Burdwan and that it has not been submitted for any degree whatsoever by her or anyone else previously.

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Contents

Introduction 1-13

Chapter I
History, Fiction, Representation 14-45

Chapter II
Representation of History in The Opium Clerk 46-85

Chapter III
Representation of History in The Miniaturist 86-130

Chapter IV
Representation of History in Racists 131-166

Chapter V
Representation of History in The Yellow Emperor’s Cure 167-193

Chapter VI
Representation of History in Kalkatta 194-227

Conclusion 228-242

Select Bibliography 243-258
Introduction

This dissertation aims to locate certain epistemological issues within the theoretical field of the representation of history and use them to examine the transaction between history and fiction in the novels of Kunal Basu. The idea of the ‘novel’ as a vehicle for interrogating historical truth claims is integral to this discourse. The tendentious aspects of Basu’s novels, the discursive turns in his writing, and the subversive approach towards the grand narrative of history underline his deep engagement with the issues of marginalisation and representation. This dissertation will try to examine all these aspects of Basu’s novel vis-à-vis the politics of representation.

Kunal Basu was born on 4th May 1956 in North Calcutta. Both his parents, Sunil Kumar Basu and Chhabi Basu, were prominent luminaries in the field of Bengali literature. Quite naturally, his upbringing was such that he grew to become an avid reader and, in course, a good student with prolific potentials. He studied science, then switched over to engineering and finally did a doctorate in Management. Presently Kunal Basu is a University Reader in Marketing at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford and a fellow of Green-Templeton College. A man of an extremely genial nature (which I know because of my personal acquaintance with him) and an immensely erudite demeanour, Kunal Basu restores one’s faith in imagination, magic, and fantastic history punctuated by love, tenderness and conviviality. Basu has till date written five novels, *The Opium Clerk* (2001), *The Miniaturist* (2003), *Racists*(2006), *The Yellow Emperor’s Cure* (2011), and *Kalkatta* (2015). He has also penned down a collection of short stories *The Japanese Wife* (2008) and a visual narrative, called *Intimacies* (2011), in collaboration with Kushal Ray. Last year he also wrote his first Bengali novel, *Rabi-Shankar*. 
It is needless to say that any researcher in literature studies has any one of the two roads to take—s/he can work on the canonised, recognised, acclaimed, highly marketed and prize winning authors, or on the authors not yet recognised by the so-called power centres and thereby traditionally and usually neglected or eschewed. Kunal Basu falls in the second category. The present researcher feels that all literary activities are valid in their own ways and viable for research. As a result of this conscious ideology that research is a re-appraisal and a new evaluation, in the beginning of her work, this researcher felt that the second road was more worth trekking.

Basu’s treatment of history in his fiction really shows that history to him is a means to an end in itself. A very distinct aspect of Basu’s representation of history is the fact that unlike so many other Indian English diasporic writers he refuses to stick stubbornly to Indian history alone. Even when he writes about Indian history, he does not exoticize it. Though he is located abroad, he does not deal with the problems of acculturation in the life of an immigrant, problems with which most of the ‘successful’ Indian English diasporic novels are loaded. His is not the NRI’s gaze, the longing lingering look at India—the ‘lost’ home. In this sense, Basu is indeed not the typical Indian diasporic writer writing about India. He seems to be almost impertinently reluctant about the elementals of ‘root’ exploration, exploring Indian-ness, trying to carve out an Indian identity foregrounding Indian culture, mores, ethos, philosophy etc. As he himself boldly declares, “I own the world by my imagination” (personal interview). His representation of history is really mediated by his imagination. He writes about China and Malaya being himself an Indian, about Islamic arts and Mughals being himself not a Muslim, and about the Victorians when he is not even white, as he himself mentioned in a TV interview in America.
Kunal Basu is too contemporary to provide a researcher with a sizeable body of critical literature on his work. In spite of all his literary merits, he is so alive with us that there is no possibility of looking at him from a temporal distance. Hence, there is a paucity of critical explorations of his works. The only full length book published on his work is an anthology of critical essays, titled *Romancing the Strange* (2004). The book is a collection of twenty critical and well-researched articles on the first two novels of Basu—*The Opium Clerk* and *The Miniaturist*. The essays provide both a critical understanding of as well as a penetrating insight into the various issues and aspects that are to be found in these two novels. They address issues like the conjunction of history and fiction, the art of narrativization, colonial and postcolonial understandings of the past, along with rigorous character analysis and analysis of plots. Each of the essays compiled in the book contributes significantly to the close understanding of Basu’s first two novels—*The Opium Clerk* and *The Miniaturist*. Nandini Bhattacharya’s article “Hiranyakarba: The Golden Womb of History and Time,” for instance, is a well-researched introspection into the terrain of the spatiotemporal elements that constitute Basu’s *The Opium Clerk*. Deb Narayan Bandopadhyay’s article “History/ Metahistory: A Study of Kunal Basu’s *The Miniaturist*” is an immensely rich and edifying enterprise augmenting the understanding of the novel with an exhaustive and enriching research on the doctrinaire of Sufism and the way it has been inculcated and portrayed in Basu’s novel. Rituparna Ray’s “Tasveer: A Study of Zuleikha in Kunal Basu’s *The Miniaturist*” is a wonderful piece of writing providing the readers with a vivid character analysis of an otherwise minor character of the novel.

Sisir Kumar Chatterjee’s article, “Desire Deconstructed: *The Opium Clerk* and the Definition of Coloniality,” is a potent postcolonial script that closely documents the colonial impact on the natives and its hangover. Chitrakala Basu’s article, “The Opium Clerk and Babu Kolkata,” transports us back to Babu Kolkata, and provides an analysis of almost a
graphic presentation of the Babu Bhadrolok by Basu. The book also contains an informal conversation of Basu with Amitava Roy in which the novelist speaks on many autobiographical incidents of his life. The book also contains a section where media responses and newspaper reviews of Basu’s first two novels are recorded.

Another very important critical work on Basu is Angshuman Kar’s chapter, “Commodification of Post-Rushdie Indian Novels in English: Kunal Basu and the Politics of Decanonization,” in the book Postliberalization Indian Novels in English: Politics of Global Reception and Awards (2013). Kar’s chapter helps us situate Basu in the global literary market. Kar pertinently addresses the production and consumption of Post-Rushdie novels and the mechanics that is operational behind their success. Kar has brought up, augmenting his argument by quoting erudite critics like Mee, the truth behind the success or saleability of Postliberalisation Indian Writers of English. Kar argues that the commodification of India, which is, in one way or the other, a very important part of the writings of this fraternity has been categorically responsible for their success in the global publishing market. India, of a particular kind, sells in the literary market providing the writers with both money and fame. And within this frame of the literary market, where a set design of India/Indian-ness and the gaze of an NRI sell, Kar quite interestingly contextualizes Basu, who refuses to adapt himself to such trends.

Apart from these critical works, there are articles on Basu that have come out in the form of book reviews. Srinjoy Chowdhury’s article, “Walking Calcutta’s Wildside” in The Statesman, refers to the extensive research that has gone in the making of Basu’s The Opium Clerk. According to Chowdhury, the details and the trinkets of imperial Calcutta have been brought back to life in the novel by Basu. The exquisite details remind him of the sets of Charulata or Ghare Baire, and he is all praise for Basu’s exceptional deliverance of a forgotten era: “Meticulously researched, Basu’s White Calcutta of the late 19th century is as
real as the Daniells at Victoria Memorial.” Anjali Mody, in her article, “Forgotten Child of Empire,” published in the *Express Magazine* on July 1, 2001, calls Basu “an adept storyteller” and “an unobtrusive narrator.” In this article, which is a review of Basu’s first novel, Mody too praises Basu’s ability to create a verisimilitude of colonial Calcutta: “…he draws you into the web that links the Brahmin baboo, Hiran, and the mysterious mud which makes its way in mango wood chests from the warehouses of Patna, through the Auction houses of Calcutta, down the Hooghly and then east.” She goes on to speculate whether Hiran’s life could be called a series of abandonment of desires and even considers him an anti-hero “in a world impelled by change and peopled with characters more intriguing, more passionate and knowing than him.” Bhaswati Chakravorty in her article, “Evening out the Rise and Fall,” in *The Telegraph* calls *The Opium Clerk* “a story of many journeys, real and metaphysical.” She too considers a discernible trait of weakness in the protagonist, who, according to her, is more guided and directed by others, therefore lacking in self-esteem and the kind of virility that is usually expected from the central character. He is seen as more a weakling who is “quite remarkably happy in being unheroic.” Chakravorty argues that Basu’s greatest skill lies in the visualization of characters and the evocation of atmosphere.

While reviewing *The Miniaturist* in her article in *The Observer*, Mithu. C. Banerji reckons the novel as perfect and detailed as a Mughal painting should be. She eulogises Basu’s potential to pen down such a well-crafted polychrome of a novel and considers it to be a “craftsman’s intensely passionate creation.” She also addresses the aesthetic theory encapsulated in the novel which “reads as a metaphor for artists and writers alike, to set free their creative spirit and not confine themselves to the trappings of social expectations.” *The Guardian* seems to provide a more direct verdict for the second novel of Basu; it declares: “It’s a historical novel for people who turn up their noses at the genre.” In this review, there is an almost immoderate praise for the erotic, ecstatic and poetic language that Basu so
adheres to in the novel. Shoma Chaudhury gives a very pert and precise understanding of the novel in her article, “Mastering the Historic Novel,” in Hindustan Times published on March 23rd, 2003. She refers to Basu’s “great skill in evoking the extravagance of Akbar’s court without turning his novel into the cheaply exotic.” She shows how, through Bihzad’s story, Basu is exploring the “irreparable tension between the official and the personal, the artist and the patron.” Her final verdict comes in the form of a compliment, “…but with his first novel, The Opium Clerk and now this, Kunal Basu has proved himself one of the most skilled practitioners of historic fiction writing today.”

Racists, too, like the first two novels of Basu, has received good reviews. Indrajit Hazra in his article “Head Hunters” in Hindustan Times brings about a relevant comparison between Adolfo Bioy Casares’ 1940 novella, The Invention of Morel, and Basu’s Racists, aligning the two stories on the pretext of an elaborate experiment “to prove or disprove the existence of the innate nature of Man.” He quite informally condones that “Racists isn’t a multi-culti exposition. It is an idea-novel that uses the historical narrative to send the reader on a shuddering yet sympathetic journey into that dark continent of human dogmas.” Comparisons abound, as the Sydney Morning Herald Review (dated Saturday, 29th April 2006) succinctly states, “Of course, Kunal Basu knows he is telling a cruel story. But he makes of it a Lord of the Flies in reverse, a story in which savagery is the result of civilization.” Alongside the commendations that form the major corpus of the reviews which Basu’s novels have received, there are to be found a few negative commentaries as well. James Urquhart in his “The Skull beneath the Skin Colour,” in The Independent, published on 12 January, 2009, for instance, registers his disappointment with Racists: “Racists is not bulging with interesting or dynamic characters, and the plot’s static argument struggles to excite. Basu’s debut novel, The Opium Clerk, promised much for the author’s slightly
ponderous prose style. Racists falls somewhere between an earth bound novel of ideas and an exotic adventure without managing to deliver very much of substance.”

The Yellow Emperor’s Cure seems to have been received in a more salubrious way, and has multiplied considerably the admirers of Basu’s prose style. Geeta Doctor, a Chennai based writer, in her blog, dated January 13, 2012, is all praise for Basu’s magical narrative style and the way he evokes strange and fantastical realms of romance and history. It is quite evident from the way she praises Basu’s novel that she is an ardent fan of Basu’s novels. She writes, “Each time Basu uncorks his magician’s bottle of historical memory and desire, he brings forth a genie of such ambitious powers that the reader is left overwhelmed and not a little puzzled by its effects. In his latest book, set for the most part in China, just before the Boxer Rebellion of the late 19th century, Basu’s storytelling skills find a subject that has all the gorgeous suffocating quality that an addict might experience in the brocaded chambers of the ancient Summer Palace of the Chinese capital.” Manju Kak, a noted blogger, acknowledges Basu’s tenacity as a writer in India Today. She refers to the plot structure of The Yellow Emperor’s Cure and praises amply the style and imagery that Basu uses in this novel. She calls the novel a love story and an engaging adventure and leaves a slightly ambiguous verdict, “But as for unveiling some universal truth—Basu leaves you with mixed feelings.”

Basu’s latest novel, Kalkatta, has also received a good number of critical reviews. Annie Zaidi seems to be slightly sceptic about this work in her article in Live Mint, published on November 28, 2015. In her opinion, the plot structure of the novel fails to construct itself into a richly layered story. According to her, Kalkatta represents a particular picture of Kolkata which is quite a familiar one and fails to surprise the Indian readers. She simply dismisses it as “an overly populated novel that tries to cram in different shades of misery and exploitation.” Geeta Doctor in her article, “The City without a Map,” seems to be more
perceptive and less caustic in her assessment of the novel. She calls it “an intriguing tale of a truncated metropolis told by a denizen twice removed.” She further addresses a very significant aspect of the novel and surmises Basu’s intentions in the novel quite clearly: “Through the voice of his narrator Jamshed Alam, the quintessential flaneur, as hero, Basu explores both facets of contemporary society as it manifests itself in the venality of the rich and the vulnerability of the dispossessed. It is a city with many memories, but little sense of belonging.”

As this brief literature review shows, Basu’s engagement with history has been examined sporadically by the critics. Such engagements, however, have not considered all the novels of Basu. This leaves nearly a virgin ground for this researcher’s attempt to make a new historicist reading of all Basu’s novels. This justifies the viability of this work as a PhD dissertation. I hope that it, as a sincere attempt, will contribute to the knowledge generated on Kunal Basu’s presentation of history in his fiction.

Apart from the introduction and the conclusion, there are six chapters in this dissertation. The first chapter introduces the theoretical premise and addresses the interrelationship between history, fiction and representation. The chapter critically looks at the theories of Representation, New Historicism and Historical fiction as it is by way of these avenues that the present researcher intends to examine Basu’s representation of history in his novels. The second chapter deals with The Opium Clerk, Basu’s first novel. This chapter examines Basu’s representation of the Baboo culture and its impact on Indian society. In course of such investigation, the Indo-Anglian relationship in the Imperial Calcutta is also addressed. Finally, the chapter examines Basu’s representation of the history and the crisis of the Opium Trade in Imperial India, especially in Bengal. The third chapter on The Miniaturist examines Basu’s re-working of the consortium of registered and unregistered facts under the regime of the Mughal Emperor Akbar with an inimical attention to the issues of religion, the
position of women and the conditions of Miniature art practised in that age. The chapter shows how Basu, by way of addressing these vital issues, recreates a new history filling up the gaps and fissures that are to be found in the aseptic version of historical documents.

The fourth chapter is on Kunal Basu’s third novel, *Racists*, which is an aggressive critique of racial discrimination in any form. The chapter intends to examine Basu’s representation of an unhistoricised past of the 19th century Victorian England, tarnished with the practice of unabashed racial pyromania. The marginal and subjugated position of the women in the Victorian era has also been examined in the chapter. In this chapter, the present researcher, in fact, tries to unearth Basu’s take on the unjust racial and gender discriminations that prevailed during the age. The fifth chapter investigates Basu’s novel *Yellow Emperor’s Cure* (wherein Basu has dealt with the history of syphilis, the deadly disease, and the Boxer Rebellion of China) to argue that Basu’s approach to history in this novel is quite different from his approach to history evident in other novels. The sixth chapter deals with Basu’s latest novel, *Kalkatta*. This chapter examines Basu’s negotiations with various issues like the partition of India, Islamic religion and the tabooed issue of male sexual service. The conclusion sums up the findings of the dissertation. For citation, this dissertation will follow the 8th edition of the MLA Handbook.
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Chapter I

History, Fiction, Representation

This chapter intends to examine the interrelationship between history, fiction and representation. It will try to make a critical analysis of the discourses relating to New Historicism and Representation vis-á-vis history to form a background knowledge for reading Basu’s representation of history in his novels. The chapter will have four distinct sections, namely, ‘Representation,’ ‘Representation in History/History as Representation,’ ‘New Historicism and After’ and ‘Historical Fiction.’

Representation

Theory of representation is one of those theories that have been important in understanding closely the inner genomics of literature and dates back to antiquity. No study of representation can begin without referring to Plato and Aristotle. Plato’s verdict that all literature is a mere form of representation and Aristotle’s contestation of such a claim attest special deference to the theory of representation and invite us to delve into its depths more closely to understand its dynamics. Man, too, by many philosophers old and new, has been considered as a ‘representational animal’—*homo symbolicum*, the creature whose singular attribute was to devise signs, i.e., things that ‘stand for’ or ‘take place of’ something else.

The concept of representation has come to occupy a very vital and crucial place in the study of culture as well. It is representation that connects meaning and language to culture. Meanings are produced and communicated by way of language and hence is considered as the key repository of cultural values and meanings. Language in itself is a representational system. It gives expressions and shapes to our notions, ideas and concepts and thus acts as an
intercessor through which feelings, ideas and emotions are represented in a culture. Stuart Hall in *Representation* stresses the importance of language in the production of meaning, “Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced” (xvii).

Members of the same culture realise and understand the world around them in practically the same way, that is, they make sense of the world or interpret it in almost a similar fashion. But it is needless to say that there will be a huge diversity of feelings, concepts and ideas within the boundary of a single culture itself, and it is hardly exhortatory that these should be open to multiple and diverse interpretations. But the concept of culture is thus that it organises and regulates the social practices and influences, rather radically, the conduct of its participants, moulding them in accordance with its own terms and dictates.

It is our interpretation of things that bestows it with specific meanings which often involves the complex process of inchoation, a fading out of previous meanings or understandings, giving way to newer perceptions, amplifying its dimensions. We attach meanings to things by the way we represent them, by the feelings we attach to them, by the values we place on them and by the way we conceptualize or classify them. Participants of the same culture fall within the same cultural circuit and thus share the same cultural codes. Those cultural codes often intervene in our construction or conceptualisation of a thing that exists in the real world, and thus, in its representation by us. As Hall would say:

> Representation, in this view, is a process of secondary importance which enters into the field only after things have been fully formed and their meanings constituted.

(xxii)

Thus, representation is instrumental in constructing meanings wherein the culture and its peripheral paraphernalia are a constitutive part. As soon as we begin to use representation in
any social situation, it immediately takes up an ambivalent role—both as a means of communication as well as contestation. This further problematizes the concept of representation.

Language is a composite of signs and these signs act as a vehicle of meanings within the bounds of a culture. The meanings and culture codes that emanate by way of language are called a ‘discourse,’ and a discursive approach practically sums up the relevant, ‘the true’ and the useful in a culture circuit. In other words, a discourse is the representation of a culture; a reference to it and an understanding of it. It generates specific, almost particular knowledge about the culture. This discursive approach leads us towards yet another contiguous and relevant aspect of representation—the ‘regime’ of representation, the historical specificity. It is a significant adjunct that determines how language and meanings are deployed at a certain time in a particular place.

Since there is no resolute or persistent understanding of a meaning and since there is always the atypical shifting of a meaning—retrenching, expanding, fading and narrowing of it—the practice of representation needs to be interpretive in all its temerity. ‘Reading’ or interpreting is possibly the sole way of exhausting and exploring myriad meanings that a representation may hold in store. It also shows how these meanings obtain newer meanings which in turn contest each other, with a shift in context and historical circumstances, negotiating, conciliating, drifting, interceding, and, at times, simply settling. Hall writes:

One soon discovers that meaning is not straightforward or transparent, and does not survive intact the passage through representation. It is a slippery customer, changing and shifting with context, usage and historical circumstances. It is therefore never finally fixed. It is always putting off or deferring its rendezvous with Absolute Truth. It is always being negotiated or inflected, to resonate with new situations. It is often
contested, and sometimes bitterly fought over. There are always different circuits of meaning circulating in any culture at the same time, overlapping discursive formations, from which we draw to create meaning or to express what we think.

(xxv)

But as mentioned earlier, all meanings, those of our fears and fantasies, desires and revulsion, ambivalence and aggression, when construed in language, are represented with the single purpose of communication, and this communication then requires a person at the receiving end. Meanings are absolutely redundant unless they are read into. The incipient meaning well encoded within a discourse requires a decoding by way of interpretation and reading. It has to be intelligibly received at another point in the chain. So the ‘taking of meaning’ is equally important as the ‘putting into meaning.’ And thus it performs more like a disquisition, a dialogue wherein there is a two-way transmission of meanings. This entire process swaying between time and space, varied contexts and historical situations, generates multiple meanings of the same discourse, frescoing newer interpretations and readings, and thus the event as essayed in the discourse almost undergoes a process of translation—a translation of culture codes, a translation of values, a translation of what is ‘wrong’ and ‘right.’ It is as if a perpetual process of re-reading, and thus generating, negotiating, moderating, conciliating, contesting the ideas encapsulated in a discourse distanced by time and space, and thus accounting afresh the cultural mores and practices from the present perception, idea and cultural domain of the reader. Readings, thus, squabble, differ and defer.

Generally, there are three types of representational relationship often understood under the names of icon, symbol and index. They are often manoeuvred as the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist approaches of representation. A photographic representation, that is a representation based mostly on the pretext of resemblance or imitation, is called the iconic or reflexive representation. The ancient theory of Mimesis falls
under the paradigm of such representation. This implies almost a graphic reproduction of the ‘thing’ in the real world with punctilious detailing with not a trinket deracinated or abnegated. The symbolic form of representation that involves the use of language engages an absolutely contradictory form of representation. Signs are used as pre-empted conveyors of notions and ideas already existing in our heads. But this process of using signs and signification is based upon an arbitrary stipulation. The stone stands for a man because we have agreed to say so; we have agreed to regard it this way. This form of intentional intervention, wherein language is but the deliberation or expression of the author’s /painter’s /speaker’s personally intended meanings, gives him an extraordinary puissant and control over the text or representation. With a further escalation of understanding, we come to the truer realization that meaning is constructed in and through language. Thus, indexical representation or constructionist representation explains the ‘standing for’ in terms of cause and effect, or some other aspects like probity or connectedness in terms of its reading by a particular someone at a particular time in a particular place. This constructionist approach thus ensures the multiplicity of ‘readings’ of a single text. Thus, representation in a constructionist approach inveterately generates multiple ‘truths,’ sinuously thus, distancing itself from the Absolute Truth or the truth that we know as the real world. But then again is the real world absolute? A moderate contemplation over the issue will amply justify that the so-called real world is also the ceaseless process of spawning a mew, often greedily and usuriously mutilating previous codes for newer ones. No wonder Plato found it fit that representation should be banished from his ideal state. Plato’s opinion about representation was more than slightly pejorative, for he thought that as representations are mere substitutes for things themselves, they may be false, deceptive, and illusory and may stir up emotions detrimental to the healthy prosperity of his ideal state.
It was Saussure who laid the foundation stone, the scaffolding upon which the
collectionist approach of representation was to build its superstructure or argument.
Saussure’s concept of formalism or structuralism can be reckoned as Mimesis evolved to a
mature degree. The concept of the signifier/signified was crucially instrumental in generating
or producing meaning impaled by the cultural and linguistic codes which sustained
representation. But the cumulative process involved a generating of meanings not just by way
of this inter-relation between the signifier and the signified, but in terms of ‘difference.’ And
thus to produce meanings, the signifiers have to be organised into a system of differences, for
it is the difference between the signifiers that signifies that is crucial in the formation of
meaning. This opens representation to a continual process of ‘reading’ and ‘re-reading’ and
the constant slippage of meanings gives way to newer meanings, and also to newer
interpretations. And in this ceaseless process of ‘reading,’ a sense of difference and
deferment crawls between the meaning and its sign, between the signifier and the signified. It
is here that we may resort to Derrida’s concept of the différance. Derrida shows that the
meaning of a ‘present sign’ is its relationship with all the absent meanings that the term is
not. So, between presentation and re-presentation there is construed a sense of deferment, a
difference and it is this difference that gives newer identities and meanings to a
representation. Thus, meanings cannot be fixed and they are in a continuous process of
change owing to the social conventions, specific to a particular society at a particular time. In
other words, meanings are produced within history and culture and there cannot be any
solitary, single, unchanging, universal ‘true’ meaning. Construction of meanings, therefore,
involves a sustained regular process of interpretation in which there is again a constant
slipping and sliding of meanings.

Foucault gave a narrower understanding of the variegated aspirations of the word
‘representation.’ His approach was more historically grounded with a greater attention
towards historical specificities, his chief concern being relations of power, not relations of meaning. His main concern was how knowledge is produced (and not meaning) in what he called ‘discourse.’ His approach was thus more discursive, eliminating almost everything but the politics of the production of knowledge and how it reflects a more corroborative way of constructing meaning or history. As in his *Power and Knowledge* Foucault distinctly mentions:

> Here I believe one’s point of reference should not be to the great model of language (langue) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power not relations of meaning... (114-115)

He petitioned that things meant something and were true only within a specific historical context. Meanings were created by way of a complex process of producing knowledge in a particular historical context and involved a pure genomics of politics by way of which power was restored and practised. His theory brought about a major shift in the perspective of a reader, reading meanings out of a particular historical context giving way to greater contestations and contradictions. He showed how power operated within what he called institutional apparatus and its technique to imbue it within the frame of the cultural milieu—a form of power that Gramsci called ‘hegemony.’ Such knowledge linked to power assumes the authority of the ‘truth’ and has the power to make itself true. As he quite clearly mentions in his *Discipline and Punish*:

> There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations. (27)
And this gave way to a regime of truth—a truth that is sustained by way of discursive formation and not one that can ever be considered as absolute, for it is susceptible to change owing to the concerned ‘perspective.’ In his *Power/Knowledge* Foucault succinctly points out:

Truth isn’t outside power….Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and make function as true, the mechanism and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned…the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (131).

This amply problematizes the politics of representation which is primarily dependent on the subject position of the person who is representing a thing or event. Representability may, thus, negotiate with more than one ‘truth,’ considering the subject position of the representer.

**Representation in History/ History as Representation**

History, as is evident already, is also a form of representation. In history, there often seems to be a covert, *ipso facto* communication, a kind of pact between the past generations with that of the present one. Our existence is in itself a proof to this as it was to the generations that preceded us. A historian practises with a clear understanding of this philosophy. Chronicling events may follow different subjective attitudes as objective history cannot be but reckoned as a mere fallacy. Many a minor and major event that may have escaped the attention of a historian or, perhaps, been intentionally avoided, cannot be dumped
into the drop box with an ‘unhistorical’ label on it. The chronicler should be precisely aware
of and alive to the fact that ‘nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for
history’ (Benjamin 254). The past is citeable only to a redeemed mankind, for “Man lives
consciously for himself, but is an unconscious instrument in the attainments of the historic
universal aims of humanity” (Carr 51). Retrieving the truth about past is in itself a mighty
challenge. Only that part is seized that vies and can be recognised by the present. As Walter
Benjamin would say: “For every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one
of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255).

Contemplating history, therefore, is a difficult process. In order to grasp and re-live a
particular era, the historian needs to religiously cleanse his head of all the information, data,
and events of history he has gathered about the course of history, else it may lead to a state of
refractoriness. The cultural treasures that he confronts as he enters that historical age need to
be treated with cautious and studied detachment. Historians need to delve into historical eras
with this specific insight. This penetrative investigation would then strive to posit the past as
a metaphor for the present. History cannot, of course, be reckoned as the feats of ‘great men,’
rulers, tyrants, stubborn statesmen et al, who had pontificated their actions and intentions as
something to bring about mass welfare and goodness. As Carr quite succinctly points out:

The facts of history are indeed facts about individuals, but not about actions of
individuals performed in isolation, and not about the motives, real or imaginary,
from which individuals suppose themselves to have acted. They are facts about the
relations of individuals to one another in society and about the social forces which
produce from the actions of individuals results often at variance with, and sometimes
opposite to, the results which they themselves intended. (52)
A cleverer and smarter approach to history is what is coveted, one that will bring about a balance and a valence to the crises of our present generations. It should be enthused with a purport to bring about a progress to mankind from its stagnancy of conformism. The past should try to demystify, rectify and make better the present. And this is exactly what is meant by referring to the past for redemption. History, thus, cannot be the accumulation of facts, following a basic law or method as is the case in scientific researches.

History is more like a bricolage constituting of available documented facts from where a contingent circumstance can well be gleaned forth. Hence it maintains a sense of contemporaneity in all ages. Perspectives play a vital role in such subtle alterations, if not absolute mutilations. It will be unfair to judge the historian for diluting the purity of facts and events, for there are certain surreptitious events that need to be kept from the knowledge of the generations with the noble purpose of averting disruption and degradation. As Professor Barraclough goes on to say that history “was not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgements” (qtd. in Carr 61). This makes history remarkably similar to the social sciences. It may not be something akin to being numinous, stringently moral or ruthlessly cynical, but it certainly serves well in scaffolding the moral ethical fibre of the society. As Karl Popper says:

A social scientist may, for instance, predict something, foreseeing that this prediction will cause it to happen. Or he may deny that a certain event is to be expected thereby preventing it. And in both cases he may be observing the principle which seems to ensure scientific objectivity: for in making forecasts (which forthcoming happenings fulfil) he may have influenced those happenings in the direction that he personally preferred. (13)
History, thus, can be called a “selective system of cognitive orientations to reality” (Carr 11). Historical facts presuppose interpretation. History is not what existed, but what the historian would like us to believe as existed. This may seem to be an almost vague suggestion, but it only reconfirms that history is not a sacrosanct well of truth and facts. It is not just a mere accumulation of facts and events that had transpired in a particular age, but is rather a manipulative interpretation of such events which the historian finds apt enough to record. The cognition of facts comes by way of a series of judgements and assumptions. Aberrations are primarily sought forth and when such aberrations are distilled through the interpretation and judgement of the historian, into what we call history, we find a referent. The cognitive manipulation and interpretation is always consciously or unconsciously enthused with a sense of contemporaneity. And thus events that had occurred hundreds of years ago can be still referred to in understanding, and possibly, solving the problems of the present. The past that is dealt with by the historians is not a dead past, but a past which still breathes in the present. Professor Oakeshott’s insightful observation in this regard is worth mentioning: “History is the historian’s experience. It is “made” by nobody save the historian: to write history is the only way of making it” (qtd.in Carr 22).

History, thus, is a composite of interpretations and we do not get it in a pure form, for it has none. The facts are refracted through the mind of the chronicler. His understanding and interpretation of the past is affected by the present. And thus it becomes a two way process. The problems and aberrations of the present are understood by way of a reference to the past. And the past is recreated with a consciousness of the present. Thus, the validity of the knowledge depends much on the validity of purpose. Intransigent facts of the past are thus quite manipulatively interpreted and recorded with the valid purpose to serve the needs of the present. The historian cannot be isolated from his age. Nor can be the reader of history. And thus the entire process of making and reading of history falls within this vicious circle. The
The historian himself is a part of history and thus the age and society in which he finds himself determine his attitude and perspective of the past. It is like a dialogue between the historian and his facts, a dialogue between the past and the present, a dialogue between the society of today and the society of yesterday. It is a construction and cannot be founded on merely accounting generalisations.

In fact, knowledge furnished by history serves a two-way process. It is not just a way of understanding the present in the light of the past but vice versa. A deep and profounder understanding is attainable only by a coherent interrelating of the past and the present. The past adumbrates and the present gives clairvoyance to it. History can therefore be safely called a cultural construct. It is an interpretive understanding of facts and events, and therefore a constructionist representation of the ‘truth,’ and in the process, yielding subsequent truths.

**New Historicism and After**

The concept and notion of history has undergone a sea-change in the recent past. A closer inspection into ‘tradition’ and the ‘past’ that encapsulates such tradition has given history a different face. As Romila Thapar very pertly observes:

In the three decades of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the interest in the past came to be re-oriented in a significant way. It was no longer limited to political and dynastic history. It introduced the interface of these aspects with others such as social and economic history and the flow of what was called culture/civilization that largely addressed religion, language, literature, the arts and philosophy. This change can be illustrated in various ways in the themes that younger historians started researching.
that were concerned with trying to construct a larger picture of society. The change
was associated partly with history becoming a social science, partly with its being
written from a Marxist perspective on the history of society, or on specific aspects of
religion and on concepts of legitimation from a Weberian perspective, and partly
with new directions suggested by different sources and new questions arising from
dialogue with other disciplines. Some examples of the latter were the function of
technology in changing society, a more realistic gender history than had been written
before, and the investigation of environmental factors affecting history. (3)

Thus, we come to reckon the importance and significance of society, people and culture in
the making and constructing of history. And this brings us to another adjacent but relevant
theory—New Historicism.

All this while we have been talking about how history is being made with a curious
and yet deliberate imaginative intervention of the historian’s perspective. This leads us to the
fact that the element of imagination, which is so pervasively and prominently manifest in art,
is not its sole patent. The kinship between the two (art and history) has, to a great extent, been
established. A little bit of art is indeed to be found in history and a little bit of history is
ascertainable in art. This mutual embeddedness of art and history is the concern of the New
Historicists. It is the play of the sense of history’s galvanic appearances and disappearances
in art. It is a syncretic tendency that contrarily multiplies inflections. Art is goaded by our
desire for critical innovations, an interest in contingency, improvisation, and the urge to cull
an oblique fact and watch its circulation. References are sought from history, which makes
history the relevant text for the construction of the art form. History in itself refers to human
culture and society. Thus, culture becomes the relevant text for history and, thus, to art as
well. This makes art a representation of history which again is the representation of cultures.
Literature or art thus becomes a chronotope.
New Historicism involves almost a raucous sceptical aggressive method of interpretation as opposed to the docile, slightly laid back approach of the old historicism. There is, however, never the repudiation or derogation of the sense of deep gratification that artistic representations provide. The New Historicists are animated with the urge and necessity to critically examine the cultural matrix wherefrom these artistic representations emerge: they want to examine the implicit assumption about representations embedded in works of art and link these assumptions to institutional strategies. This hermeneutical aggression (wherein culture is deliberately included as an important text, as a prerequisite for the understanding of an artistic representation) has led to the expansion of the range of objects available to be read and interpreted in history. Many a thing that has been dodged to dwindle in the shadows, excluded from the canon, merely on the basis of the fact that such a thing was too minor to fascinate or hold the interest of the historian or the storyteller, is now being considered by the New Historicists. As Catherine Gallagher points out:

There has been in effect a social rebellion in the study of culture, so that figures hitherto kept outside the proper circles of interest—a rabble of half-crazed religious visionaries, semi-literate political agitators, coarse faced peasants in hobnailed boots, dandies whose writings has been discarded as ephemera, imperial bureaucrats, freed slaves, women novelists dismissed as impudent scribblers, learned women excluded from easy access to the materials of scholarship, scandalmongers, provincial politicians, charlatans and forgotten academics—have now forced their way in, or rather have been invited in by our generation of critics. (9)

An incorporation of the marginal with a specific intent, thus, is amply discernible in the present-day engagement with history. This entire process brings about a distinct change in perspective: a strong denial to conformism is clearly visible.
New Historicism was, in fact, a response to an increasing sense of ethical failure and the isolation of the text. It was felt that a kind of ethical tipping point has been reached. And the modes of analysis that were in practice needed to be superseded by modes of analysis in which history and political implications of what one was doing needed to be brought to the centre. History conditions what literature can say in a given epoch and is an important way of understanding the valence of various things said in an age. Literature has a discursive agency that affects history every bit as much that history affects literature. It can, indeed, be a very dangerous or an immensely positive influence depending on one’s point of view, and this is precisely the area where Old historicism differs distinctly from New Historicism. The naivety of the old historicism lies in its supposition that it has no vested interest in what it is talking about. New Historicism is fully cognizant of the subjective interest which leads to a choice of interesting materials, a way of choosing about those materials and a means of bringing them to life, to focus, for us today. The significance of the text is more important as opposed to the meaning of the text. The significance of the text is that it has a certain kind of power invested in it, and such power is still of interest to us today, still of relevance to what is going on in our own world. The world as a New historicist sees it is essentially a dynamic interplay of power, networks of power, and subversions, that is to say, modes of challenging those networks even within the authoritative texts that generate the power. New Historicism tends to focus on the relation between this power and its subversion, and considers a text to have emerged from a complex matrix of social and political circumstances. H. Aram. Veeser observes:

Conventional scholars—entrenched, self-absorbed, protective of guild loyalties and turf, specialized in the worst senses—have repaired to their disciplinary enclaves and committed a classic *trahison de clercs*. As the first successful counterattack in decades against this profoundly anti-intellectual ethos, the New Historicism has
given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature and economics. It has struck down the doctrine of non-interference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions on all matters that deeply affect people’s practical lives—matters best left, prevailing wisdom went, to experts who could be trusted to preserve order and stability in ‘our’ global and intellectual domains. New Historicism threatens this quasi-monastic order. (ix)

From the above reading, a series of questions may arise. Does New Historicism pose a threat to the sacred aesthetics of a text? Does it, by any chance, demote or discredit aesthetic pleasure? A little more discussion on it, thus, becomes necessary to get a clearer picture of the method and purpose of this theory. Since it incorporates the marginal and the overlooked part of the greater text, that is, by far, broadens the horizon and expanse of the culture study, the process of culling the ‘other’ texts requires meticulous attention and diligence.

New Historicists consider both the primary sources and the secondary sources as forms of narrative. And be it the primary source or the secondary, both are found in some sort of writing, as a narrative. Thus, both provide us with a set of interpretations. For, writing about the event is not just photographically recording its details. It involves interpretation. It engages the perspective of the author, be it the primary or the secondary. The New Historicists deal with this interplay of discourses and narratives and try to formulate a more luminous narrative that will throw light on the web of social meanings operating in the time and place where the texts were written. They argue that all kinds of writing are but a kind of interpretation—be it history, be it letters, be it other forms of accounts. They involve the same procedure of culling facts and interpreting them. The intervention of language in itself contaminates an event in the sense that as we observe an event, we perceive it accordingly and this perception is then expressed in the language we find best suited to depict it as closely as possible. But things get refracted in the process. For these perceptions are very individual
and subjective. And so their depiction and interpretation are almost removed from the fact/event. Hence ‘truth’ seems to evade, get transfigured, is interpreted and thus contaminated. New Historicism thus tries to point out the fact that history is not a series of factual data, and that history or any form of narrative, so to say, involves interpretation and hence has nothing to do with the deliverance of truth. They are therefore, discourses, a kind of social language that is created by certain cultural conditions at a particular time and place: it helps us in understanding human experience and progress. Keeping in line with our stream of discussion, one may safely quote Lois Tyson here:

Thus, new historicism views historical accounts as narratives, as stories, that are inevitably biased according to the point of view, conscious or unconscious, of those who write them. The more unaware historians are of their biases—that is, the more ‘objective’ they think they are—the more those biases are able to control their narratives. (286)

New Historicism, therefore, smudges the demarcation between history (which is thought to be comprised of truth or is purely factual) and literature (which is considered as fictional based mostly upon the author’s imagination). For the New Historicists, history can be interpreted just as the way literary texts can be interpreted. And literary texts, in their own ways, can throw much light on the culture and history of the time and place in which they were produced.

Thus, New Historicism resulted in bringing together the implicit assumptions about representations embedded in works of art (including history) and linking these assumptions to institutional strategies. This once again brings us back to the amanuensis of Power in this context. Foucault is one of the primary interests to the New Historicists. According to Foucault, power is as pervasively and insidiously distributed in the way in which knowledge
is distributed. Power is an insidious and ubiquitous mode of circulating knowledge. This exactly explains how certain forms of knowledge come to exist in certain places as well as the pervasiveness of certain kinds of thinking.

New Historicists look upon the text as but a vehicle of politics, insofar the texts are quite instrumental in yarning the fabric of social and cultural formations. All differences between literature and history are thus dissolved and a complex dialogue between the two is created. Truth, in this context, as hinted at already, becomes important. Truth in itself is a veritable construct and though it is intended that it should have the appearance of a stable, unchangeable and objectively knowable category, one cannot ignore the fact that in constructing such a category itself, partial concerns and preferences (often unconsciously) do intervene. Both literature and history thus contain such constructed truths. But then what motivation lies behind the construction of certain truths? Critics such as Stephen Greenblatt or Alan Sinfield consider literary texts as vehicles of power and the same is applicable to the texts of history. They contain the same potential for power and subversion as it exists in society generally. They comprise this constructed truth, the manipulated truth, and thus are but accomplices in the appanage of power. As Brannigan rightly sums up:

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism can be seen therefore using the past as an impetus for political struggle in the present, and making it clear that the discipline of literary studies is not removed from the sphere of politics. (6)

New Historicists are of the belief that ‘repression’ or subversion is inevitable, and no matter how insufferable it may seem, it is but unavoidable. Subversion is produced in the interest of power and power is all pervasive for it emanates from everywhere. Our culture is thus designed so to place power in such an overwhelmingly advantageous position. The self or the community or the culture exists within the confines of language and society and language and
society are self-policing hegemonic systems. This makes resistance almost impossible. In fact, both New Historicism and Cultural Materialism preoccupy themselves in investigating power relations as the most important context for interpreting texts. There is, however, one fundamental difference between the two schools. In their efforts to examine the linguistic, cultural, political, and social fabric of the past more vividly, the New Historicists were intent on using literary texts as equal sources that may render information regarding history. Reading literary text, to them, is important in order to form a more succinct and more general idea of the age to which the text belonged. The Cultural Materialists, on the other hand, consider the literary text “as part of a wider context of cultural and political institutions” (Brannigan 13).

Thus a ‘thick’ i.e., a deeper and closer description gives us a more comely and more complete picture of the society focussing on personalised history. Lois Tyson argues: “Indeed, because traditional historicism tended to ignore or marginalize private life as subjective and irrelevant, new historicism tries to compensate for this omission by bringing issues concerned with private life into the foreground of historical inquiry” (289). It is a process of negotiating with the preternatural dimensions of orthodox or acceptable history and a parsing of issues that would provide a better and greater understanding of the societal picture. This may lead to a sense of surliness and often at times a sense of frisson amongst the otherwise supercilious face of history or the study of culture. But both New Historicism and Cultural Materialism have made this practice of incorporating the marginal side of the story mandatory in the process of ‘self-positioning.’

The selective investigation that has been the staple and forte of orthodox history making has, thus, been strategically challenged and contested. As a result, certain aberrations and aspects of society that were incriminated so long as being irrelevant and not fit to find their place in the canonical identity, have now been realised, referred to and winningly
established themselves as a counter to the otherwise linear, unblemished, untainted depiction of one’s culture. There cannot thus be a disjunction between what happens in the society and of how much of it is being told, for the part concealed is still a part of the edited conscripted version of history that is cannoned.

It is the retrenchment of the social picture by the acculturation of all such details, notions and experiences (which breathed of late in the shadows of the margin) that led to the emergence of another school, called the Subaltern Studies. Irascible to the social morass, this new discipline was dogged and punctilious in changing the visage of history and has often been reckoned as a potential threat to the vanguards of the cultural hegemony. Often ascribed as the ‘history from below,’ Subaltern Studies comprised the forgotten and forsaken aspects of the section of the class that has been drowned into the fathomless, un-gaugeable depths of anonymity. The knowledge of the subaltern is purely sociological and it has rarely found its way into aesthetics. But slowly and surely, the concept of the subaltern has become a historical construct and demands a close investigation of its inner genomics to bring out its relevance to the understanding of one’s culture and history.

Such prejudicial exclusion of certain cultural events or contexts is quite redolent to the fact that a greater inscrutable mechanism is at work to keep the Ideological stature of the society in conformity with their own almost invidious design. The hiatuses created, the sections muted, the practices snubbed, are part of a greater power politics. Certain gangly aspects of the society have been deliberately left unrepresented with the sole and immediate purpose of suppressing them. It has been done so for these muted aspects may voice truths. And the truths they voice may infringe the purity and docility of the well-constructed and manipulated history that the authority has created and circulated as knowledge. Certain dominant and prominent values which, in other words, may be called the Ideology of the state apparatus will not tolerate any such infringement or breach and hence a re-fabrication of
practices becomes necessary to obtain a better understanding of this cultural hegemonization and institutionalization of lies and half-truths or untold facts and practices.

This convenient commensal negotiatory awakening to history has caused a sense of agitation and perturbation and a strong effort has been made with utmost sincerity, to unearth the ‘minority histories.’ It further augments the well of history and provides a broader and sharper perspective:

So to the question as to whether or not such incorporation changes the nature of historical discourse itself, the answer is simple; of course, it does. But the answer to the question, Did such incorporation call the discipline into any kind of crisis? Would have to be, No. To be able to tell the story of group hitherto overlooked, to be able to master the problems of crafting such narratives—particularly under circumstances where the usual archives do not exist—is how the discipline of history renews and maintains itself. For this inclusion appeals to the sense of democracy that impels the discipline ever outward from its core. (Dipesh Chakrabarty 473)

Though it considerably augments the historical content, yet at the same time it poses a resistance to the smooth historicization of events. When one says culture, the implication herein is, however, profoundly political. The state apparatus is responsible to uphold its ideological stand which it tactfully wraps into the garb of the more agreeable and democratic word ‘culture.’ Thus, the concept of culture too is problematized and vitiated. But these suppressed histories have now found their way to the front row after a considerable and substantial amount of resistance imposed upon them by power mechanism. The subaltern historicising, therefore, involves a process of scudding justice to the marginal recluse.
Historical Fiction

If we can’t learn to take historical fiction seriously, we ignore some of the most potent shapers of the general historical consciousness, and we impoverish our own efforts to understand and explain the past. (John. E.Wills 46)

The importance of the genre historical fiction is amply discernible from the above quoted lines. In this section, the primary point of concern would be a close investigation and introspection of the genesis and history of the genre. The latter, that is the history of the historical fiction, can be adequately summed up in the words of Max Byrd, taken from his *The Brief History of a Historical Novel*:

The earliest occurrence of the term ‘historical novel’ known to me dates from 1804, when an obscure English sailor named John Davis published an imaginative account of the seventeenth century romance between Pocahontas and Captain John Smith and called it *The First Settlers of Virginia, An Historical Novel*. Not long afterward, in 1814, the true modern version of the genre was inaugurated by Sir Walter Scott with *Waverly*. To the general principles found in Homer, Scott added two: He gave us the idea that a novel is ‘historical’ only if its action takes place at least half a century before its publication. And he insisted on a complete and uncompromising realism, a nearly archaeological fidelity to historical research and antiquarian detail. (29)

Though Scott pointed out two important features of a historical novel, yet one gets tempted to ask: what exactly is a historical fiction or novel? Let us see how different critics have responded to this fundamental question about historical fiction.
Historical fiction may be reckoned as a narrative by a novelist who has done research work almost like a historian. Sue Peabody observes that for the writer of historical fiction there are three overlapping areas of concern:

One of these is the contrast between what might be called the historian’s effort to illuminate and the novelist’s proclivity to conceal. Another issue is the supposed ability of the successful historical novel to ‘make the past come alive.’ Finally, there is the relationship between these issues and the question of narrative point of view. (30)

Almost in the same line, David Daiches categorizes a historical novel into three types:

A historical novel can be primarily an adventure story in which the historical elements merely add interest and a sense of importance to the actions described; or it can be essentially an attempt to illustrate those aspects of the life of a previous age which most sharply distinguish it from our own; or it can be an attempt to use a historical situation to illustrate some aspects of man’s fate which has importance and meaning quite apart from that historical situation. (23)

Talking about historical novel and Scott’s contribution to the genre, Lukács observes:

What is lacking in the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott is precisely the specifically historical, that is derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age. The great critic Boileau, who judged the historical novels of his contemporaries with much scepticism, insisted only that characters should be socially and psychologically true, demanding that a ruler makes love differently from a shepherd, and so on. The question of historical truth in the artistic reflection of reality still lies beyond his horizon. (19)
From the observations of Peabody, Daiches and Lukács it becomes clear that history reveals, while fiction has a tendency to hide and generate an element of suspense. The intention of the historian is to accurately represent facts and thereby enlighten us of the past. But that hardly seems to be the objective of the novelist. His intention, rather, is to generate an aura of suspense that would hold the interest of the reader till the end of the novel. The novelist’s approach is more elastic and it allows him to explore the past in ways which are denied to the historian. The challenge of writing a fiction, any kind of fiction, not necessarily historical fiction, is making what is fictitious seem absolutely real and palpable. That palpability or believability of a tale is where the crafting of history in historical fiction becomes important, and the deliberate teasing with the documented facts and straining the line beyond is the mea culpa of almost all historical novelists. Finally, in history it is the author’s voice which tells us, unhindered, what happened and why it happened. While in fiction, this voice of the historian is split into many fictional voices which play with each other and create polyphonic overtones in the novel.

The approach of the historical novelist, however, must not be absolutely unrestrained, for then it may degenerate into flights of fancy, which will defile and corrupt the purpose and function and utility of the genre—its importance diminished to make fanciful pleasure inducing fictional reads with tampered history. And this will completely jeopardise and convolute the significance of the genre and its specificities. Clive King, as he discusses this aspect of the genre in his essay “The Historical Novel: An Under-Used Resource,” says:

Given that the task of the historical novelist is to portray the past in an imaginative but not false way, we should look for what Georg Lukács calls ‘artistic faithfulness to history.’ This quality means such novels must be true to the period in which they are set. This is more than simple factual accuracy, the characters must develop out of the edge and their psychology not be modernised. This is a task which even great
writers such as Flaubert and Maupassant arguably failed. The writer must seek, like Scott in A.J.P. Taylor’s phrase, to feel ‘himself backwards into time.’ (25)

The role of the historical novelist is neither cataleptic nor feloniously elastic or flexible. Thus, historical fiction can be, in short, summarised as the convergence of fact and fiction. This convergence of fact and fiction in historical fiction is something which is objected to so many times. Walter Scott in the *Dedictory Epistle to Ivanhoe* (1817) talked about this kind of a problem that a historical novelist faces: “the severer antiquary may think, that by this intermingling of fiction with truth, I am polluting the well of history with modern inventions” (17). Such a criticism a historical novelist usually does not bother about. Though he toys with fact and history, the historical novelist derides accuracy. It is, of course, not the job of the historical novelist to be accurate. History seems just to provide him the grounds on which he plants the seeds of his imagination and thereby germinates ‘his-story.’ He has no interest in exploring history for the sake of history. He reads it through the lens of imagination playing truant with the historical characters, moulding them anew, transforming their factual deeds and inserting an imaginary element into the situation. In fact, while doing so, so many times he even consciously or unconsciously, subverts the traditionally accepted history or sees it in a new light. This is how it becomes representation and thereby involves the politics associated with it.

In recent times, mainly because of the works done by the New Historicists, challenges thrown at the accepted versions of history by the historical novelists have started regaining critical attention. Its importance has been recognised considerably as a valuable source for augmenting one’s knowledge of the past not only by laymen alone but also by practising historians. As Jerry Hall in his article “Use of the Historical Novel” quite clearly states:
Many of the authors of historical novels are noted historians whose ability to record history is well authenticated. Men such as Samuel Shellabarger, James Street, Carl Sandburg, and Irving Stone take great pains to verify the actual historical content of their novels and if they take literary licence with an event they mention such a discrepancy in a preface.

The study of history can be made to live for students through the use of historical novels as collateral reading. Moreover, this reading should stimulate students to further historical work and research. (351)

Thus, one may say that the genre is gravid with possibilities of being included within the domain of social sciences in order to address significant issues relating to anthropology, ethnography, sociology and of course history.

This chapter has tried to examine the interrelationship between history, fiction and representation at length. Now, in the light of the discussions above, the present researcher intends to examine Basu’s representation of history in his novels in the chapters that are to follow.
Notes

1. Every single event from the most insignificant to the most influencing—is a product of its culture and at the same time it affects the culture in return. Thus every narrative, irrespective to its affiliation with art or history, is shaped by and shapes the culture in which they emerge. It is thus a vicious circle wherein the concept of subjectivity is further complicated:

   Now, of course, the historian does occasionally find himself in a situation in which he has no ‘sources’ at his disposal except chronicles or, in the worst case, except a chronicle. But even then the historian is not quite at the mercy of the chronicles; he has his ways of testing chronicle accounts, and he can discover important facts from them which the chronicler had no intention whatever of recording. Medieval lives of saints, for example, are invaluable to the historian for the light they throw on the life of the Middle Ages, a life which the chronicler certainly would not have bothered deliberately to record. Furthermore, the greater part of the historian’s sources, at least since Ranke’s time, no chronicler compiled. They are, let us say, lists of tax collections, drawn up by careful and certainly unimaginative bureaucrats for purposes quite temporary and official—not at all for the greater glory of the Emperor. Or the sources may be archaeological, rather than written documents—and rubbish-tips were not constructed to deceive the archaeologist. In short the historian is not in the position of having to rely on the propaganda of partisans.

   (Patrick Gardiner, 149)

   An objective investigation is a direct examination of the world and does not rely or resort to testimony.
2. The term ‘thick description’ has been popularized by Clifford Geertz. Geertz in his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973), acknowledges that he has adopted the term from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Following Ryle, Geertz is of the opinion that the task of anthropology is that of explaining cultures through thick description which specifies and indicate many details, conceptual meanings and structures, and which is opposed to ‘thin description’ which constitutes of a factual account without any interpretation. According to Geertz, it is essential for an anthropologist to provide a thick description of events which constitute not just merely facts, but a commentary and interpretation of those facts and a further investigation of those comments and interpretations. The task involves the extraction of meaning structures that constitute a culture and is often a complexly layered semantic intersection of multiple interpretations giving a fuller picture of the culture structure.

3. Peter Winch in his “Concepts and Actions” carefully studies this generally complex and commodious aspect of incorporating all that can be formed into a narrative, a discursive construct irrelevant of its agreement with social paradigms.

…social relations are internal with the assertion that men’s mutual interaction ‘embodies ideas’, suggesting that social interaction can more profitably be compared to the exchange of ideas in a conversation than to the interaction of forces in a physical system. This may seem to put me in danger of over-intellectualizing social life, especially since the examples I have so far discussed have all been examples of behaviour which expresses *discursive* ideas; that is ideas which also have a straightforward linguistic expression. It is because the use of language is so intimately, so inseparably, bound up with the other non-linguistic activities which men perform, that it is possible to speak
of their non-linguistic behaviour also as expressing discursive ideas. Apart from the examples of this which I have given in other connections, one needs only to recall the enormous extent to which the learning of any characteristically human activity normally involves talking as well: in connection, e.g. with discussions of alternative ways of doing things, the inculcation of standards of good work, the giving of reasons and so on. But there is no sharp break between behaviour which expresses discursive ideas and that which does not: and that which does not is sufficiently like that which does to make it necessary to regard it as analogous to the other. So even where it would be unnatural to say that a given kind of social relation expresses any ideas of a discursive nature, still it is closer to that general category than it is to that of the interaction of physical forces.’ (qtd. in Patrick Gardiner 45)
Works Cited


Chapter II

Representation of History in *The Opium Clerk*

I

Kunal Basu’s first novel, *The Opium Clerk*, though an intense and compelling story of colonial history, is a distinct departure from other pennant Raj novels. The novel covers a span from the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny to the First World War. This chapter intends to examine Basu’s engagement with the colonial history of India during this period. In so doing, it will, in particular, examine Basu’s representation of the ‘Baboo culture,’ the complexities of Indo-Anglican relationships and the British involvement in the (in)famous opium trade and its impact on the Indian society.

II

Hiranyagarbha, the hero of *The Opium Clerk*, was born in Patna on the eve of the Sepoy Mutiny. Saraladebi, Hiran’s mother, was left with no other option but to trundle back her way to her father’s house at Jaanbazar in Calcutta. Mahim, Hiran’s maternal uncle, soon became his most favourite companion and with him Hiran would insufflate himself with the delicious air of Imperial Calcutta and indulge in innocuous volubility sharing stories from the *Panchatantra*. Mahim exercised an inexplicable influence on young Hiran which was reflected much in Hiran’s later years. Hiran relished every single moment spent with this veritable recalcitrant *Gentoo*. Mahim’s feral zest for the Western philosophy and ways of life soon incinerated similar passions in Hiran. The gumption into the erudite world of Bacons, Humes, Paines, and Benthams created the plinth upon which Hiran’s character was to be built. Hiran started his career as a letter writer. Eventually he was introduced to Mr. Kavasji, an officer in an English firm, and because of him, he was employed as ‘a proper *keranee*’ at the Auction House (29). Thus, a “brahmin’s son turned into a mere clerk” (31). With a little
help from Vinny, a co-worker at the Auction House, Hiran soon figured out how things worked at the Auction House. He, however, could not understand what was exactly the ‘article’ of their trade—the mud. The Bastion maintained an oblique way of using metaphors instead of naming it ever. It was Vinny again who came to Hiran’s rescue providing the motjuste for the mud. He understood that it was Opium.

From this point on, a spate of events encumbered Hiran’s life. He was required to become the tutor to the Deputy Superintendent Jonathan Crabbe helping him to understand the ancient tales of India. Slowly but surely, Jonathan Crabbe, the Military Brahmin unravelled the darker and hidden plaits of his character to Hiran. He was an Indian Sahib, one who believed in tantric practices, and epiphenomenally was imbibing Indianness in his system. Soon Hiran met Lilian, Mrs Crabbe, the ‘fen’ girl, ever so distraught and squeamish and with a faraway distant and mysterious look in her eyes and came to know that she was an opium addict. This was the beginning of a new episode in Hiran’s life, an episode gravid with events and occasions that were to transform Hiran’s life irredeemably.

Jonathan Crabbe came up with yet another request for Hiran, to fend for his wife, for she was ‘suffering.’ Hiran could read the helplessness of the opium addiction and its deleterious effect hanging as a shadow on Lilian’s brow. The imperium of the drug had left her a distraught awning shadow of her former self. It required no special effort to realize the scars and wounds that the addiction has left on its victim. The malleable ‘babu’ that he had become, Hiran was only but eager to help his British superior, pro bono and was fevered by an obsession to cure her. The asking of one favour was followed by another. Hiran was further requested to get Crabbe ‘A blackie-white boy’ (98). To his chagrin, this request left Hiran in a state of perpetual unrest and pique. Manacled by a weird and strange desire to oblige the Crabbes, Hiran was arrested in whorls of thoughts of how to get a boy for the Deputy Superintendent. And after much ado, Hiran, with the aid of Vinny, finally was able to
save and bring an orphan to the barren lap of Lilian Crabbe, making Jonathan Crabbe a proud father of Douglas, the ‘chillicracker.’

Reneging to that old mysterious sense of obligation, Hiran was next to set sail for a long voyage all the way to Canton. He received a letter from Jonathan Crabbe bearing the polite request to come over to Canton and help him clear the mess therein. Such spates of requests from Crabbe and the effete placating of the requests by Hiran almost run like a pattern throughout the entire gamut of the novel and serve as a steady joist for the movement of the plot and Hiran’s story. It was this trip to Canton that divulged to Hiran the dark machinations that Crabbe with the help of Mr Guo, the Cantonese agent and Reverend Fowler, a missionary, has so meticulously woven. In a smooth manner Crabbe was once again able to inveigle Hiran to be his accomplice. Hiran once again fell a prey to that arcane relation he shared with his ‘employer,’ and agreed to oblige his request to become a party to the felonious conspiracy.

The stay at the Banyan Tree Village, the nerve centre of the rebels, where he was sent as a friend ready to help the rebel monks in their cause, was even more addling. A confused Hiran felt himself nothing better than a cretin having allowed him to walk into this mess. He failed to locate himself in the elaborate scheme of things he has got himself into. The Rebel monks were mightily shellacked. The entire village was a sad picture of death, destruction and demolition. Despite his constant fealty towards his deputy superintendent, Hiran could now see the heretical strategy and the deputy superintendent’s pert manoeuvring of the same. The journey back, still had in store, some more surprises for Hiran. The capricious Crabbes, fallen under difficult situations, had fled to England, and had left Hiran with their final request to fend for Douglas, who they had to leave behind in India owing to unknown reasons. Thus a new burden was added to Hiran’s life—Douglas.
Hiran’s life became more complicated as the start of the twentieth century did not bring in good news for the opium trade. It started dwindling under the impact of various laws, bans, treaties and restrictions, whose sole concern was to make the trade an illegal one, save for medical usage. This had a considerable effect on the workings at the Auction House, adding to the worries and concerns of Hiran and the other workers there. However, the First World War came as a welcome relief to the trade, for it triggered a renewed demand for the ‘article’ and now the trade was to devise ways of disguising and concealing the article in order to export it.

Despite all acrimony and asperity from around, Hiran and Douglas grew strangely fond of each other. It was at this time that Mahim returned from England as a changed man. The once rebellious beef-eating Brahmin, was now what may be called, a trenchant revolutionary. By that time, a new wave to free India from the Imperial clutches had rocked the country and Bengal was no exception to it. Mahim got associated with these activities and Hiran was concerned over the immensely potent influence that Mahim started exercising on Douglas. There were all noticeable indications that Douglas might have enrolled himself as a member of the ‘Boy’s Association,’ and association that was “interested in freedom” (239). Hiran, however, somehow managed to find a place for Douglas at the Auction House.

Douglas was an absolute charmer at his workplace and everything was going on smoothly. Then on the morning of Janmashtami, amidst a huge ruckus, Douglas was alleged of raping a girl. As a consequence of this, he left the country. He soon found himself a place as the Customs Inspector at the port of Kuching. The rubric of opium trade has, by the time, undergone a sea change. Officially ostracized, the trade, however, was still carried on surreptitiously. In Kuching, especially, the trade had taken a different form. Douglas’s job was to inspect the cargos to “prevent just one article of illegitimate trade,” namely the Opium (254). Once Douglas successfully caught hold of medicine boxes containing the ‘Bengal
Mud,’ and carried out the punitive measures that followed such illegal trade, thus making his first, almost indelible impression, on the white Rajah of Sarawak.

Along with the routine work of inspection, there were other things that kept Douglas busy. On one of his usual days at work, he received a letter from an English woman who he had observed from his window at the Customs House. The letter contained an invitation to Mr Crabbe to come and visit Berhala, the leper colony. A portentous suspicion was also registered in the letter that a clipper carrying infants was heading towards the port, and that those infants, just like those of any other cargo, were to be sold to their future masters. The letter carried a plea for Douglas’s help and intervention in the matter. Douglas responded to the request and found the contents of the letter true. He was, however, only successful in saving one girl child from the clutches of the savage mercenaries.

Douglas’s life was no less eventful than Hiran’s, save for the fact that the former was more zesty and active as compared to the latter. Suddenly Douglas usurps the centre stage of the story from our diffident, servile, timid Brahmin baboo, Hiran, and yet fate kept them close, related and entangled. Slightly priggish and decidedly unwilling to pander the whims of the powerful traders like Ibrahim, Abu Bakr and the likes, and slightly confused by Perkyn’s, his fellow worker’s, revolutionary zeal to see Sarawak as a Republic, Douglas apportioned his days and nights wandering his past, treading his winsome present and dreaming of a life with his soulmate Ruth and Polly, the girl child he had saved from the slave traders and whom Douglas and Ruth had made their daughter. His life at Kuching had a salubrious glow about it. But then the siege started spreading like wild fire taking the whole country in its sway. The kingdom was ablaze with words of the war. Various introspections were made into the future of Kuching. Douglas and Ruth lost their daughter Polly to an unknown disease. And as Kuching was being declared a Republic, Douglas and Ruth started their journey for Canada with the hope of a new beginning.
Indo-Anglican Interface: Baboo or Gentoo as a Cultural Hybrid

History occupies a major part of *The Opium Clerk* as it is set against some of the very important contemporary historical events. Baboo culture and Indo-Anglican relationships, for instance, form the context in which the first part of the novel is set. The British rule in India was not simply a rule of visible violence but also of many crafty and cunning strategies used to firmly establish their sovereignty in the province. Malversation was the forte of the British and they skilfully manipulated their course by almost winning a large section of the educated Indians over in a very complex and enigmatic way for materializing their dreams of absolute authority over them. Their method of exploitation was unique: all acrimony and protest on the part of the educated natives were dealt with immaculate diplomacy and cunning. They camouflaged their intentions of exploiting the people with a more agreeable and innocuous approach and thus successfully postponed any outbreak of revolts and tribulations. Though they posed themselves as friends to the natives, and as apostles of a healthy and noble mission to emancipate this diminutive race from the all devouring darkness of their prejudices and ignorance, it was not hard to understand that they were only friends without friendship, that this pose was a covert strategy to beguile the natives into believing in their noble intent and thereby exploiting them rigorously almost with the approval of the natives. This hidden intention came out clearly in the following words of Hastings:

> Every accumulation of knowledge, and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise a dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the state... (qtd. in Kopf 18)

English education was also introduced with such an intention of creating native clerks or *keranees* with whom the British officials could communicate in their own mother tongue. By
introducing English education, however, unintentionally, the British had handed over to the natives the strongest weapon to shatter the colonizer’s dream to establish their authority for an indefinite period of time.

In this context, it is really interesting to examine the development of the Baboo culture in the 19th century Bengal. How a simple sobriquet or suffix like ‘baboo’ was transmogrified into a veritable culture is both intriguing and remarkable. The history of the British Raj in Calcutta remains incomplete without the mention and discussion of this specific class of people, who, emerged in their new avatar under the Imperial regime. In fact, with the boom in the unholy money under the patronage of British, a class of nouveau riche, who were not even 1% of the population, suddenly, burst out with a new lifestyle that was extravagant and indecently luxurious. This class was known as the Baboos, which consisted almost exclusively of the zamindars, the merciless exploiters of the landless poor. They had large palaces in Kolkata and threw lavish parties to make a mark in the city. Their foppish dandyism and hybridised Anglicization earned them the sarcastic title of the flowery fop, Phoolbabu. This word was used for those who spent most of their time and unlimited wealth with women of ill repute.

Baboo culture, in fact, represents a cross fertilization of English liberalism, the moral decadence of the 1890s in England, a hybridised insertion of Mughal conservatism, and social moral and political changes. They were fostered by British patronage with English education, the British support for the zamindari system, the Protestant spirit of free capital enterprise and the feudal Mughal love for music and baiji. These baboos were governed by lust, wealth, and debauchery. They were mostly brought up by the maids and servants and were only allowed to enter the Andar Mahal or the proper family once they reached their teens. The moment they became young, they had their concubines and there was a large
competition between the Baboos about who could employ more pimps and sycophants (mosahebs).

As a natural consequence of this dirty luxe and wild expenses after the sycophants or mosahebs and their personal concubines, the Baboos perished in terms of wealth, health and social clout. But they left a legacy of Anglophilia, because their decedents and the rising upper class of Bengal all bent towards the trap laid by Macaulay, that of the English education. But English education, as argued already, was nothing other than a mode of production of language efficient, brainwashed, identity-less individuals who were meant to serve as clerks and then, when promoted to offices, ultimately to serve the cause of perpetuation of colonial rule. The British realised that bringing white natives from England would require extremely high salaries and would not further the cause of large scale profit. If one British native’s salary could produce 90-100 English language skilled Baboos, there would be a two pronged benefit: extreme economic benefits and creation of a proto-British class adept in mimicry through whom cultural imperialism could be furthered.

Despite this nefarious intention of the British, the impact of the Western culture on the Bengali Gentoo was immense and had substantial ramifications. As a result of this, a sort of regeneration set in, embracing rational thinking and the vehement abnegation of age-old inhibitive prejudices and practices. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar writes:

The most important single factor that accounts for this great transformation is the impact of the West through the introduction of English education. It broke the barrier which had hitherto effectively shut India from the outside world and opened the flood-gate of Western ideas. (259)

The establishment of Hindu College in 1817, and the likes that were to follow, brought about a Renaissance in Bengal and saw the emergence of a new class of Bengalis unshackled from
blind faith and inane dogmas. A cavalcade of new Bengalis who renounced the vapid social construct and challenged its invective practice in any form came to the fore. The vanguard of such an idealistic, rationally sound generation was Raja Ram Mohan Roy:

The standard of revolt he [Raja Ram Mohan Roy] thus raised against the medieval tyranny of dogmas unleashed forces which created what may be called Modern India, and makes him worthy to rank by the side of Bacon and Luther. (Majumdar 261)

Names like Babu Keshab Chandra Sen, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, Babu Kishori Chand Mitra, Dakshina Ranjan Mukhopadhyay and the likes may be added to this parade of stalwarts, who, armoured by the un-inhibitive and free thinking of the Western culture and education, were instrumental in changing the face of the Bengal that was earlier inflicted by retrogressive traditions and dogmas, the evils that were gnawing its roots to destruction, and helped in building a new Bengal, a resurrected culture.

This new conduit to the realms of an emancipated world of ideas and thoughts, thus, had both a coercive as well as regenerative impact upon this new emerging class of Bengalis. Coercive, for it sullied the true culture that defined the Bengalis and blinded them with a craving and admiration for anything that was British. They were caught amidst the clash of the two cultures, and were readily pro-British, spurning and repudiating all that was not. This was more than the common case, which lacked the entente and pertinent marriage of the two cultures as we find in men like Raja Ram Mohan, Rasik Krishna Mallick, Dakshina Ranjan Mukherjee and the likes. Armoured by the liberated doctrines of the Western thoughts and philosophy, one section of this Baboo or ‘Bhadrolok’ community initiated an expiation of their past passivity and servitude that they so inured under the British dominion. Their visceral deep-rooted Bengaliana and the disgust towards the torpid life they had been leading
ever so eagerly, led to the emergence of a new group of Bengalis. They were all for a careful intelligent blending of the two cultures and hell bent to gain back their lost glory. This bunch of bright, intellectually alive, militant young men sauntered their way to materialize their dream of a free and better Bengal, a Bengal basking in the glory of freedom from the shameful disgrace of servility and colonization by a race that considered them as inferiors if not vermin. These men mooted the idea that a change in their attitude and behaviour towards the colonizers was incumbent in order to free them from this manipulative exploitation that the colonizers so amply bestowed upon them. They became actively associated with clubs and organisations that were set up to concretise these ideas of a free and egalitarian society and in practising their cause they often resorted to militancy. Laushey has registered this militant face of the Bengalis in his *Bengal Terrorism and Marxist Left*:

> The genesis of the terrorist parties which first sprang to life after 1905 can be traced to small, non-terrorist youth clubs originally devoted to the three fold aims of physical mental, and moral development of Indian youth. In Bengal, these clubs combined a militant Shakti Hinduism with physical exercises and a careful study of European and Indian nationalist revolutionary literature. Apparently a number of these clubs had been organised in Bengal in the 1890s and early 1900s. The physical cultivation of these clubs were partly motivated by the desire to rid Bengalis of the notion that they were ‘non-martial race,’ an idea prevalent among the British after the Mutiny of 1857. In part, too, this emphasis on physical cultivation and forceful opposition to political authority developed from the ideas of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee as expressed in his novel, *Anandamath*. This novel, published in 1882, dealt with an order of *Sannyasins* (Hindu monks) who took to arms in the late eighteenth century against their Muslim rulers. The novel thus described a resort to violence among religious men for political purposes. The
terrorists of Bengal adopted a similar strategy aimed at the British. Anandamath contained a song, “BandeMataram” (Hail to the Mother), which became an important element in the ritual of Bengali nationalism from the time of the Partition onward. The title “BandeMataram” was used as a nationalist cheer and also became the title of a nationalist newspaper. (2)

From the reading of this paragraph a fair idea can be made of the evolution of the ‘Baboo Bhadrolok’ to the militant nationalist.

And yet amidst such turbulent changes, there was yet another section of the natives who dawdled with their usual practices, absolutely unperturbed and completely impervious of the colonizer’s influence. Tethered to their age old traditions, the British could hardly bring precipitous change in their lifestyle. They refused any form of incursion in their routine practices by any power, howsoever mighty. This is what J. Talboys Wheeler writes about them:

The native population at Calcutta lived in the same isolated fashion as in the present day. The Hindus were not so well off, but their Hinduism was more rampant, for as yet they had not profited by European education or yielded to the influences of civilization. They worshipped their household gods. They made their Pujas before the idols in the pagodas. they sacrificed goats at Kalighat. They celebrated their festivals with flags, flowers, sweetmeats, and sacred readings. They dragged about their idol cars with shouts of praise and victory. They bathed in the Ganges with rites and invocations. They feasted crowds of Brahmans. They performed their usual ceremonies at births, deaths and marriages. They perpetrated horrors in the name of religion, which have passed away under the pressure of British rule. (217)
The Indo-Anglican relation has a polychromatic visage mostly attuned with the shades of grey. The colonizers posed themselves as friends to educated the natives and by way of their Machiavellian acumen strategically carried on a camouflaged exploitation of these natives, reducing them to a state of mendicancy and that of the veritable ‘other’ in their own country.

In Basu’s *The Opium Clerk* we find almost a loquacious account of the 19th century Calcutta under the Imperial regime of the British Raj with all its vagaries. It was a mosaic and melange of various cultures and sects, a few that already existed and a few that calibrated into a new species with the intervention of the foreigners. The potent quill of Basu magically reconstructs that time and space of history and breathes life into it. The novel can be read as a portal to this historical world lost in time and space: the banality of its life, the tethered cultures and traditions of its various people, the hostile and aggressive yet euphoric interleaving of the colonizer and the colonized—all come alive on the pages of Basu’s novel.

English education, in fact, is a major issue in this novel. As Saraladebi gets used to the degenerated surroundings of her habitat at Jaanbazar, she vehemently abrogates the idea of sending Hiran to the Mission School. She vents her anger in the following words:

And what would they teach him? ‘He’ll learn to be an engine-wallah, a tailor measuring up dirty memsahibs, he’ll become a cobbler…yes, a brahmin’s son will polish the hide of dead cows.’ (15)

Many Indians opposed the introduction of English education and Hiran’s mother’s reaction is an example of that resistance.

The introduction of the English education, as said already, indeed, created a new kind of a species, a hybrid, a queer amalgam of two polar worldviews, a confused lot, often
reckoned on the pages of history as the Baboo and the Gentoo. Basu seems to make Mahim epitomize the reticent, taciturn, dignified Gentoo, and Hiran, the veritable keranee, the Baboo of the Auction House. There is also Nabinbaboo, who is the embodiment of Baboo-dom, and is uniquely having the investiture attached to his name, as if it was no extra appendage at all.

At the initial stages of the novel, Mahim is shown as the erudite iconoclast Anglophile, a confused Indian who had lost sight of his roots and is too impressed by the glamour of all that was British. This is how Basu describes Hiran’s impressions about Mahim and his study:

On his first day in his uncle’s study, Hiran saw books – stacked in piles, opened and marked, rising and falling with snores by the pillow. He saw shirts with fine fronts and cuffs tussled over armrests of chairs, Scottish tweeds, navy blue serge, cord coats and matching waistcoats. Still unschooled, he failed to detect the scent of a smouldering Java cheroot. He knew his uncle was a student at the Presidency College. Rumour had him preparing to leave on a long journey—across the seas to his favourite England. (16-17)

Mahim was, indeed, abnormally enthusiastic about all that was British—the food, the clothes, and their modes of amusement. Little Hiran, a constant companion, an awed admirer of his uncle, got his initiation into this servile state of mind from him. The exuberance and eagerness of Mahim and Hiran made them totally nonchalant to the fact that they were being discriminated against and laughed at in their own country.

Though the Western education enlightened them enough to berate and revoke the evil practices of the country that were still rampant to its utter shame (as the one like Sati), yet it also rambunctiously led these intoxicated youths to drink the opiate of Western philosophy to
its lees, resulting into an utter ignorance about their own history, their own culture, pride and self-esteem. Basu brings this to the fore, again, through Mahim:

He [Mahim] would astonish Hiran by denouncing the evils of caste. He would rail too against the practice of burning widows. ‘Just like the Middle Ages!’ The polygamous weren’t spared either as Mahim spoke of the shame of the Hindoos. ‘Men marrying brides as young as their daughters!’ His uncle showed no such disgust for the English. ‘No, not the English, Hiroo. It’s only brainless baboos who stand between us and a glorious future.’ (19)

Mahim’s return from England, however, is marked by an austere repulsion towards the British colonizers, which is a significant alteration of and departure from his former self. His disillusionment is at large noticeable in his modified demeanour. After return, he gets transformed into a revolutionary:

Only now, in place of the Calcutta Gazette and the Calcutta Chronicle, he read from the Sanjibani and the Bangadarshan. Hiran saw new portraits on the walls of his untidy room. ‘Freedom Fighters,’ his uncle called them, some dressed as college students, some looking like prisoners. And a white woman hair tied up in a golden bun. (235-236)

Nabinbaboo as the very embodiment of the Baboo of the time has also to be taken into account, especially as regards the habiliments of the said species. He seems to be an almost visual projection of a Gentoo who has the knack in the practice of homeopathy and in whom the memory of a solvent past lurks significantly and distinctly:

Dressed in the finery of a distinguished patron, he looked immaculate in white dhoti and an aachkan with a tiny watch-pocket. In winter a northern shawl stood guard
against the river’s breeze. A fine pencil moustache and an even finer line of gold
from his eyeglass lent detail to a noble face. There were other signs of high birth: an
impassive set of eyes meant for governance, deliberate mannerisms, and perhaps
most important of all – a retreat into books rather than gossip during tiffin- breaks.

Nabinbaboo’s unquestioned allegiance towards the British officials of the Auction House is
vividly distinct in his inviting them to the age old Puja that his solvent family had been
celebrating through the ages. He extended a peremptory hand of assistance in finding a way
to help Hiran to stoke the ailing health of Crabbe’s addict wife Lilian, employing all the
knowledge of the magical potions of homeopathy. This is, indeed, a very docile and
understated demonstration of an untold but obvious allegiance that he had to his superior
British officers and their ilk.

Hiran, too, seems to be one with forked identities and can be reckoned as almost
insouciantly complacent to his stature as the typical keranee, the gendarme Baboo of the
Auction House. Quite incapable to brave a cavil or show a dissent, Hiran got enmeshed into a
web of disconcerting events that were to plague the rest of his life. He readily accepted to
become Raja Nabakrishna Deb of Shobhabazar to his Lord Clive, Mr Jonathan Crabbe (50).
Resigned, almost content to his subordinated stature, he is rather insistent in ceaselessly
trying to prove his allegiance and loyalty to the Crabbies. Slowly but surely his life reached an
impasse, having been totally enmeshed by a sense of inexplicable gratitude towards his
British officers. It is a loyalty that can hardly be explained save for the simple fact that Hiran
had a deep seated veneration for this race—almost a slavish visceral colonial slavery. His
entire life was like a process of expiation for a crime he had never committed, proffering all
possible and impossible helps to the Crabbies, and staying impervious to the lesions and
lacerations they inflicted upon his life. He seems to be a string-less marionette only eager to
dance to the tune of his superior colonizer and deliver all their needs ranging from catering tuition to Jonathan Crabbe in his understanding of the Sanskrit *slokas* to being a pawn in the seditious Machiavellian plans of Crabbe in duping the Chinese Viceroy to win over his alliance for the British. Hiranyagarbha, born to a Brahmin priest, thus, becomes the dogsbody, the manservant to his colonial masters—the Baboo, *per se*. Right before their expedition to the Viper Islands to obtain a blackie white orphan for Crabbe, Vinny even calls him a Baboo: “But you are a baboo. You look like one, speak like one. You’ve read books, you can show him what we’d do once the boy is ours” (110).

Mahim was quite an altered individual when he returned to Jaanbazar from England. Calmness and composure defined him and the reckless exigent gentoo was replaced by a soft spoken, a wise dozent with a marked element of melancholy always hanging over his brows. The once rebellious beef-eating Brahmin was now, what may be called, a trenchant revolutionary. As said already, new portraits of ‘freedom fighters’ adorned his walls and in place of Calcutta Gazette and Calcutta Chronicle and he now read *Sanjibani* and *Bangadarshan*. A new wave to free India from the Imperial rule has rocked the country. The surge conflagrated the passions of the young men, especially the ones with imagination. Once Mahim threw down a copy of the newspaper he was reading to Hiran to bring to the fore this new zest which was spreading over Bengal:

> The English have taken all which the Natives possessed; their lives, liberty, and property. We are made to feel as helots, hewers of wood and drawers of water in our land of birth. Men are pervaded with a sense of helplessness, they are convinced that they would starve and die; they want to do something. We have become weak, lifeless; anyone may lord over us. Our shouting has no more effect than the sound of a gnat. But, the future belongs not to those who rule the lesser breeds without the
law, Manchester manufacturers, or those within Congress who profess a policy of prayer and petition. The future belongs to the imagination of young men.(236)

Such content clearly indicates the revolutionary zeal and zest that the young men were being injected with in order to free their nation from the clutches of an alien race that had illegitimately taken over their country. Mahim too registers his contempt, “We are in no way accountable to an alien people….Don’t you think it’s hypocritical to pray for victory over autocracy in Europe, and to maintain it in India?”(237). It is evident from these words of Mahim that a section of the natives, as said already, were now getting acclimated about the weasel like tendencies of the colonizers, and their diffidence was now replaced by a sense of growing zest and fervour to free themselves from the clutches of the British. Mahim was one of them, the emerging militant nationalist—a distinct departure from the docile and servile demeanour of the Baboo keranees.

Thus, mainly through three characters, Mahim, Nabinbaboo and Hiran, the Baboos of the 19th century Bengal come alive on the pages of Basu’s novel. Through the activities of these three characters Basu successfully re-creates the Baboo culture of that time as well as the new forms and shapes that it was taking. While so doing, Basu has also thrown enough light on the Indo-Anglican relationships. It is primarily through the relation between Hiran and the Crabbes that Basu tries to sneak into the complex genemics of the Indo-Anglican, colonizer/colonized relationship. In so doing, Basu focusses on the cultural hybridity produced by colonial interactions. “In Basu’s novel,” writes Nandini Bhattacharya, “not only are all characters fatherless, nameless, orphans, but remarkably hybrid and bicultural” (64). The relation between Hiran and Crabbe yawed around the unusual binary of proclivity and repulsion, an inexplicable kind of duplicity. Hiran was at his assiduous best in the presence of Crabbe, and his first meeting with the latter filled him with an unusual sense of power and helplessness at the same time. Crabbe’s question both befuddled and intimidated
him as well as filled him with a sense of pride, covetousness and superiority. He could not, at any cost, afford a comedown from Crabbe’s expectations of him.

Crabbe himself has been shown as a very curious and intriguing character. He was very strongly and diligently inclined towards learning closely the plexus of Indian philosophy and theology—the Upanishads, the Purans and all that constituted Indianism. He is perhaps best described in the words of Vinny:

He is a *Military Brahmin*.....both vegetarian and non-veg, and sometimes fasts for months. (54)

Crabbe also inculcated and imbibed, with similar zest, the nefarious practices of the natives. Mr Kavasji also pointed out this side of Crabbe’s character to Hiran: “He’s a great admirer of India, engaged in translating ancient tales for English readers. He needs a bit of help, and if you agree he’d be quite willing to bear charges for you to visit his house every Sunday for a few hours”(49). Hiran’s visit to Number 15 Alipore Road, Crabbe’s house, was followed by passionate exchanges and bouts of ardent discussions regarding the stories from the Upanishads, the Panchatantra, et al. Slowly but surely, Jonathan Crabbe, the ‘Military Brahmin’(54), unravelled the darker and hidden plaits of his character to Hiran. He was an Indian sahib, one who believed in Tantric practices, Hindu festivals, and epiphenomenally was imbibing Indian-ness in his system.

Crabbe’s equanimity in exploiting the innocent faith and trust of Hiran was so immaculate that it hardly left any chords of discord or suspicion in Hiran’s mind. The ploy was deft and the strategy insuperable. Vinny had warned Hiran regarding Crabbe’s intentions:
He’ll trap you jewel, just see. A sahib is more dangerous than a tiger, he makes his victim love their death! (Basu 2001: 192).

Hiran failed to discern the machinations of the arriviste Crabbe and the way he was being exploited in the process. Or, perhaps, there can be another way of looking at it. As suggested already, maybe Hiran was very well aware of the way he was being ‘used’ and was only but complacent enough, almost content with such a fate at the hands of the superior race:

He could easily see himself as a servant – supplying stories, and white drops for Lilian. *Remember, these people value everything by silver…* Hiran recalled Nabinbaboo saying. He felt near, but not close. Friendly without friendship. (95)

Quite unlike the decoupage of Crabbe, Lilian’s attitude is transparent. Slightly petulant owing to her addiction, she could unabashedly draw lines and spell out the true motives and intentions of the colonizer in an absolutely unruffled way. Aware of the power and control they exercised on the natives, Lilian did not find it difficult to initiate verbal incursions on Hiran, hurtling taunts at the helplessness and weakness of the Bengalees. Lilian’s is the grotesque true face of the colonizer. She has no scruples regarding her superior position as the colonizer and indulges in no sham about it. Once she intervened in the conversation that was going on between Crabbe and Hiran regarding a story in the Panchatantra that led Crabbe to ask Hiran what would Hiran rather be, the dying fool or the cunning survivor:

‘That’s unfair.’ Lilian wasn’t willing to give up. ‘Ask him if he cares to know. They don’t have a choice in the matter, do they?’ ‘They?’ ‘The Indians of course.’ ‘They’re the ones who wrote the story, dear.’ ‘Well, then he knows the answer, doesn’t he? Why don’t you tell him who’s the more powerful. Tell him why we are here.’ (95)
So, it is clear that Lilian is well aware of the asymmetrical power-relationship that marks out the colonizer-colonized transactions. As a mark of this asymmetry, Hiran went delinquent running the errands for the Crabbes. And in this rigmarole of diplomacy and politics he found himself utterly incapable of signing a demurral, refusing a request or declining an order. He became nothing better than a negligee of a friend, designed only to deliver in tune with the selfish conspiracies of Crabbe, a friend without friendship. Hiran, however, was not the only victim distressed by Crabbe. Nabinbaboo too had his share of misfortune owing to his loyal allegiance to Crabbe and was reduced to a vehement state of impecunity.

Douglas’s was however, quite a different story from Hiran’s, a history of struggle to win freedom from the shackles and fetters of the colonizers—a history of a different revolution. Mahim had a similar influence on Douglas as he had on Hiran. The propinquity between the two calibrated substantially and was largely instrumental in injecting the fire of patriotism and nationalism in the tender mind of the little boy. A strange hybrid that he was, Douglas needed a cause to vent his confusions and befuddlements, his perpetual agitation. Born a chillicracker, adopted by an English couple, abandoned by his foster parents and left in the care of a Brahmin clerk in a house full of people who considered him either as a bad omen or a blister of shame, Douglas restlessly sought an identity for himself. And Mahim showed him a way to find it. He registered himself as a member of the Boy’s Association, reading Anandamath, mastering yoga and hoarding knowledge (Basu 239). Quite unlike Hiran, he intended not to placate or appease his superiors by his work. He had no roots, he had no home, he was not an Indian, he was not a British, not the colonizer nor the colonized and a sense of exasperation lay dormant in his understanding of himself, often surfacing in mad fits of desperation and anxiety. He could barely resist to share this frustration of his with his English wife Ruth. He told Ruth: “Ruth, I have no family, no relations, I’m an orphan” (306). His is, indeed, a neuter existence, one that cannot claim a lineage or identity. The
Imperial rule was responsible for creating a species like Douglas, rootless ‘bastards’ who cannot claim an Indian or an English origin. He represents another kind of helpless hybrid who were the result of the lust and lasciviousness of the British officers posted in India.

**The Opium Trade**

*Papaver Somniferum*, or opium, goes a long way in the history of trade and commerce in India and finds its way safely reserved in the annuls of history. It became a bludgeoning trade under the British Imperial India. Apparently an innocent plant, its vagaries and effects were imponderable and immensely overwhelming. Brian Inglis in *The Opium War* has very ingeniously documented the evolution of opium from a harmless vegetable to a lethal narcotic:

There must have been five stages in the development of man’s appreciation of Opium, the botanist George Watts surmised in his monumental *Dictionary of the Economic Products of India*. The poppy would have been admired as an attractive flower; then relished as a vegetable (it was still eaten in India as a salad, ‘like lettuce’, at the time he was writing-the 1890s). At some point, it must have been found that the juice of the poppy could be made into a refreshing beverage; and consumption of the juice would have led to the discovery of ‘the potent nature of the inpissated sap.’ Only then would it have to be taken as a drug. (15)

Used, initially strictly as a medicine, it soon came to be taken as aperitifs and stimulants and it was not before long that it was realized that a regular consumption of the article led to serious sort of addiction which in the long run, had heinous, detrimental and more than often, fatal consequences. As William Paton quotes J. M. Sen in his *Opium in India*:
Medical opinions differ as to the consequences of opinion eating. With increased knowledge about its consequences a large number of medical practitioners of the day hesitates to prescribe opium even for medical purpose. They do not share the views of the practitioners of a decade back that opium can be used without injurious consequences. Experimental physiology also asserts that opium and other narcotics do not avert or lessen fatigue, but that such things only make a fatigued person drowsy. Opium certainly is and always will be, used as a cure for diarrhoea and other bowel complaints; as well as a cure for rheumatism and other physical ailments. But consumption of Opium for such medical purpose should be regulated by the legislature. (25)

And thus the article quite innocuously found its way into the daily life of the people, soon rambunctiously taking control of the somatic spoliation of the person and spurning all possible way of convalescence and recuperation. Once in its clutches, the addict was certain to perish slowly, but surely. It became the placebo, the heal for all wounds, the cure for all maladies, the relief from all pain. The addict willingly incarcerated in its hold, berated all judgement that warned him of its perils and evil effects, and gaged his loyalty to the drug blindly, indifferent and impervious to the slow death he was indulging into. Inebriated, he wallowed in its pleasures and comforts.

It was this helpless addiction which the British East India company took to their advantage, the veritable incursive tradesmen that they were, and transformed it into a lucrative trade with sheer cunning and celerity. India occupied a substantial position as the producer of opium and the British took the opportunity to dabble in gold by trussing this trade to precipitous heights. Opium was a treasure that the East India Company had found with their conquering of Bengal and it immediately filled their mercenary side with an insatiable
greed to make the best possible use of this treasure that had fallen in their hands. As Jack Beeching mentions in *The Chinese Opium Wars*:

When, in the mid-eighteenth century, they conquered Bengal, the soldier-merchant-administrators of Britain’s Honourable East India Company inherited, along with much else worth having, the Moghul Emperor’s monopoly of selling Patna opium, which came in 1773 under the direct control of the Bengal Government. Into their hands had accidentally fallen abundant supplies of a product which any keen merchant might be forgiven for regarding as the answer to his dream—an article which sold itself, since any purchaser who has acquired a taste for opium always comes back anxiously for more, cash in hand. (23)

Such a profitable trade needs to be fettled and handled with much tack and diligence and the British panoplied the requirement with meticulous precision. Auction houses and offices manned by labour and clerks, who served their offices with utmost dedication, were reared up in Calcutta, the hub and centre for the trade transactions.

In fact, a routine, disciplined procedure was religiously observed for the smooth functioning of the trade. N. LaMotte in *The Ethics of Opium* gives us a vivid description of the way the whole enterprise was carried out:

The production of India is, as we have said, a government monopoly. Every phase of it is under careful supervision and control. The planter who wishes to raise poppies must first obtain a government licence, specifying the number of acres to be sowed. If he has no money, the government advances it to him, free of interest, in order to stimulate production. When ripe, a government agent collects the crop and takes it to the government factory at Ghazipur, where it is made into opium for the market. The opium thus manufactured is disposed of by Government in the following ways: a) By
public auction at Calcutta for export outside India. b) By direct sales for Foreign and Colonial Governments with which agreements have been entered into for supply at fixed rates (viz., the Straits Settlements, Hong Kong, the Netherlands Indies, Siam, British North Borneo, and Ceylon. c) By supply to the medical department in India for medical purposes. d) By issue to the Excise department in India for local consumption under revenue regulations. The output of opium maybe placed in two classes: that destined for export to the various opium consuming countries of the Far East; and excise opium destined for internal consumption in India, where it is retailed to the people through licensed shops. (19)

Opium was indeed like gold and could be sold anytime. Statistics and figures too indicate and sanctify the same verdict. The immensity of the profit gained by the trade was heartily documented as a major accomplishment of the Imperial regime. Mani. P. Karmekar in Studies in India’s Maritime Trade provides a baffling account of the bludgeoning trade in India under the Imperial rule, and it gives us a fair idea of the corpulence of the opium trade. The Opium revenue leapt from 27 lakhs of rupees in 1781 to an enormous amount of Rs 14 crore during 1831-1840. Karmekar goes on to quote the statement made in this regard in the House of Commons in 1821:

From the opium trade the Honourable Company has derived for years an immense revenue and through them the British Government and nation have also reaped an incalculable amount of political and financial advantage. The turn of the balance of trade between Great Britain and China in favour of the former has enabled India to increase tenfold its consumption of British manufactures, contributed directly to support the vast fabric of British dominion in the East, to defray the expenses of His Majesty's establishment in India, and by the operation of exchange and remittances
in tea, to pour in abundant revenue into the British exchequer and benefit the nation to an extent of 6 million pounds yearly without impoverishing India. (75)

This amply suggests how lucrative a trade the opium was to the British, and how by way of it the British treasury bludgeoned. But the corpulence of this nefarious trade met with a sudden crisis at the face of strict demurrals from the Chinese authority. Bans to the import of the article was vehemently issued stalling the extensile spread of the trade to the utter dismay and disappointment and, to a certain extent, the pugnacity of the British merchants. Edicts and acts created a major obstacle to the free trafficking of the article.

Britain’s trade relation with China was at its zenith with the Opium enterprise, China being the greatest importer of Opium from the East India Company Traders. The Sino-British relations had been tarnished by many unhappy memories, especially those of the trade hungry missions of the British to China that ended in conflict and frustration (in 1793 and 1816), owing to the proud refusal of the Britons to placate the Chinese emperor. As a result of such mercenary friction, wars were fought. As the chief among the objects of trade between the two countries was opium, these wars were often called the Opium wars. The trade with China was immensely profitable and went on for some time without any disruptions. But soon outrages against this trade started mushrooming in different corners of China, and each protest had a different face. Such disagreements led to severe conflicts between the British and the Chinese, hampering and hindering the smooth functioning of the trade. The intelligent Chinese people saw opium as a social poison introduced by foreigners. But the greatest impediment in the smooth functioning of the trade was the civil revolutions and internal feuds that were rampant in China and often took lethal and calamitous proportions. Beeching records these domestic revolutions with a pinch of salt:
China’s self-adjusting mechanism was popular rebellion. Mandarins who pressed unreasonably hard on the common people could expect to provoke at first banditry or piracy, then local insurrection, and if abuses were not put right, perhaps in the end a tidal wave of popular revolt so widespread as to sweep away a decadent dynasty, and bring in a new one, likely at the start to govern better. This had been the essential pattern of Chinese history for many hundreds of years. (21)

Macao, Canton, Kuching and other places like these were the breeding grounds of such internal insurrections.

In fact, as hinted already, the immensity of this nefarious trade also met with a sudden crisis at the face of strict demurrals from the Chinese authorities. Bans to the import of the article were vehemently issued stalling the extensile spread of the trade to the utter dismay and disappointment of the British merchants. Edicts and acts created a major obstacle to the free trafficking of the article. As Inglis records:

Reports of the spread of the opium-smoking habit eventually began to disturb the Imperial Court in Peking; and in 1729 an edict put a ban on its importation, except under licence of medical use. Heavy penalties were imposed for dealing in the drug;......This was disturbing news for the East India Company’s Canton agents, the supra-cargoes (so called from the time they had sailed with the Company’s ships as its commercial representatives; by this time they had settled in Macao). If the Company were detected importing the drug illegally it would lose its trading rights in China. (17)

But the Company were alive to the fact that they could not afford to bear such a mammoth loss. Attempts were made to placate and appease the Chinese Emperor, and all possible means to reconcile were exercised. The trade was too lucrative to let go at the face of such
impetuous flagellation. The British, thus, refused to be thrown out of such a profitable enterprise. As Sir James Graham, First Lord of the Admiralty, wrote to Lord William Bentinck, Governor General of India, in 1832:

> Trade with China is our only object; conquest would be as dangerous as defeat, and commerce never prospers where force is used to sustain us. No glory is to be gained in a victory over the Chinese...Our grand object is to keep peace, and by the mildest means, by a plastic adaptation of our manners to theirs, to extend our influence in China, with a view to extending out commercial relations. (Beeching 40)

And thus instead of aggravating the hostility, they chose to manipulate their way into the smooth running of their trade with China. They took the assistance of the Hongs and continued their trade in China resorting to disconcerting methods like smuggling. Along with funk, it created a great decline in the profit graph of the Company and it was only but obvious then that the glorious days of the trade was over. The opium trade also went under the monopoly of the Hongs who took the risk of carrying on the lucrative trade in spite of being fully aware that they were to suffer severe penalties if detected dealing in opium. Inglis goes on to give us the fuller picture, that

> …they [the British] would also suffer financially, they realised, if the opium remains unsold, as the Company would not be able to afford to pay for the tea and the other goods the Hong had sold to it, which were awaiting shipment from Canton. A buyer for the opium was found, though the amount was so large, and the risks so great, that the price he felt able to offer—$1.50 a lb.—was less than it had cost the company. (29)

The East India Company incurred major loss owing to such bans and edicts and this ultimately left indelible marks of enmity and animosity on the relationship between the two
countries. The rift that was brought about by the mercenary trade relations between East India Company and China had long term political ramifications, souring the relation between India and China as well.

Basu has quite exceptionally situated his story within the scope and boundary of the Imperial history in India and China and has, in course, corralled within the opium trade that was one of the many lucrative trades that the British were keen on practising. Events and characters within the domain of the story are somewhat connivanced by this one enigmatic article and its trade. A cavalcade of facts, details and histories regarding opium creates the pastiche on which Hiranyagarbha’s and Douglas’s stories take shape.

As Hiran ambled his way to the Auction House, his fallow mind was filled with much curiosity regarding this object that was the prime concern of all their toil in the House. Often referred to by euphemistic epithets like the ‘mud,’ the ‘article,’ and the like, Hiran was quite innocently under the impression that it was a kind of medicine. But the vagaries of the trade and its hush-hushness incinerated his curiosities further and he could not redact his desire of knowing more about this ‘article.’ But no matter how tacitly he tried to make some sense out of it, “the mud remained illusive”(36):

Nobody at the Auction House referred to the precious article by name. Instead he heard one metaphor after another: black-gold, poison, green ash, gum, yen, and mritasanjibaneet—that which wakes a dead man. (35)

It was Vinny who for the first time unravelled to Hiran the mystery of the ‘mud.’ And it was Nabinbaboo who was to help him construct a fair idea, a chassis, regarding the immense usefulness of the article:
Without opium, the healing art would not exist. It resists poison and venomous bites, cures chronic headache, vertigo, deafness, epilepsy, apoplexy, dimness of sight, loss of voice, asthma, coughs of all kind, spitting of blood, tightness of breath, colic, the iliac poison, jaundice, hardness of the spleen, stones, urinary complaints, fevers, dropsies, leprosy, the troubles to which women are subject, melancholy and pestilences. (39)

After this exposure, Hiran was sent to Patna—the land where he was born—as an apprentice to know more about the _papaver somniferum_. An incipient bond with the article started dawning as he witnessed the engineering of its production in the factories of Patna in the capacity of “an apprentice to Mr Eliot, the man in charge” (44). The more he knew, the more he thirsted to know more. His ever so increasing thirst was, to a certain extent, quenched by the voluble accounts that Nabinbaboo provided regarding opium:

- The botanical family is large, twenty eight genera, two hundred and fifty species; the bush poppy and tree poppy, Californian, Welsh, and blue poppies, the tulip poppy, the opium poppy. Their colour ranges from white to red. Never yellow or green. Hiran remembered an afternoon at the Auction House, thick volumes spread over his desk. ‘The Sumerians knew it six thousand years ago, drew its picture on ideograms, called it the plant of joy.’ (45)

And soon this predilection to know his article, led this otherwise laggard Hiran, to understand the complex genemics of its trade. Its vertiginous growth was more than often the very subject of the discussions of the workers at the Auction House and the celerity with which it grew was quite evident in such discussions. He understood that the opium was a very important trade and the slightest challenge that was imposed to its smooth processing became a matter of great concern and was mightily scowled at. He also understood that The Royal
Commission’s six-point charter was considered a dark and clammy threat with insidious intent of expurgating or, at least, of prohibiting its growth, manufacturing, and sale in British India.

Basu readily informs Hiran through Vinny that the materialization of any such threats to ban the trade will render the effectiveness of a huge number of ships useless, for ‘it’ was the chief freight and the chief trade, and that any deflection in its smooth functioning will jab the economy of the country, and in course, the Queen, to a state beyond reparation. As Nabinbaboo read out to a curious Vinny and Hiran from a sheaf of papers:

‘Listen to what our friends have to say.’ Nabinbaboo drew a sheaf of paper from his desk. ‘Here’s Lord Salisbury, Sir George Campbell…even the Viceroy himself.’

Once again he read to a rapt Hiran and Vinny: “The drug, opium that is, is no more harmful than alcoholic stimulants used by Western nations…the opium sot has a decided advantage over the drunkard, not being noisy, quarrelsome and often dangerous as the other is.” This is from The Times: “Casual pipes can be smoked without harm, and the smoker can give up the drug at any moment he wishes to.”

Listen to Mr Birdwood…“We are as free to introduce opium to China and to raise a revenue from it in India, as to export our cotton, wool and iron manufactures to France.” Here’s Samuel Laing… “The Chinese, whose greatest deficiency is in the imaginative faculties, resorts to that which stimulates the imagination and makes his sluggish brain see visions and dream dreams.” (60)

This particular excerpt indicates the exhaustive research that Basu has done in course of bringing the Imperial history of Opium trade in India alive. These are real facts that he strategically employs in his narrative to give it the verisimilitude that it demands to transport us to a time bygone.
Hiran’s experiences in Canton give the readers another picture of the opium trade. Basu, once again, through Vinny, creates a livid and vivid image of Canton that it was then:

Canton the final destination of the Warrior Queen was now under siege. There were rebels everywhere in China, Vinny said. Canton’s Viceroy—the Mandarin who ruled in the name of the Emperor—was their favourite target. The rebels had encircled Canton’s port, no one was allowed to land or leave. ‘The Europeans are trapped there—in their factories… nothing to do but play cards, drink claret… miserable!’

Ships arriving stood moored at Lintin, a small island, three days’ sail down the Pearl river to Canton’s port. Only the smugglers were making a profit, sometimes dying under bullets from both sides in the attempt. (126)

Anxious and slightly downhearted, Hiran tried to find some consolation by way of distractions. He steadied his vexed nerves by passively participating in the boisterous and flamboyant discussions that the inmates were ever so busy in having. In course of those discussions, certain brutal facts and figures regarding the trade came to Hiran’s knowledge:

Three thousand four hundred chests of opium imported annually would yield thirty-three million, three hundred and twenty thousand taels of smokeable extract, and this, divided by three hundred and sixty-five, yields nine hundred and twelve thousand regular victims, allowing to each one tael per day. Amounts to only one three hundred and twenty-sixth of the whole population, even less if one were to allow for those to whom it was simply casual indulgence. (129)

The opium, Basu shows, had its effect on all alike, even those who were not addicted to it.

Hiran met the first victim of opium in Lilian, Jonathan Crabbe’s wife. Meeting Lilian, he realized that the somatic suffering that slowly but surely spreads to the head was also
gravid with further sufferings of intensified agony and infernal afflictions. Hiran sought the help of Nabinbaboo to help Lilian out of this hellish state. Soon this invariable desire to rescue Lilian from the clutches of this abominable plight, became an uncanny asinine obsession of Hiran. Opium, thus, accentuated the complexities of the colonizer/colonized relationship like an edict. Almost, as if, in a trance, Hiran sufflated himself with a tenderness towards Lilian, which was inexplicable and very much in contradiction to his demeanour, the ‘unfeeling’ one:

To Hiran she was like a book. Her secret entranced him. She became the story he could read without end, surprising by its unevenness. He delved into her wounds, smears on her milk white lace. Nothing was lost on his passion: a dismissive reply, a nervous flicker at the temple. Yet, like an arresting tale, she took him beyond the verse into the unwritten. He had become her creator. (84)

Amidst the ructions that the opium trade caused, Hiran grew deeply sensible of its atrocious effects on its victims. Devilled by fate and by his superiors, he rued every minute of his ceaseless journey that this trade had inflicted upon him. It was like an inlet of misery, both physical and psychological, and yet he spewed on discharging his duties both as the opium clerk of the Auction House and as the personal dogsbody to Jonathan Crabbe. He was to witness more darkness, speckled at regular intervals throughout the addled tenure as a ‘missionary’ saving the opium trade, a soldier dedicated to protect the cause of the trade, a pawn ready to go to any extent for the benefits of his British masters.

In course of time, Hiran, ultimately got thoroughly enmeshed into the fiendish plot of Jonathan Crabbe to win over the favours of the Chinese Viceroy and the cunning plan or strategy to go about it in order to save the opium trade from perishing. As Crabbe said:
Might we talk about the International Treaty of Opium? Make them read the writing on the wall, realize they must all act quickly before our mud, and theirs too, becomes history. (189)

In fact, before long, the trade started suffering and dwindling and no cunning, mercurial strategies of the crafty Crabbe and docile, ratty encumberance and efforts of his native accomplice could help it back to life.

By the time Douglas comes into the picture, things have really undergone a sea-change. The trade was rapidly depreciating and was losing its splendour and pomp. It had now become a contraband. In Kuching, the Customs Officer Douglas’s chief and primary concern and duty was to check the import of the article in any form, at any cost. This was however, not with the purpose of shunting or banning the use of opium altogether, but to help flourish the indigenous production of it in Kuching which was more than ample and needed no substitutions. The petulant, pique Douglas delivered his office with all diligence and sincerity.

The use of the article was, however, still condoned with much reluctance, and its movement almost stroboscopic. One man’s medicine has become another’s pleasure, and Douglas’s sole purpose was to stall the practice of using opium for delectation. To make things worse, a revolution of considerable proportion was brewing at Kuching to make it a Republic, freeing it from the clutches of the white Rajah of Sarawak. Douglas found himself stuck in such a phase in Chinese history. Thus, once again just like Hiran, Douglas was now exposed to the same machinations that writ large behind the movement of this trade. But unlike Hiran, he refused to be a puppet in the hands of these merchants—he did not perform the role of a docile keranee striving to placate his masters. Hiran suffered through supplication and Douglas suffered through resistance. This trade only wove suffering in their
lives. And thus, having lost all, Douglas finally decided to break free from its clutches. He decided to migrate physically and psychologically from this intemperate trade all the way to Canada.

The trade, thus, plays a pivotal role in the lives of both Hiran and his extended self, Douglas. While giving instructions to Hiran regarding the work he was to perform as a customs officer, Perkyns said, “Opium is the real story. The others are mere distractions” (262). This, it seems, could also be said about *The Opium Clerk*. Basu, indeed, has quite ingeniously linked the lives of his two protagonists with opium, making opium itself a vital character in the novel.

IV

In *The Opium Clerk*, Basu takes up the role of an ‘effective historian’—“the historian who talks about disunity and fragmentation, disruption and reversal, rather than the unity favoured by the traditional historians which is often the unity of the historian’s own limited vision, even bias, imposed on past events” (Panja189). The text can really be considered as a potent site for investigating what Geertz would call ‘thick description,’ a method that Lawrence Stone aptly defines as, “a close and well informed look at seemingly trivial acts, events, symbols, gestures, patterns of speech or behaviour” which “can be made to reveal whole systems of thought.....and....problems of kinship, lineage or community structures” (qtd. in Panja 191). This entire project can be considered as a huge enterprise wherein the contributor or author seems to be restoring certain events in history that have been consciously or unconsciously suppressed, thereby opening anew a wound that has not yet been healed. It is done with the purpose of restoring his own beaten sense of remorse and critical insight, and not just a mere excavation of the past to validate Edward Said’s assault upon the production of histories in which “the one human history uniting humanity either
culminated in or was observed from the vantage point of Europe” (Said 223). A significant sense of identification with the past and its co-existence with the present triggers the author’s creative impulse to draft their own histories, in their own languages and narrative modes.

A covert implementation of subjugation is amply discernible in the manufacture of Baboo culture by the British. But a closer inspection reveals that Basu is not altogether sympathetic to the marginalised protagonist Hiranbaboo in the novel. On the contrary, he magnifies the docility and the inexplicably humiliating tethered allegiance of the Baboo to his English potentates. Basu seems to incriminate Hiran of this anathema of subservience. There is an emphatic metaphorical suggestion that Basu insinuates in the modifier ‘Opium’ of the title of the novel, *The Opium Clerk*, and its salience can hardly be contradicted. ‘Opium’ here is not merely suggestive of the drug or of the trade but it is a modifier to the nature and character of the ‘Clerk’ Hiranyagarbha—his insouciance, his nondescript, frangible and malleable nature. He is an inebriated, ennui ridden, languid laggard, who readily succumbs to the superiority of his British employers. One can claim safely that the involvement of the Baboos in the opium trade has not been documented in this way before Basu. Another very significant aspect of the novel is the individual’s take on history. It is through Hiran, an individual, that Basu records history. Basu has also very meticulously captured the making of a hybrid culture in the colonial Bengal. There was an acculturation between the two races, both the races were influenced by each other’s culture and a conjunction of the two distinct cultures gave rise to such hybridity. Basu puts his finger on this issue of hybridity in conspicuous details.

However, in recreating the Bengal under British Raj, Basu meticulously maintains/retains the elitist perspective in deciphering the Machiavellian machinations of the British. Bengal, in general, and the Opium trade in particular, were a veritable treasure trove for the Queen’s treasury and to maintain a powerful control and dominion over it required
sheer cunning and ingenious craft. Thus, colonising Bengal was a lucrative prospect and hence it was necessary to colonise that which comprised Bengal—the Bengalis. Goaded by this tumescent desire to ensign their sovereignty over Bengal, the British chose to colonise the mind, the memory, and, thus, the history of the Bengalis. A complete loss of a mnemonic past and nostalgia left some of the Bengalis with a strange sense of complex dependency on the British. They were robbed of their past and were reduced to mere caricatures of their potential selves. Intoxicated by the egregious Western culture that the British copiously catered to their eager selves, some of the Bengalis, slowly but surely lost, if not expunged, their true Bangaliana. Basu reclaims the memory of that loss, though not the lost memory. This reclamation, indeed, can be looked upon as a form of protest, a contest, a refraction from settling with the loss incurred and a robust refusal to remain the flummoxed hybrid that the British so conveniently created through a hypnotic manipulation of cultures (undoubtedly convincing that theirs was the superior one) to meet their ends. Hiran’s reticent obsession with Lilian is a further proof of this encomiastic kowtowing attitude of the colonized towards the colonizer. This veer towards the white woman, the continuous pandering he felt in her presence and his incorrigible composure even to her recalcitrant mood swings, suggest an inexplicable parade of psychobabble and indicate quite obviously how ‘the inferior native’ was smitten by the charms of the ‘white’ skin, beyond reparation.¹ Such cultural hypnosis was a potent strategy of the British colonizers and Basu shows his protagonist Hiranyagarbha agued by it. The spectre of Opium trade relations that existed between the East India Company and China also comes alive in Basu’s narrative. This can be considered as a way of looking back at the irredeemable damage that the acrimony between the British traders and the Chinese empire caused to the Indo-Chinese relationship later. Even to this present day, India seems to be bearing the burthen of this failed Sino-British alliance both politically and economically.
In fact, the shameless ways in which the British had exploited and looted the resources of India and the Indians find angry repercussions in the postcolonial writings about the Imperial regime in India. A sense of anger and betrayal is quite clearly discernible in many postcolonial authors while referring to the Imperial rule in India. The postcolonial writers of the colonial history now do have the advantage of seeing the evil of the whole colonial enterprise from a distance – both of time and space. Belated interpretations of a dark memory that they attempt unquestionably yield newer open ended critical perspectives: it seems, as if, through the prism of time and space history is refracted into multiple new stories. Basu’s *The Opium Clerk* can, indeed, be reckoned as one such initiative to place the colonial history of Bengal through the refractoriness of the prism of time and space.
Notes

1. Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin White Masks* beautifully registers this psychological divide/confusion:

> Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly white. I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white. Now-and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged- who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am. I am a white man. Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads me to total realization..... I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. (45)

2. One of the most prominent of such authors, who can be relevantly cited in here, is Shashi Tharoor. In his writings, we find a blatant criticism spiked with a sense of scorn and contempt against the malpractices of the Imperialists in India. He goes on to call this bleak period of Imperial history as ‘an era of darkness’ and incidentally gives his book the same name to vent forth his staunch riposte and his obvious anger against such notoriety that was once practiced by the British in India in the name of trade. Tharoor manifestly alleges the British of exploiting Indian men, India’s resources, and India the nation itself as a pawn to materialise their (British’s) insatiable vested interests and greed. The mayhem that these colonizers inflicted upon this country, argues Tharoor, is almost beyond reparation.
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Chapter III

Representation of History in The Miniaturist

Every event in history has an after-life. It matures, ages, grows and thus transforms as it migrates in time and space. Subjective interpretation infiltrates, and a particular slice of history gets tentacle, inviting further investigations and explorations. Basu’s The Miniaturist can be reckoned as one such investigative piece of history that tells the story of an unsung miniaturist from the sacrosanct crypt of Mughal regime of India under Akbar. There is to be found a wonderful consortium of ‘facts registered’ and an imaginative inspection of ‘facts unregistered.’ In this chapter, the present researcher is trying to examine this confederation of events with special reference to the practice of religion, which was manifestly one of the most vital aspects of Akbar’s rule. Along with this, the position of the women and the tenement of an institution popularly known as the harem (which again was one of the most pompous and luxurious possessions of the ruler that elicited much attention) will also be examined. Finally, this chapter will have a close look at Basu’s representation of the art of miniature painting of Akbar’s regime.

II

Kunal Basu’s The Miniaturist can be called a kunstlerroman, an artist’s gradual growth to maturity following the scheme of *naqsh* (patterns), *tarkh* (shape), and *tasveer* (portrait), the three sections of the novel. It is the story of Bihzad, who, through a series of experiences, transforms into a true artist. Born to the Khwaja of Akbar’s *Kitabkhana*, young Bihzad was very carefully weaned and trained to become the master. His father Abdus Shamad Shirazi, the *shirinkalam*, the sweet pen, deliberately expunged the usual and the humdrum way of rearing his son, whom he knew to be born with the exceptional gift of painting. Bihzad was soon sent to Mir Sayyid Ali for his formal training in miniature
painting. Owing to the boy’s lack of education, the Master prescribed the boy to read stories from the canonical books that were the staple of all miniature art. He was to memorize the stories as his stepmother read them to him and paint them accordingly. Soon Mir Sayyid Ali realized that Bihzad would not follow the normal course of life of a painter. The boy who refused to restrict himself only to the depiction of *Razm* and *Bazm* cannot be moulded. By the age of fourteen, he stopped his visits to Mir Sayyid Ali with the proud declaration that he was an artist now, fit to join his father at the *kitabkhana*. In the *kitabkhana* too, Bihzad was kept under a vigilant seclusion from the other artists, lest he got influenced or tried emulating the works of others. He received the various commissions for painting from the Darogha with reluctance but was extremely prompt and meticulously egregious in delivering them. Then slowly, he was possessed by a passion to meet the Emperor, a passion that was soon to become an obsession with him. Ever since he saw the Emperor at the Qamargah, the seeds of this desire had been sown in his heart and mind. From the mischievous young artist he soon turned into a quiet sulking youth. Listening to stories of Akbar from his mother and his friend Salim Amiri, the paintseller, this yearning was further conflagrated. And soon these longings and desires could no longer be restricted. The emperor had ordered the making of *Akbarnama*, where all his heroics and exploits, his court proceedings and his hunting expeditions, would be documented in miniature paintings. But consumed by his ever increasing passion for Akbar, Bihzad started painting his personal *Akbarnama*, his very own ‘Akbarnama,’ where he unabashedly painted and registered his love for Akbar. He imagined the emperor as his lover and pages after pages of ‘forbidden love’ came alive from the tip of his brush. The gratuitous paintings were kept carefully hidden between the sheaves of paper. His stepmother would feed the artist in him with stories and anecdotes that made the intransigent artist furthermore rigid towards the apodictic ways of the age and time. The intoxicating perfume in his mother’s parlour, her inebriating beauty and charisma, and the
Mufarih, the opium laced sweetmeat that he was so fond of, soon led him into the web of incest. He became her ‘bee.’

But this incest perhaps was only an ancillary to his obdurate obsession for Akbar. Unfortunately his ‘Akbarnama’ was intercepted and fell into the hands of his rival Adili, who then brought it to the notice of the Khwaja and soon the news of the artist’s audacity reached the emperor. Bihzad was banished. He was to leave all that he possessed by dejure including his love—Akbar. Bihzad’s ‘Akbarnama’ led to his banishment, an exile to Ha Dervish and then to Hazari, the ‘no man’s land’ (123). The asperity of the punishment, however, was mellowed by his chance meeting with Hilal Khan, once the head-eunuch at Akbar’s Harem, who embraced him into a loving friendship and gave him refuge in his serai in the midst of the scalding dry desert. Bihzad became ‘Rangila,’ the pleasure seeker, roaming about the markets and streets of Hazari, conjuring tales, when asked for, of his earlier experiences and of what led to his refuge in Hazari. He visited the slave markets of Hazari and was a regular at the Tarabkhana, the Joy house, dousing himself in wine and opium. But his pen could not be controlled by his rigid objurgating. It was at the serai of Hilal Khan that he met the Sufis, danced and drank wine from the same cup with them. He met Father Alvarez, the emissary who was sent to Akbar’s court to teach Akbar the truth of Christianity. And then one day he saw the picture of a lady with an angelic face holding an infant in her hands and he drew ‘The Lady’. And soon from a painting she became a goddess. People came from all corners, towns and cities, to have a glimpse of ‘The Lady’ and offer their obeisance. Words reached the King of Hazari, Haji Uzbek, and he too came to serai to witness this magic of ‘The Lady’ that was spreading like wild fire. The Haji chose Bihzad to become his son-in-law and brought him to his court where the latter was given a seat, closest to the Haji’s. Bihzad became a courtier, the Khwaja of an invisible Kitabkhana, at the court of Hazari. But Hazari proved to be a terra incognita for the artist Bihzad. His court was not at all like Akbar’s court Bihzad was so
familiar with. It was more of a menagerie of strange animals owing to the unctuous fetish of the Haji for strange beasts and their customs. And then Bihzad met Zuhra, Haji’s daughter, his bride, and was undone. Her priapic escapades with her thirteen year old eunuch in presence of Bihzad stimulated a confusing sense of seduction and vexation at the same time. Her reluctance and indifference tortured Bihzad and he gradually lost himself to wine and melancholy. But this was soon to end, as was Hazari. A calamitous earthquake reduced Hazari into a mass of putrid bubonic corpses and debris. Bihzad hurried to Hilal khan’s serai only to find it in a dishevelled state, and his friend Hilal Khan dead, his throat slit.

The astute artist in him grew bitter at the thought that he had only painted an imperfect universe. He decided to blindfold himself. Bihzad, the rightful master of Akbar’s Kitabkhana, was now relegated to a mere beggar, and a blind helpless one to that. He was maltreated, abused, tortured and his life became a colourless daub, a plangent soiree. But then came the Bird Women to his rescue. They took him along with them to the mountains where they lived, and took care of him till he recuperated and recovered, both from his mental buboes and his physical wounds. One day the Bird Women brought along with them another victim, almost lifeless, and Bihzad, though still blindfolded, could easily tell by running his hands on the face of the man, that he was the postal runner, a friend who had shown him compassion and kindness in Bihzad’s days of misery at the town’s market. It is from the runner that Bihzad learned that Akbar the emperor was now on his deathbed.

Released from all sorts of quandary, Bihzad set forth for Agra. Reaching there he learned that the order of expatriation was taken off his head. As Bihzad was brought to the dying emperor’s bedchamber, Akbar himself took off Bihzad’s blindfold. He saw Akbar’s blood kept in a bowl by the side of the dying emperor’s bed and then his eyes beheld Akbar, now only a shadow of his earlier self. The dying emperor had just one wish: he wanted Bihzad to turn into an artist one last time and draw him (Akbar). Bihzad went back to the
pigeon house, the caves of the Bird Women. But this time he needed no help, for he could see.

The past is amorphous, formless and Basu’s is an invitation to such a form. In this *recit de voyage* of the artist, Basu has incorporated certain aspects that deserve special mention and close inspection. This will be done in the sections to follow.

III

Religion

The aseptic version of history roils and registers copious information regarding emperor Akbar’s regime. Glossing over the pages of history, the putative image of the emperor that we find is essentially that of a tolerant one. Akbar held no scorn or grudge towards other religions, on the contrary, he made considerable efforts in bringing all the religions of the world together. His intention of establishing equality among all religions was quite pellucid in his activities and reformations that he brought about in sangfroid at the face of vehement oppositions from the guardians of Islam. As Ashirbadilal Srivastava in *The Mughal Empire* writes:

...the inquisitive Akbar made a scientific examination of various religions then known in India and that his enquiry led him to the conclusion that there was truth in every religion. He thought it undesirable, therefore, that a comparatively young religion like Islam should be considered to possess the monopoly of Truth and continue as the religion of the State. Hence he abolished Islam as the religion of the State and established in its place, a religious society of his own choice known as the Din-i-Illahi. This new society, which has been compared to the theosophical order of
our time, was an eclectic faith and consisted of good principles culled from every religion. (218)

However, the reaction to such leniency was immense and scornful. Especially the Ulemas were greatly perturbed by such religious measures taken by the emperor and resisted them violently:

These religious reforms appeared revolutionary inasmuch as they brought down Islam from its position of dominance which it had enjoyed for centuries, to one of equality with other religions. Its important followers, particularly the Ulema who had hitherto presumed to guide the State and shape its religious policy, were greatly disturbed at the change. They levelled charges of irreligiosity and even apostasy against Akbar and instigated the Muslim public to rebel against him. (Srivastava 219)

The incandescent wrath of the Ulemas grew to such a cataclysmic extent that a ‘fatwa’ was issued declaring that the emperor had forsaken Islam and that a rebellion against him should thus be considered lawful. However, all these threats failed to shake the iron will of Akbar and he resisted to these blasé’ reactions by maintaining his secular stance. As Bamber Gascoigne in *The Great Moguls* records:

...the orthodox were in retreat, but even during Akbar’s reign there were signs of backlash which by the end of the century would leave the relationship between the communities worse than Akbar had found it. Muslim criticism of Akbar was led by an orthodox Sunni, Shaikh Ahmad Sarhindi, who was notably fond of Mohammad’s maxim that ‘anything new which is introduced in my religion is condemnable’; the sheikh had little effect on Akbar and was imprisoned by Jahangir, but his son and
grandson continued his cause and were able to move gradually nearer to the side of the throne. (110)

Akbar went great depths to whet his appetite and curiosity for learning the truth of religion and “built a special Ibadatkhana or ‘house of worship’ in which to hold religious discussions”(Gascoigne 102).

In fact, Akbar’s entourage of Islamic counsels could not shake his penchant to learn the deeper realities of religion, and thus he could not restrict or reconcile himself to obsequious fealty towards Islam alone. He was sufficiently exasperated by the differences that infested the Muslim community and,

…..his next step was to throw the debate open to learned men from other religions. Eventually he included Hindus, Jains, Zoroastrians, Jews and even a small group who came to play a prominent and most interesting part in the court life at Fatehpur Sikri, three Jesuit fathers from the Portuguese colony at Goa. (Gascoigne 103)

The orthodox Muslims felt that their religion was being scourged and berated in the hands of this Monarch. They felt threatened and this led to a series of trepidations and upheavals. They were strictly against such reforms and leniency introduced by Akbar in religious practices and policies. Abraham Eraly in The Mughal World records one such vehement opposition:

Against these diverse pressures of heresy and reform, the middle ground of Islam was defended by such sages as Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi of the Naqshbandiyya order. The Sheikh was a contemporary of Akbar, and was appalled by the rationalist and philosophical trends at the imperial court. He wrote several tracts defending orthodox Islam, desired jizya to be re-imposed, cow-slaughter resumed, and wanted Muslims to ‘avoid infidels as they did dogs’. For his pains, the Sheikh was
imprisoned by Jahangir for a while, but he continued to preach strongly against reformist movements, as well as against Shiahs. The movement became so strident in its fundamentalism that even Aurangzeb was obliged to ban its teachings. The order however remained a source of inspiration to Sunni fundamentalists for a long time. (320)

And in the face of such ineffable religious tolerance and reformation the cult of the Sufis emerged and attained considerable and almost formidable shape under the reign of Akbar. They preached the renunciation of formalistic and biased religious practices and were neuter to the concept of religion itself in the attainment of God—love and universal brotherhood being their sole motto:

Within Islam there had long been a tradition of free-thinking mysticism, known as Sufism, which was opposed to the rigid distinctions of orthodoxy, and in the past century this had been joined in India by similar stirrings within Hinduism, in particular the Bhakti movement and the beginnings of the Sikh religion, both of which included a rejection of the caste system and a belief in personal God.

(Gascoigne102)

Akbar’s endorsing of his new religion Din-i-illahi, arcane as it was, was, indeed, confronted with stringent oppositions. And yet one may safely say that Akbar’s viscid adherence to religious tolerance had no intentions of persecuting Islam. He remained a believer of god till the end and no wheedling of force could deter him from his fealty towards the almighty. This is what J. Talboys Wheeler writes about the Mughals in general:

The Moghuls of modern times professed to be Mussulmans; their profession was only a thin varnish over old idolatries. They were lax, indifferent and sceptical. Sometimes the varnish disappeared altogether; they inclined to Brahmanism,
Buddhism, and Christianity. Consequently they introduced a new element into the collision between the Mussalmans and Hindus. (120)

Such accounts sufficiently indicate the religious environment under the rule of Akbar. His docility and leniency, as mentioned already, were perversely criticised and resisted against. His faith in Islam was severely questioned and challenged. The Ulemas, who were the religious guardians of Islam, scowled upon such steps of leniency and tolerance shown by the emperor and vehemently voiced their opposition against Akbar and his religious policies.

Religion plays a significant part in the diegesis of the unfortunate artist Bihzad and is amply spliced throughout the entire gamut of Basu’s novel. The narrative also reflects history very closely. There was to be found a melange of religious order under Akbar’s rule. The sociable emperor, as mentioned already, had unquenchable zest for learning the truths and secrets of all the religions. He was the very epitome of tolerance when it came to religion and had shown great magnanimity to the practitioners of other religious disciplines. Basu’s novel is imbricated with such instances of the emperor’s religious generosities and curiosities:

The Paymaster reminded everyone of the emperor’s famous leniency. ‘At twenty he abolished the tax on unbelievers. He even married their daughters. Lit lamps paid homage with fire. Whether in jest or not, he grew his hair past his shoulders, marked his forehead just like…’ (58)

However, such lenient policies, as in reality so also in fiction, did meet with considerably harsh and opprobrious reactions from the Muslim subjects of his kingdom. They were of the opinion that such acts of munificence and kindness towards the other religions, especially to the Hindus, the infidels, were defiling the purity of their own religion. A sense of dire
contingency plagued the courtiers. His courtiers were in constant agitation over Akbar’s pandering with the Hindu religion and his overzealous desire to learn its secrets. It caused not just rancour and contempt among his courtiers, but also generated a sense of fear and insecurity. They considered it as a vehement act of blasphemy and were troubled over the ways things were trundling to. Basu registers the torpor and concern of the crotchety courtiers in the following way:

‘He won’t stop just with translations. He’s going to make us read the books of Hindustan everyday in place of namaz prayers.’ ‘He’ll make us memorise the names of thirty million gods!’ The physician added his own comment. From his post in Sikri’s imperial kitchen, Shaibaq the Inspector had seen the emperor at the jharokha window, eyes raised towards the sun, his lips moving. A Hindu monk had hypnotised Akbar, he said. (57)

Despite such criticism, the image of Akbar that Basu creates is that of a devoutly religious minded emperor. Basu goes on to show how the virile king’s hunting expeditions too were followed by a prayer by dervishes for the slain animals as well as for the ones they spared: “When they had their fill, the dervishes would be summoned, to pray for mercy for the surviving beasts” (31).

Basu also shows how the emperor, despite having an opulent Harem, helplessly resorted and surrendered to the mercy of the ‘living saint’ SalimChisti, when he, even at 26, remained childless. He prayed incessantly, and soon his prayers were answered. Akbar’s first son was born of his Hindu wife. This expedited a sense of stronger religious fervour in the king. He was humbled beyond imagination and his gratitude knew no bounds. He constructed a rich and beautiful dargha to commemorate the death of the saint, as a token of his gratitude and sincere devotion:
In the city’s second year, the saint died. Akbar had a tomb built for him, a womb of white marble where men and women could enter to pray for a son. (68)

During his conversations with Salim Amiri, Bihzad also came to know that Akbar’s Ibadatkhana, his House of Worship, had become a bricolage of diverse religious orders. As if in a spiritual quest, Akbar spent long hours listening to the Koran in his Ibadatkhana. And as if, not slaked by that alone, he had brought forth polymaths of all religions to his House of Worship to administer spiritual solace to his scalding religious fever. Basu shows how he had banned the merciless butchery of animals that was practised in the name of Qamargah, and chose the colour of his robes in comport with the position of the stars and the planets.

Akbar’s religious activities, as they was in reality, caused a lot of frowning brows in the novel. It was suspected that such exercises were soon to relegate Islam from its hegemonic dominance. While conversing with Bihzad, Salim Amiri told him about Akbar’s zealous spiritual/religious quest:

‘These days he spends his time listening to the Koran from those who have learnt it by heart. He has started to meditate. Even counts beads like a Sufi, I’m told. But …’

‘But?’ ‘But now he wishes to know more. He has brought men of faith, of all faiths to his House of Worship. Sunni and Shia, Brahmins, Sufis, Jains, Jews, Parsees, even the Nazarene sages from Goa.’ (77)

Bihzad, who was also privy of the running gossip regarding Akbar’s religious madness, could distinctly recall an angry Ismail Safawi, the physician, spitting venom at this preposterous stance of the emperor:

‘Better a Shia than a Sunni, a Parsee than a Jew, a Jew than a Christian, a dog than a worshipper of cow.’ (78)
Banerjee 97

Basu, thus, has quite meticulously breathed life into the running debates on religion during Akbar’s rule. The rancour and contempt that writ large amidst the Ulemas and the other orthodox followers of Islam have been realistically portrayed by Basu. His representations of the then religious controversies and debates are exceptionally meticulous and realistic. Such representations, indeed, transport the readers to that age and give them the taste of its milieu.

Serving his term of expatriation, Bizad came in contact with the Sufis. Basu delineates the Sufis with marked ebullience and vividness in his novel. Bihzad’s journey involves a pervasive assimilation of experiences, which gradually define his aesthetics and his apparently ‘queer’ obsession for the emperor. The Sufis intervened radically in this eschatological journey of the artist and a marked semblance is noted in the form of their practice of religion and the practice of artist’s religion of art. Salim Amiri, for instance, succinctly pointed out the true nature of an artist by equating an artist with a Sufi:

‘A real Sufi,’ he told Bihzad, ‘neither fears hell, nor dreams of paradise. He craves nothing for himself, willing to change depending on where he goes. If he goes to a country where nakedness is the rule, he becomes naked. Just like an artist—ready to draw, whatever his commission. The artist is like a Sufi—a dead man, alive only to truth.’(39)

A lot of rancour and contempt for the Sufis writ large among the orthodox Muslims, as the former threateningly challenged their revered formalistic approach towards religion. Like the Sahajiyas, the Sufis believed in a concretization of their devotion to god, by reaching out to him through love, intimacy and friendship.¹ They derided the established norms and revelled in their absolute surrender to god, not through strict rigorous adherence to religious rites and rituals, but through an ecstatic celebration of love, camaraderie and companionship, in order to approximate their love for god and their attainment to the height where they could be one
with the most coveted, the omniscient, the omnipresent, and the omnipotent. Their cavorting, drinking, abhorrence toward the rituals made them a despicable lot in the eyes of the Maulanas and the other doctrinal guardians of abstemious Islam:

‘How can one hope to reach Mecca, in the company of the impure!’ With just the water bubbling in the kitchen, the silence spurred him on. ‘They pray not, keep no fasts, in their blood flows wine. Pleasure seekers pretending to be saints!’ (126)

The use of Sufisim finds a sublime relevance in the novel when the circular journey of Bihzad ended with his meeting with Akbar on his deathbed. Akbar, as mentioned already, took off the blindfold of Bihzad and called him a saint, for a saint alone can see none, “but the god inside him” (242). Akbar asked him to become an artist one last time and embraced him and tied a string, as an emblem of their friendship and love, around his wrist. This pristine moment of the union of Bihzad and Akbar reminds one of the Sufi anecdote that the magalas told. This is the story of Rumi and Shams—the two drunks who spent months together without any human need, bathing in the warmth and glow of their friendship. Rumi poured out his love for his friend Shams in his verses, and when Shams disappeared, Rumi was left to mourn the loss of his beloved. But then Rumi received news of his friend from Baghdad and sent his son begging him to return. When they met, they fell at each other’s feet, completing a beautiful and soulful re-union.

Bihzad’s days at the court of Hazari too were infested with diverse and strange experiences. He was made a courtier. He became the Khwaja of an invisible Kitabkhana. And then he was asked to paint and record the Haji’s priapic encounters. The baffled artist could not draw a line on his paper as he witnessed a distorted bestial display of carnal madness. The Khwaja was driven and consumed by an animal passion and in a fugue demonstrated his
voracious sexual potency in fits, both revolting and disturbing to the sight and psyche of an artist who was quite not used to record such vulgar demonstrations of carnal love.

Hilal Khan came to Bihzad’s rescue. He offered to take him to the village of the infidel artists, the “artists who know how to draw these scenes” (182). They were the artists who depicted shameless love. As Bihzad peeped through the windows of the cottages of these artists, he saw paintings of carnal galore. When Bihzad wanted to know for whom these artists painted these scenes, Hilal Khan informed:

‘For their god. The god of love. For them it’s an act of worship. Just as a Muslim prays on his knees...’ He saw the infidels’ god, Krishna, adorning the women with flowers, embracing one while fondling another, playing hide and seek with many hands touching him, holding a pair of swaying hips like an earthen jar. Krishna whispering secrets into a courtesan’s ear, making her blush. His face and body bore the marks of a lover’s teeth. In one scene he appeared on the brach of a tree shooting arrows at the women, setting fire to their veils. (190-191)

Their art was considered denigrated for it challenged, just like the Sufis, the traditional norms of formalistic religion. Their paintings of their dark god of love, drawn amidst his sexual consorts, indulging in shameless love, were but a conduit to approximate their love for their god. But these paintings depredated the orthodox Islamic beliefs and hence they were considered not just infidels but were incriminated of indulging in perverse pleasures through the depiction of such carnal scenes and hence were isolated from the general society, secluded from the general community. But one might also add the fact that these painters (they were Hindus) were considered infidels not alone for the fact that they drew paintings of carnal passion, but they were brandished infidels because they were not Muslims. Despite Akbar’s earnest efforts to snub it, the practice of such vile religious orthodoxy and
delinquency was responsible not only for unjust discriminations, but also for dividing and segregating the social fibre which slowly but surely weakened the foundation of the empire. Basu, by the power of his quill and imagination, makes these infidel painters a part of the greater metanarrative of Akbar’s regime. In history books, there is no mention of these painters. Basu is here actually ‘creating’ them who might have been there, and would have been treated thus, ostracised and segregated for what they painted as also for the religion they practised.

Harem and Women

Turning over the pages of history of the Mughal period, one finds a very interesting treatment of women in it, especially during the regime of Akbar. They have been mentioned with a sense of reluctance and their mention mostly corroborates to the virility of the Ruler and the pompous design of his rule. The most paradoxical part being that they were mentioned only to be ignored, or at best as accessories to the virile empire. Referring to the copious and abounding harem of Akbar, Bamber Gascoigne registers:

The screens of purity were already bursting at the seams—Akbar finally had more than three hundred wives—but the political advantages of this stream of presentation princesses, one of whom came as far away as Tibet, were incalculable...The actual number of women in the harem was nearer to five thousand. Many of these were older women, but there were also young servant girls, or Amazon from Russia or Abyssinia as armed guards, all with the status only of slaves. It was these who, if so required, were the emperor’s concubines. The three hundred were technically wives, even though the Koran limits the number to four. (73)
Marriage was essentially a strategy that Akbar followed to expand the bounds of his kingdom. In comport with Muta marriage, he took many Hindu wives, which in the long run earned him the allegiance and loyalty of many Hindu rajahs and thereby making them his consorts. R.Nath in *Private Life of the Mughals of India* records:

> Orthodox injunction to restrict nikah marriages to four was altogether ignored and the Mughal king contracted marriages freely, and unencumbered by any law, human or divine. (26)

But despite the blandishment it so evidently preached, there was something about the Mughal harem that intimidated most Hindu women. They found in it something abominable and thus to save themselves from a perennial contrition and disgrace, they practised Jauhar, “the Rajput custom of burning their women before coming out to fight to the death” (Gascoigne 82).

The Mughals were particularly a Sybarite ilk and Akbar too was no exception. His uxorious fancies thus made the harem an important institution of his kingdom, and great care was taken to translate it into an arcane chamber of dreams:

> Fatehpur Sikri contains many fanciful individual buildings, such as the Panj Mahal, a palace for the members of the harem consisting of five pillared floors, provided originally with delicate screens through which the ladies could see but not be seen. (Gascoigne 86)

It was altogether an organised institution and was not just a pleasure palace of the emperor to slake his concupiscence and make merry. Though many perfidious tales of ribaldry were woven and circulated around it, the harem maintained and followed the decorum and system like any other important institution of the kingdom. And it was under Akbar that this
institution worked in a very organised and systematic way much in comport with the other government departments.

The term was derived from the Arabic harem which literally meant something sacred or forbidden. True to its name, no stone was left unturned to maintain its sanctity and secrecy. The female inhabitants were ensconced within its walls wherefrom they could see the world without being seen:

Above all, it ensured inviolable purdah and seclusion of the ladies and maintained, what was termed, its sanctity for the exclusive satisfaction of the king. This was its objective, which was less guided by the shariat injunction on purdah and more by its need, efficacy and use during the medieval times. (Nath 26)

Thus the security of this auspicious abode of revelry was no mere tripe. Eunuchs were appointed for this special task of guarding the portals of the harem. And they were conferees upon whom the task to record and regulate the entry to the harem was given:

Eunuchs (mukhannis: castrated men) were placed outside the enclosure of the harem, and they were also not allowed, normally to enter it. But they were an important link between the maids of the queens and the officers of the harem as the former were not supposed to meet the latter themselves. It was only at a later stage, during the declining period of the later Mughals, that eunuchs took over the control of the harem and became its dominant functionaries. (Nath 22)

The Mughal harem represented a perpetual state of incarceration. It was designed with the single intention to provide pleasure and respite to its master. It was a bastion intended singularly to slake the concupiscence of the emperor, and was quite unlike the pleasure
houses or brothels, for its lack of churlish ribaldry. J. F. Richards brings out this unique aspect of the harem in *The Mughal Empire*:

> Behind the stone screens of the harem quarters was a domestic world with its celebration of births, marriages and deaths, religious festivals and social occasions. The wives, concubines, and female relatives of the master were ranked by seniority, blood ties, and favour in a strictly proscribed hierarchy. Hundreds of female maidservants, often slaves, were employed. The harem was an ordered community with its own decorum and gentility. Ideally, the harem provided a respite, a retreat for the noble man and his closest male relatives—a retreat of grace, beauty, and order designed to refresh the males of the household. (61)

The vivarium of beautiful women, ‘collected’ from the various parts of the country as well as from abroad, was in itself a melange of various cultures. The lovely women from all over the world brought along with them the various mores and colours of their culture.

The historians have been quite parsimonious in their recordings of the Mughal harem, putatively a treasure trove of secrets. Much has been left to the imagination and many brilliant tales have been woven around this sacrosanct abode of mystery. Very little, indeed, has been told about the harem and the life that dwelt therein. Many historians have tactfully avoided or merely made passing remarks on this important institution. In some history books, there is no mention of harem or eunuchs at all. The cause for this wending can be manifold. One of the basic reasons behind this scanty information regarding such a prominent institution of a regime could be the elemental concern of the Islamic races for *purdah*. It is also possible that, perhaps, they knew not much about this institution, and what they knew, they could write not. Contemporary historians grimace at the scanty supply of information regarding such an important institution\(^2\) and assume that perhaps the Persian chroniclers were
absolutely ignorant of what went on within the walls of the harem, or were immensely lacking in courage to pen down what they knew. It is here that imagination and fancy were added as an epaulette on the garb of history. They imagined the harem and its interiors and this led to a blend of the real with the desired, a concoction of facts and fancy. How much of this the metanarrative has recorded? How much has been excluded? These questions keep on disturbing the inquisitive minds of the present-day researchers.

Historians have been, generally speaking, a bit offish in their treatment of the women of the age. Not many of the women of that age could make their way to the pages of history. The account of the raffish harem (that too hardly adequate) is almost all that we have about women during Akbar’s reign. However, there are a few names that have found their way to recognition, in spite of the condoning attitude of the historians. They were women who had their share of considerable contribution to Akbar’s rule and had contravened into his administrative policies by exercising their control over the emperor. S. M. Edwards in *Mughal Rule in India* has talked about the important roles that a few such women played during Akbar’s regime:

His [Akbar’s] foster-Mother, Maham Anaga, to whom he was devotedly attached, fanned the flame of discontent and was helped in her task by Hamida Begum, the Emperor’s mother, Adham Khan, her son, and Shihabu-d din, her son-in-law. They began to poison the mind of the Emperor by insinuating that Bairam Khan had become virtual master of the kingdom and was actually thinking of setting Akbar aside and of placing a son of Kamran upon the throne. (25)

Mentions of women like this one are rare. Usually, their roles have been ignored by the historians. Such a lack of historical details built on gender considerations unquestionably generates a kind of gap or hiatus in the metanarrative. It is both disturbing and disconcerting.
at the same time. Such gaps invite a deeper and closer inspection to salvage the discontinuities in history and find out the reasons behind the reluctance in registering those fissures. And this is what Basu seems to be doing in The Miniaturist.

Basu’s The Miniaturist, indeed, offers an interesting peep into the secret chasms of Akbar’s harem. As a voyeur, the reader is invited to the much adorned but least talked about harem of Akbar, as Zuleikha, the Khwaja’s wife and Bihzad’s stepmother, opens its doors to the readers. She skilfully delineates the picture of Akbar’s harem, the hundred and more begums, their boudoir, the jealousy that ran high amongst them to be the emperor’s favourite, and more:

A race was on. To become the mother of Akbar’s son. The emperor had more than a hundred begums, each a rival to each. They spent all day bathing and perfuming, braiding their hair, dressing up in robes and jewellery—only to be disappointed at night. The first to catch Akbar’s eye, when he entered the harem, could be the lucky one. He’d go to her private chamber, spend an evening with songs and stories, but then he might leave with her slave girl! The next morning, the begum would call for the whip, each stroke to the slave’s back would lash the emperor. Akbar! The whole harem would be suspicious. What if the wretch carried the next emperor, their future guardian, in her wretched belly? (37)

The doors of the harem were heavily guarded. The inmates were almost like prisoners within its walls. All their wiles and fancies were slaked, however, within the confines of the harem, a strategy religiously observed in order to safeguard the ineffable sanctity of the place. Objects of their need and desire were brought to them by female mercenaries into the harem, for they were denied the freedom to fetch these objects from the marketplace themselves. This was a part of the connubial arrangement that made them the sole precious possession of
the emperor and they were not to be exposed to the sight of any other man, but him. Akbar was the master of his harem and all his wives and concubines and the slave girls were only vassals to his desire. In their secluded world, their sole ambition was to be their master’s favourite and their nights and days were given in pursuit to obtain his attention.

The raconteur Basu goes onto add that the harem was considered to be a very important institution of the regime and was to be recorded in the pages of the Akbarnama with only as much details that were permissible to maintain its modesty. Wishful rumours and chimerical fanciful accounts sprouted all around it. Especially, tales were spun when Akbar, already 26, was still childless. Divisive tales were constructed as the master of such an opulent and rich harem was yet to give Hindustan its heir:

But the one with an ample supply of wives and concubines managed to remain barren as an old tree. There were rumours about a jealous harem. Perhaps the begums were conspiring against each other—robbing a womb with bitter herbs before it could bear fruit. Better for him to remain childless than father a son with a rival wife. (66)

Throughout the entire gamut of his story, Basu keeps on referring to the Harem, imagining with the sheer delight of a storyteller, the world that was kept hidden so meticulously from the inquisition and curiosity of the rest of the world, the world that lay right in front of the eyes, and yet no eyes but those of the emperor’s have ever pried in it.

All the women characters in the novel, however, are not submissive and passive like the begums of Akbar. Basu indulges into an onerous portrayal of a few women characters who are different from the stereotype of a Mughal woman and thus deserve special attention. Zuleikha is one such character. She belongs to the ilk of women who are not frangible or easily yielding to the power and dictates of male dominance. She glowered at the custom of
the ‘purdah,’ the veil that was considered as an obligatory prerequisite to safeguard the modesty of a woman in those days:

Bihzad would see her dressed for her royal visits in her full length jaguli gown with tight sleeves and an opening at the breasts. She did not wear the married woman’s kerchief folded crossways and tied under the chin, but the stylish taq, the cap she had worn in her native Multan before she had married the foreigner, the Persian master. (19)

A true Persian beauty, she spent her days making perfumes and selling it to the ladies of the royal Harem. Strong, upright, bold, independent—she carried all the marks of an emancipated woman. She was free from the scruples of pretending to be a house-wife like the other women, and possessed not just a beautiful but an extremely smart head on her shoulders: “It was she who had married him (the Khwaja), neighbours said” (18). She had no qualms in speaking out her mind, and during the sessions of her reading out stories to Bihzad, she showed no hesitation in ridiculing or mirthfully throwing out a word or two, even regarding the emperor, “Akbar! He’s illiterate just like you!”(37).

Zuleikha had ensconced herself in her bedchamber, like an empress, free to practise and exercise her wishes, and reprimanded blatantly all possible restrictions that were otherwise imposed on the women of the day. Unlike the harem ladies, she was free to come and go wherever she liked. Slowly but surely, the ivy of her charm and beauty had menaced Bihzad a prisoner. He was intoxicated by her demeanour and her presence. She lured and seduced him unabashedly into an incest and Bihzad yielded, a helpless bee to the beautifully fragrant lotus:

‘O Nakshabi, there’s a trap in every wish, a lurking danger in every woman. She’s poisonous from head to tail.’ (47, original italics)
She loved Bihzad passionately and was not a bit ashamed to admit it. In their meetings, which were not quite infrequent, owing to Bihzad’s migration to Sikri, she would blurt out shamelessly, “What if I was carrying your child....” (88).

Another woman with a difference is Zuhra. She is like an enigma, obscured by her unabashed exhibition of nakedness. Every disguise is but a self-portrait, and she resorts to none, dispelling so effortlessly all qualms of feminine modesty. The Haji’s pet, as she was called, was a veritable mystery and a vicious one so to say in that. She was Bihzad’s bride to be, and Hilal Khan warned Bihzad way beforehand, of this viper of a being:

‘She let her veil drop, appearing in the market with her face uncovered. She came to the moon festival wrapped in a dress so thin that you could see all her secret parts. Shameless! Like a slave girl parading naked.’ With a quick look at Bihzad, he continued. ‘She’s enslaved by passion. They say women lose their appetite for men by the time they’re thirty, but not her.’ (177)

She was a strange enticing seductress. As Bihzad met her for the first time, after their wedding for their nuptial, she had nothing of a shy demure wife about her. She had a strange commanding presence and demonstrated a deliberate indifference to Bihzad’s presence. And then she started a vile ritual, the kissing game, with her eunuch, a boy barely twelve or thirteen years old. Beyond shock and alarm, Bihzad was overwhelmed with lust. Zuhra became the mistress of Bihzad’s heart and body. And soon she was to rule his head too. After these zanies of love-making sessions, they used to take walks together, and in their conversations Bihzad excitedly related to his artistic manoeuvres and Zuhra listened to them with an icy reluctance. Her perception of art was absolutely different than that of Bihzad’s. The refractoriness of her being imposed upon Bihzad a sense of doubt and ambiguity
regarding his own aesthetics. She pronounced with great certainty and salubriousness, as if her declaration was gospel itself, “Art is dead life” (187).

Zuhra soon became the cause of the unmaking of the artist in Bihzad. He was consumed by a scalding passion to be with Zuhra, but Zuhra, like a merciless goddess, remained adamantly indifferent to his pleadings. And then one night, as she permitted him entry to her bedchamber, Bihzad saw what no one should see, an act of gruesome brutality and insanity:

She kissed her sleeping boy lightly, then she freed herself from Bihzad and rose from the bed. Taking off the silk cord that held her gown together, she passed it around the neck of the eunuch. With a quick look at his face, she tied a knot, then climbed over his frail body. Leaning her elbows on the pillow, she brought her face close to the boy’s, then tightened the knot. (200)

Basu by way of such grotesque episodes is trying to show the extent of savagery and animosity that a woman is capable of. This episode also indicates the aberration that inflicted Zuhra, a carnal animal driven by a defiance to adhere to anything tender as love, and by killing her pet she is declaring quite vividly that she is not capable of the emotion of love or attachment, and is only driven by a fetish of power which she manifests by way of this horrible act over the helpless eunuch who was solely at her mercy. Seeing this, Bihzad was undone and so was Hazari, as right after this incident a calamitous earthquake took place burying Hazari deep down under the earth of nonexistence.

Basu’s portrayal of the Bird Women, a curious flock of women, is also equally interesting. This group constituted of women of various tribes, cultures and even ethnicity, speaking different tongues. And yet they lived in complete harmony as a compact family. They lived in complete seclusion from the society, in the mountains. They visited the town
markets with their curious and refulgent wares, and were extremely proficient at their trade. It was the Bird women who rescued the blindfolded Bihzad from the quotidian exploitation and cruelty that he suffered at the hands of the market people. The Bird women were like a symbol of emancipation and freedom in the stifling ambience of rigorous puritanism of the age. They were kind to the oppressed and harsh to the oppressors. They were an army in campaign to rescue the destitute and were in a constant vendetta against the bastion of the invidious patriarchal dominance.

The delineation of these women by Basu can be read as a riposte to the orthodox, conventional, superficially imposed concept of womanhood. Each in her own way defied the customs and rigours that stipulated them to a distinct category – the women. The rubric of womanhood forcibly imposed upon them by the patriarchal vanguards of the society, sculpting them to be something that they were expected to be and not what really constituted them. The chauvinism of patriarchy has been blatantly challenged by these women, who readily refused to be made into a woman following patriarchal instructions and regulations. Their defiance and lack of respect for such formalistic prescriptions are to be considered as a distinct mark of emancipation, of breaking free, and can be reckoned as the emblem of a resurgent womanhood.

**Harem and the Eunuchs**

Basu, as shown already, etches the rich, luxuriant and opulent harem of Akbar with much vividness and graphic details. Such a portrait becomes even more interesting because of the presence of the eunuchs in the harem. The role of the eunuchs in the doctrinaire of secrecy of the harem, indeed, deserves a special mention. The eunuch is not born a eunuch, but is made into one. The eunuchs suffer this menace of brutality to serve the emperor better.
They are appointed as guards to the harem. They look after the needs of the hundreds of queens and keep a strict vigil so that the sanctity of the harem is not defiled by any alien or male intrusion apart from that of the emperor himself. They are free to leave the harem and go out into the world outside its walls. The world outside sees the world within the harem through the eyes of the eunuchs. The eunuch tells the curious people of the world outside about the concatenation of wiles and jealousies that so thicken the air within its walls, the imponderable emotions that breathe in it, the blinding refulgence of beauty and the cretin darkness of jealousy. But then, the eunuch also performs the crucial function as the ‘eye’ of the emperor, keeping a strict check and vigil over the inmates of the harem. He has been made into a eunuch to perform this function. His genitals are severed at a tender age so that he could be a constant companion to the queens, never once posing any threats to get sexually entangled with them. His genitals may be severed, but does that severe his innate masculine desires? He is compelled to be in the company of the most desirable and seductive women, and yet refrain from any act of volition, for he has been castrated. His phallus is shaven clean, but his priapic urges still holding him a prisoner. The immensity of the psychological and physical suffering makes this whole business a horrible pandemic practice, a sinister torture. This intolerable infliction of mental and physical pain was but a savage way of creating a new section of people and thwarting them to the margin. As if the oppressor created the oppressed just in order to inflict sufferings upon him, supping thus in the pleasure of being in power. It is, in fact, a punitive infliction upon the body.

With graphic details, Basu’s novel brings to the fore the pain and sufferings of the eunuchs of Akbar’s harem mainly through the story of Hilal Khan, who was once the head eunuch of Akbar’s harem. The character, along with its immediate relevance to the plot, in itself provides an altogether different dimension to that category or section of people, who, though a very significant part of the regime, were never much discussed or talked about.
Basu, through Hilal Khan, opens a portal to the lives of these ‘others.’ These ‘monsters,’ as Hilal Khan would himself call the likes of him, were different, or rather made into something different. Basu seems to have captured their lives, their desires, their pain and sufferings mainly through Hilal Khan:

He had the head of a boy—smooth chin and blubber lips—on the body of an old woman. Hilal Khan, once the head eunuch of the emperor’s harem in Agra, the faithful keeper of the loveliest women in Hindustan. (115)

Though slightly cantankerous and pettish by nature, he was indeed the very factotum of Akbar’s harem. Petty slanders and ill-founded banter regarding him having a family, a wife and children, though amused the artists of the kitabkhana and the other common people, could not, however, repudiate the fact that Hilal Khan was the sincerest and the most efficient of all in his profession. Then one day, surreptitiously and suddenly, he disappeared from Agra, from his home, his harem. Rumours and stories were spliced explaining his sudden departure. Some said he was an ‘imperfect’ eunuch. The implication alone, though quite revolting, should be looked into closely. It was believed that he was not a ‘cleanly shaven’ eunuch and perhaps, thus, after the discovery of it, could not be trusted with the beautiful women whom he had attended all his life. And maybe in his new-found manhood he had grown close to one of the hundred harem wives. The jealousy of the rest perhaps had paved the way for his exile or banishment. Naubat Khan explains it to a curious gathering at the kitabkhana:

'Yes, if he was indeed imperfect. Capable of giving infinite pleasure without planting his seeds. Maybe he has grown too close to one of the ladies, and had to flee the jealousy of the others.' (119)
There, however, lies a more grotesque and ghastly tale behind the making of such ‘monsters.’

Hilal Khan narrated the process of making eunuchs to Bihzad, as one day they heard the appalling cries of a child, outside Bihzad’s window in Hilal Khan’s serai. It all sounded like the progression of a customary ritual. The barber asking the child if there will be any regrets, thrice. And then there were sounds, initially the movement of the feet over the stone floor and then “the swish of a cutting through air” (161). Hilal Khan shaking and crying, as he was reminded of his own ‘day of blood,’ sighed in a lachrymose tone, as if to himself:

‘He is a monster now. Just like me. They’ll take him home now to his mother. No other woman will ever have need of him.’ (161)

Hilal Khan’s words clearly suggest that the physical pain of the process will die but the mental suffering will plague the boy for the rest of his life. No riches, no fame can recompense for the horrible nightmare that has become his life now. He will be incarcerated for the rest of his life in the frame of the monster that he has become and with no hope of respite. This intransigent event has made him a eunuch and “He’ll feel incomplete for the rest of his life” (161). He will now be despised, used, and treated as a creature, a thing. He will love never expecting to be loved; he will care never expecting to be cared for. He will become a device, a machine for entertainment and pleasure or contentment. Once again Basu makes Hilal Khan speak this maudlin reality of the eunuchs: “A eunuch lives for hate. Everyday of his life” (138).

The entire episode of the making of a eunuch and the life that follows after the castration is both galling and appalling. It shows the brutality of customs and the savagery of a society where such inhumane exercises are practiced, that too as a ritual.
Miniature Art

Akbar was a great patron of art and his solicitude for art and painting has been celebrated with much aplomb in the pages of history. The emperor had his days and nights, all important affairs of his life and all significant aspects of his empire, recorded, not only in letters, but also in miniature paintings. B. N. Goswamy writes about the way the clerk’s diaries were first corrected before they were presented to the emperor. There were enormous karkhanas of paintings where commissions from the court were brought about by the daroghas and the clerks and the salaries of the artists or the rewards were conferred according to the excellence of workmanship after the due approval of the emperor himself. In this context, Goswamy goes on to quote Abul Fazl:

“Persian books”, Abul Fazl tells us, “both prose and poetry, were ornamented with pictures, and a very large number of paintings was thus collected. The Story of Hamzah was represented in twelve volumes... The Chingiznamah the Zafarnamah, this book [the Akbarnama], the Razmnama, the Ramayan, the Nal Daman, the Kalila Dammah, the Iyar-i-Danish, etc., were all illustrated.” ... “His Majesty himself sat for his likeness and also ordered to have the likenesses taken of all the grandees of the realm. An immense album was thus formed.” (93)

There is almost an impetuous if not torrential an account of the Mughal art form depicted in history. The accounts of the technicalities that were employed in the miniature paintings that were more of a narrative art are quite overwhelming. They have been put under careful scrutiny and analysed meticulously by the historians.

A wonderful melange of the Indian and Persian art—the Mughal art has been talked about in excess. Starting from the use of ‘naturalism’ to the technical disability of the Mughal
painter to represent the three dimensional reality on a two dimensional plane has been discussed closely. Som Prakash Vermain his article “Painting Under Akbar” writes:

Continuous narration in the Mughal school appears in the Hamzanama illustrations, which show multiple phases of an event depicted within a single visual field. These phases (units of an event) revolve around the central theme and make the representation of the event more elaborate and descriptive. (qtd. in Irfan Habib152)

Deliberating further about the opalescent Mughal miniature painting under Akbar Ettinghausen’s observation on Abdu-s Samad’s (the khwaja of Akbar’s kitabkhana) miniature is worth quoting, for it shows the admixture of Indian traits in the essentially Persian art of miniature painting:

Akbar presenting a miniature to his father Humayun (datable before1559), is important: ‘the hustle and bustle of the subject, the realistic approach of the painter, and the way of showing the attendants and servants outside the wall with the main scene behind, that is higher up in the painting, betray an Indian style.’ (19)

The longue duree of Mughal paintings under the patronage of Akbar was one of an elision of the Hindu and the Persian technique of art. It survived and sustained itself at the face of strong opposition. A miasma of anger, disagreement and rancour persisted amidst the most orthodox members of the Muslim community over the practice of miniature painting since it was strictly forbidden in Koran. As Bamber Gascoigne records:

It is a fortunate fact in the history of art that neither the Persians nor the Moghuls paid any attention to the passage in the Koran which forbids figurative art. Mohammad proclaimed that any man who parodies God’s power of creation by making an image of a living thing will be required on the Day of Judgement to give
that image life and, if he fails so to do, to surrender to it his own—a prohibition which forced artists in the stricter Islamic cultures to concentrate exclusively on calligraphy and abstract decoration. (92)

But at the face of all these oppositions, Akbar remained intransigent. His was a dream to make Fatehpur Sikri a flawless parterre and his regnal period a golden time in the pages of history. He was neither bigoted, nor did he preach obdurate and stringent orders to condign his subjects or his critics. But he was a man of sound taste and had an open mind. His aesthetic sense and his subtle taste for all that was good and edifying enriched the art and architecture of the period and helped it to reach to the zenith of glory. As is registered in the words of Bamber Gascoigne,

One of the most interesting of Akbar’s departments at Fatehpur Sikri was that of the painters. Akbar had inherited from his father the two Persian painters Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad, but the large number of painters under their control in the court studio were nearly all Hindus, trained in the Gujarati school of painting; the resulting Moghul style was therefore a combination of Persian and Indian traditions, and is in most ways an improvement on both. The department of painters were closely attached to the library, since nearly all their work at this period was the illustration of manuscripts, and they operated very much on a manufacturing basis. (92)

Alongside slaking the aesthetic fetish of the emperor, the entire enterprise of miniature painting also had a considerable political role to play; it was an acolyte especially in spreading the dynastic ideology of Akbar. The paintings were a pictorial translation of the Akbarnama manuscripts and were, therefore, also a part of a strategy to reach the populace at large. J. F. Richards in his article, “The Formulation of Imperial Authority under Akbar and Jehangir,” writes:
Abul Fazl’s most systematic exposition of the new ideology is set out in the best-known Mughal history, the voluminous Akbar-nama, an annual recounting of the events for 47 regnal years along with its equally bulky appendix: the three volumes of the Ain-i-Akbari, an imperial manual and gazetteer. After years of effort, Abul Fazl presented the magnificently bound and calligraphed first volume of the finished manuscript to Akbar at a court audience in 1595. To further aid the intended effect of the work, several hundred miniature paintings, found on virtually every page, illustrate the most dramatic events described in the work. (qtd. in Alam and Subrahmanyam 140)

Akbar’s love for art, indeed, has been widely and greatly chivvied by historians. All such accounts indicate to the constructive, aesthetically sound manoeuvring that Akbar had in mind in making his rule a glorious and memorable one.

The novel The Miniaturist can be partially called an eponymous novel for it revolves around the miniaturist Bihzad, a child prodigy bestowed with a grand name, after the great miniature artist Kamal-al-Din-Bihzad, “the jewel of Herat and Tabriz,” “Hazrat-i-Ustad” (6) whom even Orhan Pamuk recognises as “the master of masters, patron saint of all miniaturists” (20). Basu aligns Bihzad’s story with Bihzad’s art by dividing the novel, as already mentioned, into three parts, Naqsh (patterns), tarkh (shape) and tasveer (portrait), which again suggest the three steps to be followed in painting a portrait. It is the recit de voyage of the artist Bihzad who desired to break free from the formalistic rituals of art in the halcyon world of miniaturists under the convivial patronage of Akbar.

From his very tender years, the Khwaja took meticulous care in training his son whom he aspired to succeed as the master of the Kitabkhana after him (the khwaja). Under the strict tutelage of his father and within the confines of the lonely haveli, Bihzad started painting
with ease from the age of seven. As his mischiefs continued to his sheer delectation and amusement, he was sent to Mir Sayyid Ali, the master miniaturist, for his formal training in the art of miniature painting. His parboiled etchings were now to be trained under the strict and gelid vigilance of the Master, to be transformed into decorous pieces of miniature art form. Art to Mir Sayyid Ali was like a religion and the abstemious miniaturist would entertain no perfidy in the practice of it. “Be careful,” he warned his students, “Beware of the temptation of colour. Remember, colour to an artist is like love to a fool” (14).

On account of the fact that Bihzad could not read, he was, however, sent back with the prescription that Bihzad should be read out from the tales of the Persian and Arabian fables that were the very staple of all miniature painting. Impervious to what was expected by the populace at large and his master in particular, Bihzad strove to free himself from the stifling training of his master by refusing to draw the lovers, Khosru and Shirin. Instead, he gave life, through his brush, to the sighs of the lovelorn Farhad. And on being asked why he didn’t draw the lovers, a defiant Bihzad replied, both to his master’s alarm and adoration: “The brush hasn’t the tongue to speak the secret of love” (22).

The constant flagellations and admonitions fell to his deaf ears. Bihzad refused to draw the shamsa, the ornamental sunburst that was front piece of all important manuscripts. He refused to illustrate the memoirs of Babur. And soon Sayyid Ali realised that “Bihzad wouldn’t follow the normal course” (27). The boy who refused to restrict himself to the depiction of Razm o Bazm cannot be moulded. By the age of 14, he stopped his visits to Mir Sayyid Ali, with the proud declaration that he was an artist now, fit to join his father at the Kitabkhana.

The diffident Bihzad slowly grew defiant and obdurate, relegating the strict rules he was obliged to follow as a miniaturist. He failed to conform to the putative traditions of the
artist. His brush refused to paint a brute, loutish aggressive emperor who showed not a modicum of grace or mercy when it came to winning battles and annexing territories. He could not conceive of Akbar bleared by an unquenchable lust for power and victory. And hence the victory album of Akbar that Bihzad was commissioned to draw remained empty. He failed to record any of the details of the emperor’s vapid victory. The Khwaja could not contain his exasperation:

‘Do you know what you’re saying? That you have returned from the war without even a single sketch. Not one of the emperor inspecting the rajah’s fort, ordering the siege. Not one of him felling the infidel with a single shot! Not one of him pardoning the young prince who is now his vassal.’(107)

And yet such asperity yielded no results. Bihzad painted all night, but it was not the victory album, but his own Akbarnama. And the very next day, to his alarm and astonishment, Bihzad’s private Akbarnama was discovered:

There was a look of utter bewilderment on the Khwaja’s face. When did you do these things…? He glanced quickly at Bihzad, then stared at the portrait of Akbar as a young man with dangling earrings and unkempt hair. Akbar embracing a young man dressed as a maid, holding a half-eaten apple. Akbar caressing a boy with a face as delicate as a woman’s—kissing him like a wife. Akbar showing marks of his lover’s bite. (108-109)

The scabrous paintings of forbidden love besmeared the faces of the courtiers, as they beheld it, with awe, shame and revulsion. The courtiers inveighed and questioned the fealty of the artist and the emperor declaimed the little master. Bihzad was banished. He was now a “useless” painter (110). He spoke in a different language in his paintings defying the jargon of the miniaturists, and was doomed thus to lead a life without his precious one, the emperor,
for whom he had professed his overwhelming adoration in one of his paintings: “What is life without you/ And a world, without you” (109). As a miniaturist Bihzad is really shown to be an iconoclast. Basu is here also using these paintings to highlight the homoerotic love which was a taboo at that time. This is, of course, a way to proclaim the artist’s freedom of expression and repudiate the customs and rigours that stipulate that freedom.

While serving his term of expatriation in the ‘no man’s land’ Hazari, in Hilal Khan’s serai, Bihzad’s life became a bricolage of variegated experiences. Such experiences enriched and nourished the artist from within, almost without his knowledge of it. Though Bihzad was determined that he would never take up the pen again, the artist in him could not be kept away from objects soused in beauty. His noematics revolved around objects apt to be the subject of his paintings. The banishment of the artist could not ostracize the artist within, that lurked in the crevices of his wandering heart and eyes. As he wandered in the slave markets, he could not but stop to appreciate the charm and beauty of some of the slave girls who were in display to be owned by the highest bidder. Then there was the Tarabkhana, the Joy House, which Bihzad visited almost regularly. Inebriated by majun and wine, he would surrender to the incandescent pleasure seeking feats of the house. And soon the Tarabkhana was to become his Kitabkhana.

Then he painted ‘The Lady.’ Talks about Akbar’s relegating Islam in his quest to learn the secrets of the other religions were being highly criticized and frowned upon. It was amidst such pettifoggery that he met Father Alvarez, the Christian missionary who was invited to the Royal court by the emperor himself to divulge to the latter the secrets of Christianity. It was in Father Alvarez’s room that he saw the face of a mother holding her son, and it was that face that rocked his world:
He gazed for a long time at the painting on the open page. It was a woman’s face.

Astonishingly beautiful. A halo above her head. An infant in her arms. (157)

‘The Lady’ became a religion by itself. The miniaturist Bihzad, amidst the humdrum religious squabbles, gave birth to a religion untouched by the uncouth aggression and vile corruption. ‘The Lady’ became the simulacrum not of any particular religion, not of Islam, not of Christianity, nor of the infidels—but of something more profound and pure. It was a simulacrum of the artist’s religion.

It was because of ‘The Lady,’ Bihzad, as said already, found his way to Haji Uzbek’s court. He became the Khwaja of the invisible Kitabkhana of the gauche King’s court. But there was a frugal production of drawings in the Hazi’s court. No court proceedings were recorded. Bihzad found himself drawing animals in order to gratify the strange and queer fetishes of the Haji. And through strange and predictable wends, one day he was brought to the Haji’s harem where he was to draw the unabashed, almost nauseous venery of the Haji with his wives. The Haji was transformed into a lubricious animal within the walls of his harem, emulating the sexual feats of animals as he made love to his wives. The Haji desired his priapic encounters to be documented. Bihzad was directed to paint the Haji’s priapic japery. But the artist in Bihzad was so overwhelmed by horror and shock that he became an absolute neuter. His brush froze and his papers stared back at him. He was incapable of drawing the beastly lovemaking of the Haji and his wives:

It was as if his fingers had rebelled against his sight. As much as he tried to compose a scene, the lines refused to flow. The forms that he saw cavorting before him, seemed like Mulla Assad’s ghosts—invisible on close scrutiny. (180)

Bihzad needed to be trained, in the art of painting shameless love, and Hilal Khan took him to the village of the infidels to snaffle a glance or two at their paintings of their dark god, and
thus hone his (Bihzad’s) own skills to depict such obscenities. The entire colony was engaged in painting copiously the incendiary paintings of nothing but lovers, and passionate lovers so to say. Bihzad’s surprise knew no bounds and when he asked for whom these artists painted such scenes, Hilal Khan answered: “For their god. The god of love”(190). And thus Bihzad learned a new form of painting, a new way of life, a new colour of love.

Zuhra too had an arcane and yet an immensely potent effect on Bihzad’s aesthetics. All the secrets of miniature paintings that he had worked for all his life over, were altered, challenged and riven considerably by Zuhra’s arrogance and haughtiness. Inebriated on her own world of pleasures, Zuhra looked at the world of the artists and their works from an almost felonious perspective. She was the Chatelaine of her own thoughts and was never too hesitant in letting them be heard, loud and clear. When, in excitement, Bihzad told her about the dream Kitabkhana of Hazari that he was planning to build, Zuhra was hardly perturbed or moved, and defiantly spelt out:

‘You mean they’ll come to admire dead men, dead animals, dead flowers.’ She seemed unimpressed. ‘Is that why you’ve come here? To trick everyone? To make a desert seem alive?’ (186)

Her realm of priapic practices and the paroxysms of seduction that it induced upon Bihzad, slowly but surely, started gnawing and exhausting the artist in him. Zuhra became the cause of the unmaking of the artist in Bihzad. He became a sad shadow of the master painter he once used to be. He flayed his aesthetic theory, as he realized the colours and beauty scraping from his own life have now brought him to the true knowledge of the futility of his art:

Of all the paintings they had touched, he couldn’t think of one that was free of the lies that he has learned as a child. ‘He has drawn an imperfect universe,’ he whispered to himself. ‘Better never to draw than imitate His strange pleasure.’ (213)
The sprightly alacrity of the miniaturist faded and had given place to a comatose desire to “lift the curse forever” (215). Bihzad decided to blindfold himself. And soon he found his way sidling through various impediments and roughness into the safe custody and nursing of the Bird Women. Though the rest of the world bleared and faded into darkness, Bihzad could now see with much clarity the paintings he had drawn all his life, the subjects of the paintings, the faces he painted. His head which was filled with the memories of his paintings could not be eviscerated of its content. And the blindfold, instead of taking away the might of the painter, further probated the fact that Bihzad was a painter by birth and was to die as one. It was when he met Akbar on his deathbed, that Bihzad finally accepted this truth. As the dying emperor embraced him back to his patronage and love, Bihzad was once again reunited to his Muse and his art:

‘You are not an artist,’ Akbar told him. ‘You are a saint, Bihzad. Only a saint is truly blind, seeing none but the God inside him.’ (242-243)

Freed from all inhibitions, confusions and paradoxes, Bihzad became the artist he wanted to be. The free flame of the artist emblazoned with a glorious passion, found its way as he painted Akbar for the last time:

He drew Akbar like the dark god of the infidels, the god of love, cavorting with his consorts, setting fire to their veils. With every stroke of his brush he healed the wounds of a sick emperor, turning him young again. (244)

He was now the Artist, the free Artist. Basu supposedly by way of his novel is reclaiming for all artists (him included) a freedom of aesthetic space.
V

Till the emergence of poststructuralist theories which led to a bombardment of traditional academic disciplines, the novel and history were regarded as segmented compartments. The novel as a literary genre could often take resort to history, and was classified as ‘historical novel,’ keeping the sanctity of history as a separate discipline intact. With new readings and the influx of new literary theories, the basic exclusiveness of ‘History’ and the ‘Novel’ as literary forms has come up for interrogation. It is here that new historiographies have supplemented and compensated for the dubitable loopholes in the central metanarrative known as ‘history.’ Kunal Basu, in *The Miniaturist*, has challenged the purity of the traditional metanarrative by imaginatively re-creating some aspects of Mughal history which have hardly been recognised as an integral part of history proper. Thus, Basu creates a novel, which as a new historicist version of the metanarrative, can be described as ‘Novel as History.’

It has been already shown in this chapter that the historians have been extremely generous in documenting the details of Akbar’s religious policy. There seem to be almost ceremonious details of how munificent and tolerant the emperor was towards other religions in spite of the formidable and the considerable opposition that he had to confront from the orthodox and bigoted practitioners of Islam. His hermetic refusal to become a sectarian at the face of the growing acerbity of the Maulanas has been elaborately celebrated in the pages of history. In Basu’s novel too we do find him as the very epitome of tolerance and magnanimity. He has been lionised to a grand echelon. But this is only one side of the coin as Basu has portrayed an isolated community of Hindu painters who indulged in composing scenes of carnal pleasures and were thus incriminated as perverse and infidels. Their scabrous presence was scowled upon by the orthodox Muslims, who found in their cult a threat to the concept of formalistic religion. And hence they continued their existence in absolute
seclusion from the society. Basu’s text thus brings to the fore this section of suppressed and subjugated community of painters who could not make it to the pages of traditional ‘historical’ texts. Basu’s Akbar is not shown to be aware of these painters or to take any steps to make them part of the mainstream Mughal society. Basu, by this subtle touch, recreates a section of fictional marginalised painters and thus also challenges the metanarrative that refuses the inclusion of such marginal communities. Basu, actually, is bringing the marginalised history to the fore to give us a balanced take on Akbar’s regime.

This practice of subjugation and marginalisation is equally pellucid in the context of the representation of women in the historical accounts of the regnal years of Akbar. The women were also not properly mentioned or chronicled in the historical documents. In this context, it is pertinent to quote Miriam Schneir from the book, *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, wherein she has pertly placed the point that how this manifest form of suppression in the form of ‘purdah’ and the likes had been severely detrimental in constructing a sound feminist history, or any intellectual expression on the part of the women, “No feminist works emerged from behind the Hindu purdah or out of Moslem harems; centuries of slavery do not provide a fertile soil for intellectual development or expression” (xiv).³ It is, indeed, by way of constructive and confident rendering of the hidden female past in harems that a considerable feminist history can be salvaged. And Basu, by way of his novel, seems to have contributed much to it.

In historical documents, names like Mahamanga, Akbar’s mother, and Jodhabai, who played an instrumental role in the emperor’s state policies, were but only reluctantly mentioned. The depiction of women’s carnality was considered a sacrilege, and it was an absolute hush hush. Basu spurns this practice of the historians by empowering some of his women characters with a matchless flamboyance and vigour. They can go to any extent to fulfil their desires and exercise their wiles independent of any stipulation imposed upon their
gender. Basu’s is, thus, an emancipatory stance in regard to the presentation or ‘no presentation’ of women characters in the pages of history. The way Basu has represented the pangs and sufferings of the eunuchs also deserves special mention. In fact, history books tell us very little about their sufferings. Basu, by writing *The Miniaturist*, seems to fill in this void in the metanarrative of the Mughal empire.

The discovery of Bihzad’s personal ‘Akbarnama,’ wherein he had depicted scenes of forbidden love contemplating Akbar as his paramour, meets with vehement repugnance and anathema. The tolerant monarch could not bring himself to accept the unabashed exhibition and depiction of homoerotic love recorded in the paintings of Bihzad’s ‘Akbarnama.’ It was unanimously treated as a sacrilege and the creator was deemed fit to meet the severest punishment. Homosexuality or any demonstration of it was coterminous to blasphemy or a serious crime. Homosexuality and its practitioners were considered plagued or diseased and thus a bad influence on the culture of the age. It was thus brandished and skilfully exterminated or subjugated, by inflicting severe punishment and by keeping no account of such aberrations in the chronicles, thereby safeguarding the dominant ideology from getting defiled or corrupted. Basu has skilfully brought this reality to the fore as well.

Reading of any text, be it history or literature, involves understanding the location of the writer. It is the perspective of the historian or author that is of utmost importance. Basu’s use of history cannot be considered as a ballast or prop for his tale. Rather he is trying to situate us in that particular context and culture and interpret it from his own (and also our) cultural context. The spatial and temporal distance gives clairvoyance and thereby helps us to see a more complete picture of the age, and, in course, understand ours. In such an act, the gaps and hiatuses are filled in and the power politics, by the propagation of a specific ideology, is exposed. In this sense, Basu’s *The Miniaturist* can be interpreted as a discourse *de voyage*, a belated travelling through the Mughal history under Akbar, opposing, resisting
and re-producing the ideologies of a hegemonic discourse to form counter ideologies. Opposition herein should not be considered as a negative force outside the dominant, but a formative element that mediated the production and maintenance of power and knowledge of that age. It can be called an ‘anamnesiac’ account of the Mughal period. This point can be more clearly established by Behdad’s observation of such belated readings:

A belated reading is not an orthodox reiteration or a reapplication of a previous theory; rather, it is an interventionary articulation of a new problematic through the detour—or, perhaps more accurately, retour—of an earlier practice. The belated practice of philosophy is therefore a mode of discursive contestation, and having renounced denegation, this wild practice is consciously political and ‘acts according to what it is.’ The new practice of philosophy is a ‘certain investment of politics, a certain continuation of politics, a certain rumination of politics’ Althusser insists. (Behdad 3)

This belated reading includes the texts and voices previously excluded from various disciplines. And, thus, after Behdad, can be called “the belated return of the repressed histories of resistance” (Behdad 6). This can also be called a ‘towardness’ to history that reclaims the unrepresented parts of history and demystifies the allochronic/ asynchronous discourse of power.
Notes

1. See Bamber Gascoigne’s *The Great Moguls: India’s Most Flamboyant Rulers* for a detailed history of Sufism during the Mughal era.

2. See Ale Rutherford’s *Empire of the Moghuls: Ruler of the World*.

3. Mention however must be made of the fact that the concept of ‘Hindu purdah’ was a colonial construct, and it can safely be argued that no such thing existed before the coming of the Moslem invaders. Women were held in high respect and enjoyed ‘almost’ equal status with men. One of the luminaries writing about women history, Geraldine Forbes, have vehemently opposed to this concept of the ‘veiled Indian women’ as the general rule ever since time has been recorded. Forbes in her *Women in Modern India* is quite clear and confident in her observation:

   In the first place, not all Indian women were behind veils, although certain ideas about modesty and respectability were widely shared. It is equally false to define women’s world as one which totally suppresses female agency. To go one step further and declare that Indian women, secluded and not secluded, had no voice in the third act of silencing. (4)
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Chapter IV

Representation of History in Racists

I

Kunal Basu’s *Racists* is an aggressive critique of the practice of racial discrimination in any form. The novel is situated in the 19th century Victorian Europe and its African colonies. It is an engaging tale of a curious, impetuous and elaborate experiment undertaken by two scientists, in a quest to identify the superior race and to calibrate the reason behind this superiority. History bears evidences to such fanatic experiments during that period to settle the inconclusive debate on race. This disconcerting palaver of an idea is well transfused in the novel by Basu in the debate between the two scientists, Bates and Belavoix. Their ceaseless, unyielding penchant to know the truth of racial differences forms the staple of Basu’s tale. Since cognition is also a kind of narrativization, in this chapter, the present researcher proposes to examine closely Basu’s unearthing of the ‘non historicised past’ with a special unword for the racial pyromania that was prominent at that time and still exists, perhaps, in a sugar-coated form. In so doing, the present researcher also intends to investigate the state and plight of the Victorian women amidst this fanatic march of men for establishing racial superiority.

II

The novel, *Racists*, is about the conflict between two prominent scientists, Bates and Belavoix, regarding the discourse of race. They agreed on to conduct an experiment which, they thought, would prove their individual postulates regarding the racial question. For the experiment, two infants, one black and another white, were chosen; they were to be raised in complete seclusion from civilization in an isolated island, Arlinda, under the care of a muted nurse, Norah, who was to follow certain very strict instructions given by Samuel Bates, in
rearing the two specimens. The two scientists along with Bates’ assistant, Quartley, were to visit the island twice annually, for registering the cranial and behavioural developments of the specimens. The experiment was to be carried on for a tenure of 12 years, till the two specimens reached their puberty.

Each of the scientists carried their respective instruments – the scientific tools of Bates for taking the cranial measurements, and the notebooks of Belavoix wherein he registered the behavioural pattern of the specimens and just as soon as they reach the island, the rigmarole of their experiment started promptly. The first experiment, which involved the recording of the cranial measurements of the specimens with the craniograph and the torsiometer, was a major expose that introduced the readers not just only to the idiosyncratic behaviour of the specimens, but also provided them with a fair idea about the other characters, the focussed Bates, the observant Belavoix, the cautious assistant and the protective nurse. The boy seemed distinctly animated and excited at the sight of the visitors and the prospect of the experiment that was to follow, while the girl appeared to be reticent and shy, redacting and retracting with a sudden sense of horror. The measurement yielded results to Bates’s unshriven content and satisfaction as the cranial measurements of the white girl were more than the black boy.

It was Quartley who takes us back in time, to the very source of the dispute. Through him the readers come to know about Bates’s obsession with craniology, his laboratory, the Madhouse, which was considered as the worship house of the religion of racial sciences. It was a veritable treasure trove that proudly housed a huge array of human skulls of different races (300 skulls to be precise); it was, in other words, a racial archive. Bates was hell-bent in proving his point – what made one race superior to the other. Bates’s robust enthusiasm and flamboyant arguments on racial issues, however, had failed to impress the polygenist Belavoix. And it was, thus, the rivalry took roots, and since both the parties were determined
to prove their own theory right, it culminated in the curious experiment mentioned above. There was no dearth of philanthropy and generous charity to support this expedition which was to contribute substantially to the noble cause of racial sciences. Bates’s wife, a rich heiress, who stayed far away in a cold county and who cavorted at the very fact of being Bates’s wife, was his greatest support. Motivated by an unflinching Missionary zeal to stop slavery and the maltreatment towards the coloured race, it was this proud wife of Bates who fuelled and financed all his experiments and study.

Though Bates remained absolutely resolute in continuing the experiment as was decided for 12 years, a sudden sense of impatience had crept in the minds of both Quartley and Belavoix. Driven by a sense of abnegation triggered by the inert time spent in the island, Belavoix finally suggested a means to obtain a hastened ‘natural conclusion’ to their experiment. He decided to leave a knife for the specimens hoping that the superior one in the chain of races would obviously kill the other, giving thus a natural conclusion to their long drawn experiment that was not going anywhere. But Bates inveighed and dismissed with his usual acerbity the incipient betrayal that was taking shape in his rival’s mind.

And soon, amidst this tumultuous and unrelenting battle to solve the conundrum of races, love trod in stealthily. Amidst this gumption to bring about a breakthrough in racial sciences, Norah and Quartley had found tenderness and comfort in the presence of each other. And before they could know, they were sprawling love. The growing resentment and disagreement between the two rivals, which was no longer tacit anymore, greatly perturbed Quartley. He grew immensely restless and apprehensive regarding the fates of the two specimens and the nurse Norah. His fondness towards the boy and the girl, his love for Norah, and his waning interest in this experiment, slowly but surely, made him devise strategies to protect them from being sacrificed at the altar of racial sciences.
Back in the Madhouse, Quartley found a changed, more desperate and ruthless than ever Bates. Perhaps Bates dreaded a comedown, even more than the destruction of his Madhouse. He was driven both by a sense of mad enthusiasm and frustration. The scepticism of Holmes and the other members of the Royal Society added fuel to the fire. The palaver over his elaborate experiment and endeavours and the new theory of evolution propagated by a contemporary budding English scientist had wrecked Bates’s peace and calm a thousand times over. However, good tidings came in the shape of the long awaited letter of Belavoix, wherein, he desired a final sail to Arlinda for officially bringing this entire enterprise to an end.

Belavoix was to arrive separately following Bates in a month’s time. To Quartley’s amazement, Bates refused to take any new instruments along with him for the final trip to Arlinda. And as the days passed in a reticent, languid yet anxious way, one night an event took place that caused the final stir of the most lethal effect. Bates discovered Norah’s secret. He came to know that Norah could speak, that she could sing. He found her in her little nest, playing with the specimens, singing songs to comfort them. He found Norah playing a game she had devised, with the two children. Bates would have killed Norah, had it not been for Quartley, who having been forewarned by a promontory sense of evil, had followed Bates to Norah’s cottage, armed with Bates’s rifle.

Stung by a morbid sense of betrayal and disgust, Bates left the cottage as the lost scientist, the broken scientist, alleging the nurse and the assistant of killing the experiment. There was no more hope left for success of any kind, and thus the experiment rescinded itself. Bates appeared inexplicably calm as he sailed back for London with Captain Perry, leaving his assistant, the Nurse and the children back in Arlinda. A sudden attack by the Arab traders and their abduction of the boy left Norah and Quartley with the white girl, sad and listless by the loss of the boy. Rumours regarding the priggish scientist prevailed, as Quartley and Norah
began their own experiment, ‘the real experiment’ (213); they were now the father and the mother of Ari, the white girl.

III

History of Racial Sciences

The notion of race and the practice of racial differences are not eternal, immutable or inherent in man. The ‘constructed’ nature of racial differences has been pointed out by Professor M. Nesturkh, who in his in *The Races of Mankind* pertly quotes Marx and Engels who argued that “even naturally emerging clan differences, such for instance, as racial, etc., differences… can and must be eliminated by historical development”(9). The study of races, over the years, has also developed as a branch of science to typify and classify races, show their development and provide an understanding of the biological and socio-economic factors involved in this development. But then, what was the ‘need’ for such a science to emerge and gradually bludgeon? Sociologists argue that need is explained by social dynamics such as conformity and competition and that needs are learnt. It could, therefore, be said that the emergence of racial science has its roots in social, biological and economic factors, and in our process of learning them. Racial science, of course, was the plinth on which the various faces of racial differences were to be addressed.

There can be no disjunction in asserting that the question of the races has long troubled men/ historians through the centuries without any possible retrenchment. As Mary Grigg points out in *The White Question*, the problem of race could be analyzed from multiple perspectives:
The colour problem is something of a global confidence trick. If we wish to understand it we must look at the class angle and the sex angle. Then, again, we must look at it from the angle of industrial relations, and further, from the educational angle. Then we must consider the ‘problem’ of immigration, the problem of health, the problem of poverty in the underdeveloped nations, the problems of cultural differences. Suddenly we are looking at all human problems as at the branches of a single problem, of which the root is race; when perhaps we should be looking at racialism as just another branch of something which is rooted in ourselves. (112)

This ‘problem,’ delicate as it is by nature, was, indeed, dealt with by different historians in different ways. Some of them simply planted it as a political question wherein the repeal and amendments of acts alone were mentioned. They chose not to speak about the differences and discriminations that prevailed unabashedly. In *A History of England*, John Thorn, Roger Lockyer and David Smith, for instance, just made a passing reference to William Wilberforce, the noted vanguard the spearhead, who was instrumental in abolishing the slave trade. Sometimes it was otherwise reluctantly registered under the context of industry and empire, with no reference to the immensity of the monstrous practice, as we find in Keith Feiling writing in a very matter of fact way about this historic occurrence in his *A History of England*:

It became clear that, so long as slavery existed, large profits could be made in an illegal trade, nor would the United States collaborate by allowing British warships to search suspect traders. In the twenties, therefore, Wilberforce and Fowell Buxton raised the issue of abolishing slavery itself. (832)
Chroniclers went on referring to racism in such oblique ways by making passing comments on slavery and its abolition. In fact, most of the white chroniclers have slyly avoided the details of the inhuman brutality that was inflicted upon the coloured slaves by their white masters.

The references to the slave trade in different chronicles clearly prove that along with the spread of slavery there was also a wake to stand against it and fight for the fair and rightful share of the coloured people as free citizens in entire Europe. Radical minds were in operation to bring this inhuman enterprise to an end. Eric Williams writes:

England, France and even Holland, began to challenge the Iberian Axis and claim their place in the sun. The Negro, too, was to have his place, though he did not ask for it.(4)

The clamour for the equity of the Blacks reached its peak in Victorian England. It, however, has to be pointed out here that even those who were driven by a humane concern towards their coloured brethren, were in a state of confusion, and, indeed, their strivings, thus, though not outright spurious, were of a diluted nature. Their sympathy and concern for the coloured lot was in itself gravid with contradictions. The white wanted to show the liberal and munificent side of their race, and this desire to show kindness was mostly triggered by a sense of obligation, and not by a sensitised empathy or concern for the coloured masses. It was, as if, the ‘white man’s burden,’ owing to their superior position, to see to it that the coloured are not wronged. It was more a selfish benevolence than a humane one. In understanding this confused sense of empathy or sympathy for the Blacks that suddenly took hold in quite a many, including the whites, a report (about understanding the process of integration among the black workers with this new and changed attitude of their white masters) as recorded by R. B. Davison in his *Black British* can be cited:
Some good, some not so good. Some English treat them well, some not so well, but he [the black worker] is trying to be happy in his surroundings. People from different islands tend to stick together and not mix very well. She [the white supervisor] does see some Jamaicans who work on the other floors, but as they have their lunch-time at different hours, she does not talk to them. Supervisor is white and quite nice. Some like us, some don’t. (132)

This report clearly indicates a sense of chaotic confusion. And not only the somewhat ornate munificence of the whites, but also the reception of the same by the blacks, did further problematize the situation.

There was, in fact, no dearth of the solvent benevolence in the 19th century England. Though the coloured was no longer ostracized, yet, as argued already, one can safely question the authenticity and genuineness of such sympathy. Though not evanescent, such demonstrations of concern were indubitably of an exhortatory nature. In his *Negroes in Britain*, K. L. Little points out:

By the end of the 19th century, however, attitudes towards the Negro, as well as notions concerning him, seem to have undergone a considerable change. No doubt the emotions of sympathy aroused on his behalf had a great deal to do with this. An object for pity becomes very often an object for condescension. The difficulty was that by emancipation he had theoretically ceased to be either. It was no longer possible to regard him merely as the faithful black, a typification of servile devotion and fidelity. It was as if in becoming a “man and a brother,” as one anonymous commentator puts it, “he forthwith ceased to be a friend.” Members of the public who had known the Negro in his servile days looked back to them and to him with
sentiment and affection, but it is doubtful if they could bring themselves to recognise
and to relish him on terms of equality. (207)

No conceivable solution to this problem was there at that time and, perhaps, no ultimate
solution has come up till date. And yet the understanding and close diagnosis of ‘the
problem’ itself can be reckoned as a significant step forward in race studies. One also notices,
with a growing awareness of this racial riddle, sometime towards the end of the 19th century,
a diminishing tendency of the colonial scruple in the registering of ‘the problem.’ One also
finds the chroniclers striving to delve into the inner genomics of the racial question instead of
just reluctantly mentioning an event like the abolition of slave trade in order to oblige
historicity.

The foundations of such a change, an enthusiasm for equality, though, to a large
extent, superficially installed, were laid by Charles Darwin’s theory of the ‘Origin of the
Species’ that shook the world and jolted hard the age old doctrines and beliefs of racial
sciences. Charles Darwin in his Origin of Species proposed a shocking theory that man and
all other species of life had evolved from a common source, thus establishing a connection
between human beings and lowly species like those of the apes. This indicated, as he himself
pointed out, that man with all his noble qualities still bore in his bodily frame the marks of his
lowly origin. This caused a considerable amount of commotion and excitement amidst the
various sections of the then society. As Thorn writes:

The theory of evolution seemed to be not only a challenge to the biblical story of
creation but an insult to all the achievements of the Victorian age. In the hands of
scientists and churchmen the argument became a bitter battle of words which
damaged the cause of religion and of science for a century. (494)
In fact, after Darwin, the study of variety of human beings suddenly became the concern of a good many scientists of the Victorian period. This altered various earlier positions. The racial sciences, of which the science of Craniology was the most prominent, were greatly stirred and got a huge setback. The practice of racial sciences was rampant during that period and was of an elaborate stature.

In fact, there were various postulates, methods and theories that operated behind the practice of racial discrimination/distinction under the more acceptable guise of racial sciences. Such syndicate of racial prejudices that led to and was carried on in the name of racial sciences was a categorical way of continuing the Spartan cause of the White race, a way of justifying, as if, that their superior stand was natural and was thus unimpeachable. It was a mere façade to continue their routine ugly practice of maltreating the coloured as inferiors. Nesturkh has very clearly pointed out this aspect that was instrumental in ushering in the ‘need’ of racial sciences:

It is precisely by means of race theories that the “white” imperialists justify the enslavement and exploitation of the colonial peoples who, in the majority of cases, belong to the so-called “coloured” Mongoloid and Negroid races. (9)

It was, in fact, an elaborate mechanism that involved various complicated procedures and experiments to substantiate the difference between the races. It was a very meticulous and carefully sculpted science to validate the vile practice of racial discrimination. Significant data were obtained by an anatomo-anthropological study of the different parts of the body, especially the skull and the skeleton. The study of human skull produced a special branch of anthropological science known as Craniology. In it, the data collected by the measurement of skulls and skeletons of a considerable group of people were subjected to statistical treatment. The results of these complicated statistical works were then recorded in graphs and tables.
Using these tables, the racial scientists then defined the territorial anthropological types or racial groups they represented. And all this was done for a better understanding of the way a nation developed. In this context, mention may be made of the two 19th century phrenologists, Franz Gall (1758-1828) and Johann Spurzheim (1776-1832). These two neuro-anatomists had a firm faith that, “…the degree to which an individual possessed a faculty, such as ‘memory’ or ‘love of off-springs’ depended on the size of the relevant brain area” (Angus and Zarate 21). They further believed that this faculty would be, in turn, reflected in the shape of the skull over that area. The hypothesis had a very potent effect on the minds of the then people and generated a common conception that personality could be analysed by examining the skull. But no two phrenologists ever agreed on exactly what mental faculties there were, nor on how they were positioned over the skull. And thus the debate over the issue remained inconclusive, and could be considered as only a conjecture.

In Racists, Basu has given quite a pertinent account of the white man’s inimitable preoccupation with race studies to assert and establish his superiority to other races. He has also added other dimensions to this iniquitous desire by showing the obsessive engagement of Bates to prove his theory of the superiority of the European races to the other races, the missionary zeal of Louisa Bates to civilise the savage and make him fit for society and company, and the neutered affection of the nurse Norah, her equal care for both the coloured and the white child. Bates is of the belief that all races belong to the same human family and the superiority of the one to the other can only be experienced by the difference in size and proportion of the cranium. On the other hand, Belavoix’s speculations stem out of his observations and experiences he has gathered from his extensive travels in the African colonies. He believes that races represent human species which are different from one another and “…which are destined to dominate, enslave and murder each other” (Mike Phillips 1).
The purpose of the experiment undertaken by Bates and Belavoix, indubitably, was to establish the superiority of the white race and also to sanctify it empirically. This seems to be perfectly in tune with the European thinkers and scientists of the 18th and 19th centuries who, as shown already, thought that a rational premise was required to justify this xenophobic tendency that was so nefariously prominent in them. In fact, *Racists* endeavours to scrutinize as well as satirize this so-called scientific racism. Basu animates his characters and invests in them the kind of fanaticism that was expected to be the goading force of the then racial scientists.

Professor Samuel Bates carried on his crusade for the racial sciences with utmost temerity and success. The proud owner of the Madhouse, Bates was quite a type, opposed to flummery, a ceaseless crusader to the cause of the incipient science of craniology. He would display his keen sense of observation and study of the skulls of various races in order to bring home his conviction to general applause and welcome receptions:

That a Negro is more a monkey than a man can’t be denied. But why is it so…?

He’d open with a puzzle then offer answer and proof in public, producing instruments and specimens like a magician. He’d compare the skull of a European – ‘the race that has produced Newton and Shakespeare’ – to one of a Negro: ‘the inferior sibling, unable to count the numbers of their fingers.’ It was more than colour of skin, he’d thunder on. The savage and the civilised were separated by nature where it mattered most: in the brain. Like Aristotle’s *scalanatura*, Bates Chain of Races charted the entire human species, based on the cranial features of each race. At the top of the chain stood the European, the very best, while the bottom was reserved for the Negro: ‘A man he is, like us, but a lesser man!’ he’d announce to general applause.
Such speeches and their welcome reception by the populace at large indicate the distorted social design that was evidently plagued by racial prejudices in Victorian England. There was, as if, a frenzied race which became mad to prove the superiority of the white to the other races by any possible means.

Jean Louis Belavoix, the polygenist, was, however, reluctant to accept Bate’s views on racial science. The counter argument of Belavoix was of equal importance and was not altogether lacking in sound logic:

The races, he’d announce in his singsong voice, were distinct – they were different species. ‘Two hands and two feet, a head and a belly don’t make the same animal!’ However similar their bodies, the minds were strangers to one another. ‘It isn’t that the Negro is inferior to us,’ he argued, ‘but that he is unrelated to us. Would you compare a horse with a zebra?’ The races were equal only in one thing: the germ they shared. And it woke in them when they met, turned them into two species of fighting animal, driven to covet and conquer the other. That was their only similarity. According to Belavoix, all races were doomed, doomed to plunder and be plundered, to murder and die. It was a curse, a flaw that must’ve been in the seeds of all Adams – white, black, yellow red. (37).

This thus gave rise to yet another sound and logical argument contesting Bates’s theory of the races. The argument to establish a logical and reasonable racial theory was thus pronged into two very strong and confident arguments, each contradicting the other vehemently. It was on such a bawling dispute, that the grand experiment was decided upon, with the eager support of Royal College of Physicians of England and Societe’ Ethnologique de Paris. It was believed that the experiment would not only settle the differences of these two scientists, but was to change the very face of racial science.
Derisive as they were, the two scientists were equally distinct in their approach, techniques and attitudes towards the experiment. The proud, dauntless and focussed Bates along with his diligence and perseverance had a horde of instruments and tools to substantiate and validate his part of the theory – the craniograph, the torsiometer and the ceaselessly and meticulously etched log of the cranial measurements of the specimens. While the pleasant, almost flippant, Belavoix with his power of sharp, keen observation, brooded, contemplated and unburdened his findings and imaginings in his notebooks. However, the drive to prove the superiority of the white race was equally strong in both, so much so that their sole consolation lay in the outcome of the experiment, impervious to what consequence it may be of to the children or to the nurse associated with the experiment. They were slowly but surely becoming savages themselves, irate at the slightest provocation, ready to sacrifice or risk the lives of two innocent infants for a ‘natural conclusion’ to their experiment (69). When snubbed by Bates at his outrageous suggestion to leave a knife to the children, and leave them to decide their own fate, Belavoix observes:

‘The ability of the civilised, the most civilised of all, to show the highest savagery – that’s the real proof of racial superiority. Nothing else will do.’ (70).

The scientists do rector the experiment with much innocuous assiduity governing every step as if it is the most crucial and fundamental one in the process of proving the theory. Basu goes on to show the two scientists basking in the triumph over idle diversions, sating their curiosities as the specimens are put to the mirror test – a test of intelligence – and sculpting their own deductions at the reactions of the specimens. This is to be followed by another test – a test of benevolence. And all these are done to reason out the superior race. In course of these scientific pursuits, the two scientists indeed become more savage and wild than the feral specimens themselves. As Bates derisively blurts out with a naked display of his insensitivity:
“The children are rubbish, Quartley.” “Rubbish?” “Yes, rubbish, I thought you’d know that by now. This isn’t about the children. It’s about two great arguments.”

(179)

The age was designed to support the operation of such an experiment. Racial science, the new science that was emerging with a gradual and considerable speed, was frescoed on the social and academic, and to a large extent, on the political face of 19th century Victorian England. In constructing his tale, thus, Basu has dealt it with much sincerity and diligence instead of driving it to the margin as some pointless bauble. He scrupulously brings to life and recreates an age that was driven by an insane curiosity about racial difference:

Never since Newton’s *Principia* had there been such fervour, such hope. A time to rejoice, as scientists finally turned their minds from the mystery of things to the mystery of man. From arranging the millions of stars neatly into a universe, to arranging the motley races strewn higgledy-piggledy across the earth. From discovering nature’s laws to building a theory of the human species. (27)

Craniology soon made its own special mark with a promise to contribute amply to the promenade of the incipient science. The world seemed to be responding to it with a remarkable enthusiasm, as Basu points out:

Three museums opened in Paris alone in less than a decade. Two in London. Antwerp boasted that its Athenaeum would overtake even the British museum. Cologne, Edinburgh, Leipzig, Copenhagen weren’t far behind. The Queen of Holland offered a generous benefaction to scientists to document the peculiarities of her subjects abroad. The King of Sweden was said to have a keen eye for shrunken heads brought back from New Guinea head-hunters, to display to his privileged
guests. Even guildsmen and sugar barons felt tempted to abandon their morbid lust for building more cemeteries in order to erect new temples to science. (28)

The entire world seemed to be in the firm thrall of this new race to know the races and Racists, almost like a chronicle, seems to document such a frenzy.

In a nation driven by the exuberant concern for racial science, it was hardly difficult to secure a willing aegis for ‘the experiment.’ Within the scope and frame of the tale, Basu depicts a horde of such willing benefactors, Mrs Louisa Bates being the most prominent of the lot. Apart from being the proud wife of Professor Samuel Bates, she is a rich lady, an heiress, and also holds a missionary office of her own making. An invalid and hence restricted to her wheelchair, she enjoys the company of a handful of people who readily share, or perhaps pretended to share, her concerns and affiliations for the cause. She is the chief sponsor for Bates’s and Belavoix’s experiment. And thus, every routine visit to Arlinda is followed by a routine visit to the Steeple, Mrs Louisa Bates’s residence where Bates is to sate a gaping curious gathering of ‘inquisitors’ (92), Mrs Bates and her companions, by his brief and succinct disquisition about their latest findings and developments of the experiment. Louisa “the worrying saint…needed scientific proof for what God had intended: the unity of all races. To prove that the savage was worthy of help to raise him to the level of his superior brother, not just fit to be sold. She planned to fight the devil, the slavers, with his proof, strangle them all with the great Chain of Races. Bates must win over the likes of Mr Tucker. Her husband must defend God with his science” (97).

Though Bates deigns to satisfy their insipid inquisitions by maintaining a studied calm, his patience is more than often impaled by the counter propositions and challenges of the lot. Their inveterate qualms and their overindulgent beliefs in their integrity often demand answers to questions that Bates and Quartley both are unwilling and incapable to give:
‘Even if the result confirm our belief, will it be enough?’ He hears Louisa speaking almost to herself. ‘Will it discourage the slavers? Will it finally stop slavery?’ She sighs, ‘As Mr Kepler was saying at supper: can we stop evil with science…?’ (100)

The two scientists, however, would yield to nothing less than concrete results, a worth for their money, their patronage. Talks about the brutish treatment that the coloured suffered at the hands of the white punctuated their discussion.

The role of Captain Perry, whom Basu delineates as a loyal comrade to the scientists extending his indispensable services in commandeering ‘the experiment,’ also seems to be extremely significant in re-creating the 19th century milieu in the novel. A common acquaintance both to Bates and Louisa, Perry too is one amongst the many faces who gather for the bouts of edifying sessions that Bates and Quartley deliver at the Steeple after each of their visits to Arlinda. A man of agreeable temper and jocund constitution, Perry has rendered the insuperable service to Bates and Belavoix by helping them not only to identify and isolate Arlinda as their natural laboratory for their mammoth enterprise but also to commute to this god forsaken island. He has rendered further services by arranging to deliver the necessary comestibles and other items that the specimens and their nurse require to survive in the sterile island. Basu has clearly expressed his momentous fervour and enthusiasm for the ‘cause’ in the lines:

‘The unfinished scientist,’ he calls himself. Like most experienced sailors, Perry has learned a thing or two from his travelling companions and nurses the dream of leading his own scientific expedition someday. From each trip he brings back a novel specimen – a skull which he presents to Bates in a special mahogany box engraved with the legend: ‘A gift from Captain Charles E. Perry to the cause of British Science.’ (82, original emphasis)
However, his earnest dedication to the cause slackened considerably, when Quartley confided to him the strategies that the scientists were construing to expedite the experiment to a ‘natural conclusion’ and how such plans would imperil the innocent lives of the specimens and the nurse. He further told Perry that such a loss of one of the specimens getting killed by the other was to yield no tangible resolution to the experiment; it, in short, would rather result in the very failure of the enterprise.

The role of the Royal Society of Britain and the Societe` Ethnologique de Paris, whose veteran support provided an academic ballast and purport to the whole enterprise, also contributes a lot to the representation of the 19th century craze about racial sciences. It is in the auspices and the august presence of Sir Reginald Holmes, the President of the Royal Society, that the seeds of the experiment were sown. Under his persistent guidance and tutelage it even germinated to a considerable extent. Initially Sir Holmes gave Bayes the promise of ‘l’e`preuve’ (105), without the slightest hint of compunction:

‘You know that I and the Royal Society stand firmly behind you.’ (107)

But soon certain skirmishes and scruples took hold of the better side of Sir Reginald Holmes and his patience and dedication were seen to falter and dwindle,

‘It’s not beyond our means to support you. And the society does, as you say, stand to benefit from all this. But we’re best left out of it. It would raise too many eyebrows. Unusual as it is, your experiment might arouse controversy.’ (106)

This comment of Holmes is immensely significant. Phrenology, popularly known as craniology, was developed by the German physician Franz Joseph Gall in 1796 and the discipline became very popular in the 19th century, especially from about 1810 until 1840. The principal British centre for phrenology was Edinburgh, where the Edinburgh
Phrenological Society was established in 1820. However, in due course of time, it was regarded as an obsolete amalgamation of primitive neuroanatomy with moral philosophy. The overall attitude of the people as well as the institutions that fostered such scientific assumptions and phenomenon changed drastically with time. The decision of the Royal Society to withdraw their support to the experiment (that was purely grounded on racial bias and contradictions) foregrounds the then debates on the ethical side of such experiments and the consequent hesitations of the scientific institutions in providing their patronage to such experiments which might have controversial overtures.

The Societe’s concern is also quite pre-emptive as is expressed in the rather saturnine letter that conveyed the accidental and fateful demise of Belavoix. Though the letter certainly bore the disappointment and dismay that afflicted them not only for the loss of their greatest scientist but also for the unfortunate abrupt caesura that this event might bring to the experiment, it was merely a courteous and cursory way of washing their hands off the experiment. The Societe was, of course, not supporting the experiment financially, their only support came in the form of their precious scientist Belavoix, who was now dead.

Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution also occupy a significant position in the novel. As there ensued a mild and polite squabble convincing the members of the Royal Society in Sir Reginald’s office, Bates was confronted with a new poser, a new riddle, a new challenge:

‘What if it was neither monogenism nor polygenism, but something else that explained the racial puzzle?’ ‘You mean if…?’ ‘I mean if Mr Darwin and his friends are right,’ Skeene put in quickly. Then he turned to Bates. ‘Have you heard of the new theory of evolution?’ with Bates silent, Skeene seized the chance to lecture.

‘It’s a theory that explains what we have been trying to explain for so long. It claims
that we – men were born not of Adam and Eve, but – ‘But that all the races have evolved from a common origin,’ Burnett joined in. ‘And it’s a peculiar origin that is claimed. One wouldn’t think of it normally, but there seems to be a lot of evidence in its favour.’ (183)

The emergence of Darwin’s theory came as a potential threat to the vanguards of racial sciences. The theory not only diluted their conjectures and assumptions, it vehemently refused the stand of the then phrenologists. The stalwarts and patrons of racial sciences were fevered all the more by Darwin’s theory, for it was scientifically more appropriate and was based on sound logic and empirical evidences, thus expediting the failure of the then visage of racial sciences. Even the confident and defiant Samuel Bates found it hard to dismiss the theory and felt the threat and challenge of a very strong rival in the field of his expertise.

Thus, Basu, in Racists by the incorporation of different characters and societies and of the absent presence of Darwin and his theory, very successfully creates a verisimilitude of 19th century England so far as racism and racial science are concerned. The way the two children are used by the scientists also shows 19th century obsession with race that made human beings forget their bare minimum duties and responsibilities even to children. The two children were, in fact, the most important components of the grand enterprise of Bates and Belavoix. They were to be the adobe that was to provide the answer to the great riddle of the races; they were the culvert through which either of the two vanguards of racial science would prove their theory, their doctrinaire. The ‘specimens,’ as they are recurrently called, were not to be weaned or shown any iota of affection or tenderness. They were to grow as ‘savages,’ feral, within the marshy solitude of Arlinda.

Even the selection of the specimens was also done with a prescient manoeuvring and machination, with an aquiline briskness. Bates justified his selection of a white girl instead of
a white boy as a counterpart to their black boy, which immediately displays both his
gumption along with a slightly seditious if not nefarious design to prove what he already
knew was true: the superiority of the white over the other races. He succinctly pointed out
that the size of the female brain and facial angles were less than those of the males in all
races. In this particular instance, that is, in their experiment in which the cranial
measurements were to decide the cerebral and thus the racial superiority of either of the two
of their specimens, therefore, the victory of the white girl would make the black boy doubly
inferior to the white girl. As Quartley pointed out to both Sir Reginald’s and Bates’s
amusement the discrepancy of the cranial and facial measurements between the average white
female and the average black male, Bates could hardly conceal his excitement and declares:

‘Her sex is less important than her race, which makes her superior, far superior, to
her rival. If we trust our craniology, we’ll have no reason to fear the result.’ Bates
appeared to rest his case before offering his final argument. ‘It is the right sample for
us. The white girl’s victory will do more for our racial theory than anything else.’

(50).

Basu goes on to delineate with inscrutable details the anatomical and behavioural attributes of
the samples that are to characterize their individualities and thus give an idea of their racial
distinctiveness. But do they really give the readers any such idea?

On one’s first acquaintance with the girl and the boy, one may find ample differences
between them in terms of their nature and demeanour, which may, in the long run, yield or
suggest some radical result for the scientists in their understanding of racial differences. But
as children, they are only different, just as Belavoix is different from Bates, or Bates from
Louisa, or Louisa from Norah, that is, they are different from one another in the way two
normal children differ from one another. Since cleanliness and hygiene are absolutely
relinquished in order to give them the adequate space and occasion to grow ‘naturally’ within the wild quarters of Arlinda, one meets a pair of dirty children unkempt and inured to their state of perpetual untidiness. However, a measurement of the girl’s skull, as she lay paralyzed under the soporific effect of laudanum, brought a smile of triumph on Bates’s face:

‘Eighty seven degrees. No make that eighty eight.’ A smile crosses his face. ‘She shows the promise of her race.’ (16)

Both the children, however, show a genuine sense of concern edging to vulnerability displaying pure human passion when it comes to relationship with their nurse. Acclimated to be savages, they, surprisingly, display compassion though untutored in it and have been censored of having the slightest amount of emotional propinquity either with their nurse or with one another. They, indeed, seem to be tethered to the nurse with a curious bond of love and concern. A ‘pure’ sense of attachment to her is easily discernible in their reactions when they found Norah being manhandled by a petulant and irate Bates, who had discovered to his utter disappointment that Norah had been stealthily indulging the children to play games and thus corrupting his samples. The boy retaliated with aggression, while the girl was flustered and hopelessly snivelled clinging on to Norah. This distinctly indicates the fact that no matter the colour of the skin, a human is, after all and above all, a human and will display similar human attributes, no matter under what race they are classified. The selfish intention of the two scientists to prove the superiority of the White race by establishing the superiority of the white girl (who is again considered inferior to a white boy) to the black boy is, therefore, an evil and malicious way of practising both racial and gender discriminations.

Thus, Basu, by way of using the ‘specimens,’ has not only shown the erroneous nature of the hypotheses offered by the two scientists but also criticized the frenzied obsession with the racial science in the 19th century England. The black boy and the white
girl are, first of all, humans and the colour of their skin scarcely regulates this fact. Though they are being treated as specimens, yet they yield a result that serves not the interest of racial sciences but of humanity at large. Basu’s message, therefore, is clear and transparent.

**Women in the Victorian Age**

It is not racial discrimination that alone plagued the Victorian world; gender discrimination was quite discernible too. It was, indeed, a gendered world and women were manifestly subjugated. The pages of history seem to have deracinated women and their context in the socio political understanding of the age. The paradox of it is that the age itself was named after a woman—the Queen. But still, women, in Victorian England, were safely deported from any reference, in the snug shelter of domesticity and haberdashery. It was an age of political pikes and gentlemen alone were considered fit to render services to the nation, politically and economically. Women were denied any political rights and were, thus, quite evidently considered inferior to men. To prove this discrimination, Robert Saunders, in *British Conservative Leaders* quotes Disraeli:

“The proper leaders of the people,” he wrote “are the gentlemen of England. If they are not the leaders of the people, I do not see why there should be gentlemen.” (94)

Thus, along with the coloured people, women were also refused equity and were not particularly considered a significant enough part of the citizenry. Such diminutive and disparaging practice was carried on unabashedly and no amends were made to set things right for the social standing of women. They were to master prudence, propriety and submissiveness, and were to sulk in the shadows of oblivion, moderated by baubles of domestic bliss.
In fact, a most striking semblance can be seen between the ways in which the coloured people and the women were treated in Victorian England. Being a white was of no advantage, if one was a woman. In this regard, Paul Hoch, in his *White Hero Black Beast*, quotes Lerone Bennett:

> What is really involved in the explosive fears that surround the white woman and the black male? Let us start there for if we do not start here, in the heart of our fears, we shall not get anywhere. (43)

The situation, indeed, remained unchanged till 1928 when suffragette bill was passed to give women the right to vote. They were, however, freed from the veritable vault of indifference and oblivion, only to sate the political considerations. Feiling records:

> The great extension of the franchise in 1918 was carried to its conclusion in 1928 by an Act giving women the vote at twenty one, on the same terms as men, so adding seven million electors and raising their total to 28 million. (1086)

This excerpt proves that even the voting right was given to women not out of any concern to emancipate them or to give them any due recognition. It was rather with the selfish political interest of men to raise the number of the electors that they were given the right to vote.

There are, indeed, several books which have recorded instances of women’s subjugation in the Victorian period. *The What Not or Lady’s Handy Book*, published in 1853, throws ample light on the wretched conditions of women in the Victorian period:

> It is probably not generally known that when once a woman has accepted an offer of marriage all she has or expects to have becomes virtually the property of the man she has accepted as her husband and no gift or deed executed by her is held to be valid. (qtd. in Chandra 213)
In his *Victorian Conventions*, John. R. Reed similarly points out the prevalence of such presumptuous ownership while discussing the position of the women in the domestic front:

The wife’s personal chattels vested absolutely on her husband at marriage and any personality she acquired during marriage followed the same course. (106)

There are other instances of gender discrepancies that were routinely followed in the Victorian world. There was to be found gender segregation even in the field of education. As Rosanne Tomyn points out in her article “The Inequality Between Genders During the Victorian Era in England”:

Still, as more schools opened to women, studies remained gender specific. English literature was considered appropriate for women while Latin was offered to men.

Boys continued to progress to higher levels of education—perpetuating inequalities in the workforce. (web)

But such discriminations were not to be tolerated for long. John Stuart Mill, for instance, in his *The Subjection of Women* (1869) succinctly brought up the issue and summarily criticized it:

That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (1)

Mill understood well the fact that men could not continue to better their lot in the world by ignoring women. Mill recognised that women had greater potential and capabilities than most men acknowledged. He strongly believed that if the women of the society suffered, it would
result in the doom of the society, and if the women were not given their due, the society was bound to fail. He was a true pioneer in holding the cause of the women in a world where this fairer sex was abominably maltreated and discriminated.

As a result of the publication of works like Mill’s, a consciousness slowly but surely crept in the minds of the Victorian women regarding their worth and value, and the way they were constantly being deprived of their due. This inflation of women’s value in the scheme of things, though not readily accepted by the men folk at large, gave rise to substantial movements voicing against the muted subverted status of women. Race and gender discrimination were like sore carbuncles in the face of the society and an effort to eradicate such discrepancies and divisions was slowly but surely taking shape.

In *Racists*, the condition of women in Victorian England is captured by Basu mainly through the depiction of Norah. Basu has rendered copious details about this mute nurse in his tale. She is an enigma that slowly unfurls itself towards the end of the novel. Her inability to speak, however, cannot be reckoned as a blemish for it adds greatly to the poise and composure that she so readily retains till the very end. It is her defect, once again, which makes her the most significant component of the grand experiment. She has been entrusted with the most trying office of tending and nursing the specimens and yet maintaining a strict and studied distance from them. Left alone with the specimens in the barren, god forsaken island, she has rendered her services most sincerely and diligently, religiously observing and abiding by the Ten Commandments of Bates:

She has mastered the trick of passing messages, leaving the list of things she needs each month by a small hut by the beach and raising a flag over it. Then she’d wait for one of Captain Perry’s ships to replenish her larder with supplies, bring her food and fresh water. She’d ask for tinctures and drops, clothes, provisions for her cottage
– everything to keep her going on the barren island. She’d leave a letter for Bates as well with her list, her monthly report on the children. In the five years the camp has turned her into an invisible trader, a letter writer and a nurse. (12)

One cannot begin to imagine the immensity of the tenuous and nondescript life that the island and the experiment amply bestow upon her. Solitude and a perpetual anxiety are her constant companions. Though she lacks the grandiose of Louisa who too shares her fate of a handicap but is a lady of fortune, in Norah we find no dearth of grace and elan. Basu makes Belavoix construe Norah in an almost poetic and romantic way encapsulating her station, quite aptly:

‘Imagine Norah as Nature herself: a mute mother forced to raise her children, powerful and helpless at the same time. She can feed and clothe them, but can’t teach them good or evil. She lives for others, not for herself. Your rules for her are like God’s rules for Nature. You’ve taken away her tears, forbidden her to love the children. Her game is Nature’s game. It is born not of a clever mind but an idle mind. It is the only thing not artificial in Arlinda.’ (46).

She is the mute bird of Paradise. If we expunge the romance out of this delineation, it will yield the true sordid picture of a Victorian woman and the way she was expected to be, all beauty for the eyes of the men, and all menial chores for their domestic front. A sense of male domination and cruelty is understood as she is strictly instructed to divest herself of all the natural tender feelings in rearing the specimens. She is to perform like an automaton, rendering her services to the male scientists without ever complaining. Such docility was, in fact, almost an imposition by the Victorian man on the Victorian woman.

Nora has to suffer the loud vituperations of Bates at her slightest negligence. Her lithe malleable disposition weathers it all with an unusual and unique composure. She fends for the children when the scientists are away, she fends for the scientists when they come for their
routine visits, but she has none to look after her, and she acquiesces to the fact without betraying any hint of complaint in her manners. She is the woman who will not complain, the woman who cannot complain. As Basu writes, “She has turned into an instrument” (72).

To Quartley’s and to the readers’ shock and surprise, Basu divulges towards the end of the novel that Norah is not mute after all. She can speak, and she speaks her heart out to her lover Nicholas. She cannot contain her feelings and her sufferings anymore. The enigma unfurls itself in an eloquence that Quartley could never have imagined. Her muteness can thus be reckoned as symbolic of her gender, a kind of forced imposition that the world governed by patriarchy has charged her with. She, in fact, lied and she had done so in order to save herself from the ruthless ignominy and the brutality of her fortune:

Her birth was her tragedy. She had thought of escaping once and for all, with a penny-stick of pills. She’d sleep with her eyes open, she feigned her defect. She could’ve pretended to be anything—even the owner of a wobbly head, which would have kept her locked up for life, barred her from the workhouse for ever. Losing her voice would be easier, she had thought, making her way through the years with nods and shrugs. Dumb Norah. She had slept with a blanket over her face, done her duties in silence at the asylum, lived in fear of her minders, who’d have thrown her out if they’d known. She’d have had to go back to the streets, if they’d found out.

The last tragedy was the child she’d had, but lost: a baby girl fathered by one of the bullying minders. She had lived only a few days, died just before Bates’s friends came to the asylum looking for a nurse. They’d wanted a dumb caretaker, someone to wet-nurse newborns—a nurse with a strong will, and willing to live far away. She had fitted the bill. (163)
Her life had been a long session of cruel escapades. She long withheld the woman in her, abnegating all tenderness of feeling, snubbing all desires and nipping all emotions in the bud. But now once more, with her newly founded love, she has felt the courage and the urge to live again: she now wants to live and not just to survive. It is a life fuller and more giving where she is allowed to love and be loved in return.

At the end of the novel, a happy augury filled Nora and her love with joyous hope to flee with the children to a different place and be together as a happy and complete family. Norah now could be the singing mother she wanted to be, freed from the forced exile of communication and love. Norah, thus, can be reckoned as a representative metaphor for all women, muted forcibly and forced to continue their existence amidst men who would consider them (the women) as nothing better than an instrument, a prop to meet their needs. She has been projected as the very epitome of womanhood in the context of Victorian chauvinism—mute, submissive, wronged and an instrument in the hands of the male scientists delivering the menial domestic chores and taking care of their routine needs. It will not be a tall claim to argue that the use of Norah by the two scientists is perfectly in tune with the contemporary treatment of women by Victorian patriarchy. Norah’s predicament and the tragedies that had shrouded her entire life clearly demonstrate the bleak truth of the plight and the position of women in the cruel, patriarchal Victorian England.

IV

Discrimination in itself is a hagiographic construct and though it is abominable in all its manifestations, it has taken its roots deep in all societies. To understand such a complex phenomenon one needs to contextualize its evolution through time to the present, often through a belated reading of the history that constructs differences, creates binaries, and
draws lines between humans. The practice of racial discrimination that led to the lucrative slave trade was not just only a shameful practice but also a dehumanising one. It was a two way traffic in that it not only dehumanised the slave who was reduced to a commodity, a commercial good to reap benefits, but also dehumanised the ‘master,’ bringing alive the potential animal that lay dormant in him. Over the years, some of the white historians have tried their level best to cloak and assuage such naked greed and barbarism in defending the ‘masters.’ And yet with time scornful accounts of this rankling, putrid practice have surfaced. Daniel J. Vitkus in his English Captivity Narratives mentions:

Accounts of slavery, piracy and apostasy in North Africa appear frequently in print throughout the seventeenth century, and form a group of writings that might be said to comprise a distinct narrative genre, similar to but in fact earlier in date than the American captivity narratives that have received much recent attention. (qtd. in Harper 26)

Such narratives, however, did not receive proper attention that they should have.

This brings us to a new question regarding the role of the postcolonial chronicler whose sole vow is to show the truth that was so manipulatively hidden over the ages. S/he finds himself or herself in a state of aphasic limbo enervated by a curious sense of fatuity to unravel the whole truth. In attempts of unravelling the truth, s/he again finds himself/herself entrapped within the colonial vestibule and finds it rather difficult to write outside its precincts. S/he questions the limits, limiting herself/himself within the stipulated prescribed limits of a postcolonial recorder, who is supposed to have a defined definitive role and cannot step out of the boundary. A certain thing has been frescoed within the psychological frame of the modern postcolonial author, and s/he finds herself/himself utterly incarcerated within its
scope. And a bewildering array of cultural translations further problematizes his/her situation as is pointed out by Boehmer in his *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*:

In the 2000s the generic postcolonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveller, or an ‘extra-territorial,’ than a national. Ex-colonial by birth, ‘Third World’ in cultural interest, cosopolitan in almost every other way, she or he works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connections with a national, ethnic or regional background. (227)

Basu seems to have rid himself of this colonial incarceration and has vividly addressed the issues of racial prejudice that prevailed during the period. Like a ‘cultural traveller,’ who is also ‘extra-territorial’, he brings out the truth of history in all its reifications retaining a thematic connection with the ethnic, or regional background.

In fact, Basu’s representation of racial science in *Racists* could be read in the light of Foucault’s observation on the development of the subject. Foucault, in *The Birth of the Clinic*, discusses how in the 19th century there was an advent of a new kind of thinking that was ideologically driven to perpetuate the idea that some races are superior to the others. The study of Biology became a tool of racism and certain pseudoscientific notions were incorporated in order to consolidate the propaganda that physical features such as the colour of the skin, the shape of the head etc. were the markers of moral, intellectual prowess or capacity. A scientific validation of this kind and the elaborate paraphernalia of jargons ensured that pseudoscientific disciplines such as craniology and phrenology etc. were accepted as valid modes of understanding the concept of race and racial behaviour. It was also used, with considerable amount of academic persuasions, in order to perpetuate a culture of discrimination. The discipline of Biology was thereby extended to the point of distortion in order to serve the logic of racial discrimination. It can be reckoned as a subtle form of
coercion. In order to dominate or govern some people (a racial group), perpetrators of racism often used such pseudoscientific theories. It was done with the calculated intention to instil amongst the racial group a belief that they (the racial group) were the inferior race. This sense of inferiority injected in these people incapacitated them in terms of construction of selfhood and a human identity. Basu’s narrative quite strategically addresses this particular aspect exploring the various avenues of racial sciences that were prevalent in the Victorian England and how they were manipulatively practised under the garb of academia to perpetuate a culture of discrimination.

One aspect of Basu’s representation of Victorian England, however, might raise a few eyebrows. Even though he weaves an appalling tale of racial prejudices where *libido scienti* is inadvertently translated into *libido dominandi*, one finds Basu a veritable unconscious victim of the androcentric concept of the society, especially, in his depiction of the nurse Norah. Why Norah, and why not a man has been chosen to fend for the samples? Why does Basu use the cultural notion of a mother as a natural child rearer? There was no dearth of indigent male and yet it was a mute woman who fits the bill. A frieze can be discerned from the choice of samples as well—a black boy and a white girl, and not the vice versa. Nothing covert about the suggestion that the white female, being inferior to the white male, if triumphs over the black male, the scientific proof of the white supremacy will be sanctified doubly. Basu finds himself resolving to the survival of the white girl by the end of the tale as well.

There could, however, be another way of looking at these issues. It could be argued that Basu, on the one hand, shows how patriarchy operates even in the domain of science, and, on the other, subverts such domination by his strategic treatment of Norah. She is, of course, subjugated (as is amply discernible by the way she is treated by the scientists as an instrument) but at the same time she challenges the repression in her own special way. Basu,
in fact, adorns her with the instrumental role of becoming the very cause of the failure of the
grand experiment. The selection of a white girl and black boy for the experiment also
establishes Basu’s take on the uncouth racial and gender pyromania that prevailed during the
time. Finally, the abduction of the black boy by the Arab traders subtly hints at the slave trade
that was so rampant in those days. Basu’s representation of history in *Racists*, thus,
unambiguously proves his postcolonial take on racial science.
Notes

1. This is what they wrote: “…and his old friend William Wilberforce urged him to abolish the slave trade, which still packed hundreds of Africans into the stinking holds of old ships and carried them to bondage in America. It was only in 1772 that slavery was declared illegal in England itself (435)”.

2. Grigg’s analysis is worth-mentioning in this regard: “Once the myriad power conflicts within any society, or throughout the world, are resolved into a confrontation between black and white, there is nowhere but limbo for those who do not care to accept the terms of separation. White people who are not prepared to be anti-black, and black people who are not prepared to be anti-white, are met with suspicion on both sides. Nor can they come together in understanding because the black man will always wonder if the white man is not in fact a white man underneath; and the white man will feel that there is something wrong with a black man who is not supporting the blacks (115).”
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Chapter V

Representation of History in The Yellow Emperor’s Cure

I

Kunal Basu’s The Yellow Emperor’s Cure deals with two prominent themes: a Portuguese Doctor’s quest to find a cure for syphilis which takes him to China and the Boxer Rebellion in China that has besmeared the history of China with an indelible stain. In this chapter, the present researcher seeks to examine the immaculate detailing of the Boxer history that Basu encapsulates in his tale and the exhaustive and diligent research that has gone into Basu’s understanding and analysis of the fatal disease of syphilis.

II

Kunal Basu’s The Yellow Emperor’s Cure is a recit de voyage. It involves the quest of a Portuguese doctor Antonio Maria to find a cure for the generally considered incurable disease of syphilis. This quest takes him all the way to China from Lisbon. In the first part of the novel, Basu draws a colourful festive milieu of 1898 Lisbon. A polychromatic Portugal with its revelry, ribaldry and carnivals comes alive by Basu’s sleight of hand. The story opens on the dawn of St Anthony’s fest in the month of June in 1898 Lisbon. Antonio Maria is shown as a brilliant surgeon and his acuity in his discipline has no equals in the whole of Portugal. He comes to know, by way of a note, that his father is ailing and on reaching his father’s mansion finds his father at the very brink of death. His father is affected by syphilis (which is also known as French Disease, Spanish Itch, German Rash, Polish Pox and Canton
Rash) and is reduced to a grotesque mass of putrid and bubonic flesh. Antonio is resolved to
cure his father of this scourge that is slowly but surely killing him. He resorts to the advice of
his teacher Dr Martin from whom he comes to know that this disease has found no cure for
the last 400 years. It is from Dr Martin that he first comes to know about NeiChing, the
Yellow Emperor’s canon. A peremptory desire to find answer to his queries regarding the
disease makes Antonio seek the help of his best friend Ricardo who takes him to a port in
Portugal, the hub of quacks and heretics. These people sell God’s remedy to various diseases
that the medical sciences have recognised as incurable but they also fail to provide Antonio
with a remedy to syphilis. Having failed to find a plausible way out, Ricardo is on the verge
of giving up. But Antonio is stubborn and determined. He is a changed man now; the prurient
charismatic womanizer is now replaced by a brooding sulking man ever arrested with the
thoughts to figure out a way to find a remedy for this bane called syphilis. When he visits his
father on his mother’s death anniversary, he is surprised to find that the rash that has so
disfigured his father’s face and body has disappeared. His perspicacity as a clinical
practitioner immediately recognises that this is not healing, but is the beginning of the end.
He decides not to dawdle any further and requests Ricardo to arrange for his travel to China
where he hopes to find a cure for the disease. Taking leave from his fiancé Arees and his
friend Ricardo, Antonio sets sails to Macau and from there to China, promising to return to
Portugal before the feast of St. Antony with or without the cure.

Arrangements are made for Maria to stay at Ricardo’s god mother Dona Elvira’s
place in Little Portugal in Peking. She was the empress of Little Portugal, her husband Dom
Afonso being the island’s governor. Dom Afonso arranges a meeting of Antonio with
Joachim Saldanha from whom Antonio is to learn the Chinese language in order to interact
with his domestic helps during his stay in China. It is Saldanha who in his usual candour tells
Antonio of one such master of NeiChing, Dr. Xu, the Empress’s physician. On his journey
towards the Chinese capital, Antonio is informed of the brewing unrest that is yet to unsettle
the foreigners but will do so in its due time. He also comes to know about the vandalism in
the Jesuit churches and the killings of the Chinese nuns. The voluble Saldanha goes on
narrating the snide and resection that the ecumenical institutions in China are exposed to. He
tells Antonio that religious intolerance is at its worst and nuns are being burnt on the
allegation of being witches. Missionary institutions are being tarnished and demolished with
invectives and imprecations that the Christian religion is one that is defiling the cultural core
of the Chinese people, giving them the lure of food and sustenance and converting them in
the name of God. The religion is considered a threat and is meted with utmost severity
leaving blemishes of acrimony in the Churches and missionary institutions. Once in Peking,
Antonio is put up in a pavilion, which is one of the thousand pavilions of the Summer Palace,
the residence of the Dowager Empress. The Empress is now the de-facto ruler of the
kingdom, after she has imprisoned her nephew, who is the rightful emperor of the dynasty.

Dr. Xu is aware of Antonio’s purpose of the visit from Dom Afonso’s letter and has
agreed to take Antonio as his student. Although aware of Antonio’s eagerness to learn only
the cure for syphilis, Dr. Xu insists on Antonio’s learning the basics of the Yellow Emperor’s
canon broaching the fact that it is fundamental towards treating any disease. He ultimately
convinces Antonio that he has to take the usual hard way to get the secret knowledge which
would take four seasons, provided he is diligent and receptive. During his stay in the Summer
Palace, Antonio is attended by Wang Sheng and Tian, two eunuchs who do all his domestic
chores. Antonio’s tutelage starts under the calm supervision of Dr. Xu in his quest to master
the secrets of NeiChing. Xu, then, leaves for the North for attending some business,
deputising Fumi, Xu’s mysterious Assistant and a woman with a chequered past, to continue
with Antonio’s tutorials on NeiChing. She teaches him the secret of diagnosing human
ailments based on pulse beats and also the details of the twelve channels as delineated in the Yellow Emperor’s canon.

The Legation of the foreign officers is just twenty miles away from the Summer Palace. Antonio gets to know the members of the Legation in a ‘fat tea’ held at Cedric Hart and Polly Hart’s place. It is here that he comes to know about the Boxers, the way the Legation is always at tenterhooks about it. The discussion at the tea leads him to understand the vehemence and turbulence that the Boxer mischief has already generated. At the Legation, Antonio then hears rumours about Dr. Xu being an accomplice to the Boxer rebels. Fumi, however, dismisses this assumption. At this juncture, on an invitation from a rich Gypsy named Ferguson, Antonio visits his residence. As Ferguson knows of Antonio’s quest, he offers to sell him a 2000 years old Palace Edition of *Neiching*, the Yellow Emperor’s canon at a very low cost. Antonio declines the offer for now he is getting accustomed to learn the canon the hard way. Back at his pavilion, Antonio finds Dr. Xu waiting for him. Dr. Xu praises Antonio on his progress but insists that a complete year will be required to impart him the full training and Antonio is to wait for that duration to know the cure. Antonio now receives a letter from Rosa Escobar, his father’s nurse, informing him of his father’s deteriorating health. Madness has set in, and the news shatters Antonio’s calm. Polly tries to console him, but also registers a scorn for the devious and torpid attitude of his NeiChing masters in teaching him the cure of the disease. All at the Legation including Polly seem to be immensely suspicious of the movements of the Chinese and various remarks made throughout the gamut of the novel suggest this. The foreigners look at the Chinese with an eye of suspicion, and vice versa. Words now reach Antonio from Fengtai, that his friend Saldanha is severely wounded. The Boxer Revolution is now at full swing in Fengtai. Railway lines and bridges are being burnt by the rebels to disrupt the peace and stability of the country. Under the able medication of Antonio, Saldanha, however, recovers fast.
Antonio pays a visit to Xu and, in course of the conversation, the other side of the story, the Chinese version of the whole fracas, becomes pellucid.

At this point, Ricardo, with Antonio’s surprise, reaches Peking. He has brought with him the news of Antonio’s father’s death. In an urge to know more about Fumi (with whom, it seems, Antonio is in love) Antonio now visits Ferguson to find out the details on the materials Jacob, the Dutch printer, was printing for the Boxers. Ferguson agrees to get the job done at a price. The Boxer history is carefully spliced in this section of the novel and is well enmeshed with the tale making Antonio’s quest almost inseparable from the Spirit Army’s quest to avenge their lost glory and shattered pride. Ferguson shows his suspicions about the strategy of the Dowager Empress too. She is keeping up a very diplomatic stand and it seems that she may take sides with anyone—the Boxers or the foreigners. The threat of an imminent attack on the Legation by the rebels is growing day by and they are preparing strategic plans to defend themselves from the attack. With their troops arriving to help them, the Legation is planning to burn down the Summer Palace again. The patience of Antonio now starts fading, as he realises that the true purpose of his coming all over to China is slowly drifting away in the surge of events.

During a discussion with Yohan, Antonio now comes to know that Dr. Xu was rumoured to have a wife whose identity was guarded. Yohan also mentions one Oscar Franklin, the Locke mission’s American doctor, who knew the real story about Dr. Xu. Saldanha comes over to take Antonio back to Macau. News of the rebels has reached the governor and he has sent Saldanha to bring Antonio to safety. Conversation with Chris Campbell reveals to Antonio issues relating to Jacob de Graff and he comes to know that Jacob was killed not by the rebels but by one of his own, a foreigner. Back at his pavilion, he finds the imperial troops have entered the Summer Palace, the Kansa soldiers are everywhere. He learns from Wangsheng that all have left and only the poor servants and eunuchs remain
in the Summer Palace. Antonio goes to Oscar Franklin’s and for the first time gets the chance to witness a pox patient being treated. It is from Oscar that he learns the truth about Xu and Fumi, that they were husband and wife. He also learns the oeuvre of syphilitic treatment that prevails in China. There are two cures for syphilis, one for the Royals and the other for the commoners. The one for the Royals is mysterious and the other is simple—kill the patient and stop the infection. The knowledge that he finally is successful to exhume, after all the psychological and physical trepidation, dismay and distresses him beyond imagination.

Antonio finds himself in an utterly lobotomised state as he realises his queer position within the insidious and vicious circle of the foreigners and the rebels. The turgidity of emotions reaches its nadir when Fumi comes and asks him to leave, for the Empress is powerless now and his safety in the Summer Place is thus compromised.

The Boxer Rebellion is now at its peak. The entire Tartar city is deserted. All the foreigners are taking refuge at the Legation, even the Chinese who have been converted came under an unflagging threat by the rebels. The growing number of patients in the camps is keeping Antonio busy and surprisingly he is resorting to his NeiChing knowledge in treating them. Steps are now being taken to fortify the Legation by calling the Kansu soldiers from Tientsin to their aid. Soon the foreign army of 350 men arrives to the relief of all at the Legation. To Antonio’s great confusion and surprise, Arees too arrives at the Legation seeking her Candide. Antonio is still in a daze over the events that happened in the past few weeks. A kind of awkwardness has crept in between him and Arees.

Arees then goes missing with Ferguson and Antonio goes out to find her. Reaching Ferguson’s place, he finds the gypsy packing his treasures. He has other plans, for now he is certain that the Legation can no longer provide safety to him. Antonio finds Arees in the balcony upstairs and Arees shows him the marching Boxers heading straight towards the mansion. Ferguson is brutally killed after he is charged with a long list of crimes including
the murder of a poor man by setting him on fire. Antonio and Arees get spotted by a Boxer and to his utter astonishment Antonio finds that it is no one else but Fumi. She exchanges no words with the two and instead leads them to a sedan which carries them to the safety of Antonio’s deserted pavilion in the Summer Palace. Reaching the pavilion, Antonio finds a box wherein lies the body of his friend Saldanha, a hole gashed through his heart. Oscar and Lixia, who are still at the Summer Palace, arrange for the escape of Arees and Antonio along with Tian who has returned to tell Antonio how the Boxers have made Wangsheng kill Saldanha. Things now are getting worse with the provincial armoury having been set ablaze; it will soon be the Summer Palace that will be ravaged. With the help of Oscar, Antonio and Arees reach Tientsin wherefrom they are to leave for Macau. Antonio now confides to Arees that he has failed to obtain the cure for syphilis. Leaving China, Antonio feels a strange sense of peace and calm. He is almost relieved to leave a putrid, bubonic China plagued by anger, hatred, acrimony and mass mayhem. It seems to be a China that is inflicted with a pox more fatal and horrible than syphilis.

III

Syphilis

Condemned as an incurable disease till 1928, syphilis has been a matter of great introspection and frustration among the medical practitioners over the centuries. As is mostly conjectured, the pox had struck in the very last years of the 15th century. But unlike some other diseases that strike abruptly and then fade away only to redound with further vigour to inflict its victims with pain and suffering culminating in inevitable death, syphilis settled down and became a permanent menace to human existence. The origin of most of the diseases often lies beyond the ken of man’s earliest memory. Of all mankind’s most
important maladies, syphilis has a beginning. Alfred W. Crosby in his *The Early History of Syphilis* refers to a 15th century docent while stating the origin of this pestilence:

Ruy Diaz de Isla, agreed that 1493 was the year and went on to say that “the disease had its origin and birth from always in the island which is now named Espanola.” Columbus had brought it back, along with samples of maize and other American curiosities. (218)

The actual term comes from an ancient myth about a shepherd named Syphilis. Bruce M. Rothschild in his *History of Syphilis* registers:

In 1530, Girolamo Frasastoro first derived the appellation “syphilis sivemorbusgallicus.” Because of the associated rash (pox) and as a means to distinguish the disease from small pox, the term “great pox” arose. (1457)

The variety of names often euphemistically and literally given to the disease is almost clamorous and indicates that it was putatively considered as a foreign import. As Crosby records:

Italians called it the French disease, which proved to be the most popular title; the French called it the disease of Naples; the English called it the French disease, the Bordeaux disease, and the Spanish disease; Poles called it the German disease; Russians called it the Polish disease, and so on. Middle Easterners called it the European pustules, Indians called it the disease of the Franks (western Europeans); Chinese called it the ulcer of Canton, that port being their chief point of contact with the west. (219)

The signs and symptoms of this venereal canker are quite appalling and disturbing. Within a few weeks of the original chancre healing, one may experience a rash that begins on the trunk
and eventually covers the entire body, even the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. This rash is usually not itchy and may be accompanied by wart-like sores in the mouth and genital area. Some people also experience hair loss, muscle aches, fever, sore throat and the swelling of lymph nodes. These signs and symptoms may disappear within a few weeks or repeatedly come and go for as long as a year. About 15 to 30 per cent of people infected with syphilis who don’t get treatment will develop complications known as tertiary (late) syphilis. In the late stages, the disease may damage the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones and joints. These problems may occur many years after the original, untreated infection (Mayo Clinic).

The disease had a social face too. Victims, who were diagnosed showing symptoms of the venereal disease, were often ostracised and vilified. As John Parascandola writes in his *From Mercury to Miracle Drugs*:

> Once the venereal nature of Syphilis was understood, people could be (and were) warned against having intimate relations with individuals who were infected, assuming they could identify the infected. But once one has contracted the disease, what remedies were available to alleviate, if not cure the malady? Some of those who believed that the pox was the just rewards of immoral behaviour questioned whether or not those afflicted with the disease even deserved to be treated. (14)

The above excerpt indicates the horror and suffering the deadly disease inflicted upon its victim, not just physically but also psychologically and socially.
Basu in his novel provides a very graphic and vivid description of this disease. He addresses with sharp acuity the hideous physiological and psychological deformities that the pestilence brings about on its victims. When for the first time Antonio visits his father having received a note of his ailing health, the spectacle he is made to witness is ghastly grotesque and implacably horrible:

A field of roses blinded him as he ripped open his father’s tunic, the red rash that covered the body from head to knee, sparing no part except the eyes. In places the buds had dried out into ugly scabs, like leopards’ spots, chaffed and shrivelled. Hideous lumps flattened the balls of his feet and his palms, joined his neck to his chin and sent a ripple across the chest. Pus oozed from fiery cysts. His back resembled a field of millet. A deep lesion on his forehead gaped like a dead crater. Eyebrows had disappeared, along with hair from his head and limbs; the nose turned into a one holed flute. Saliva drooled through his gumless mouth, a tooth falling out when he parted his jaws to let out a howl. Antonio removed the covers fully and saw an abscess on the genitals resembling a flowering cactus, and testes that were far too swollen to hold in both hands. The stench of rotting flesh made him cover his nose.

The galling disease, as shown already, not just only reviles its victim physically but preys upon its mind as well, reducing the victim into a mass of putrid bubonic flesh. The suffering it inflicts is unimaginable and the pain insufferable. Rosa Escobar (Senior Maria’s nurse) gives Antonio an account of the invidious predicament that his father was exposed to because of the disease; she vividly describes the various symptoms that soon surfaced as the disease took shelter in the body of its victim:
She [Rosa] told him about the crushing pain in the bones in the early days of his father’s sickness, as if he had fallen off a galloping horse. ‘He stays awake all night from dreadful colic, sleeps all day then wakes up to the pain as it starts all over again. Some nights he can’t sleep at all, has the sense of flames bursting through his pupils like fireballs. Can’t eat a morsel of food or gulp down a drop of water. He has the tongue of an ox. And his body shakes like a rabbit caught in a trap.’ (11)

However, the worst thing about such unjust contravention that the disease practised on its victim was that it brooked no cure. Antonio is left paralysed by a sense of indefatigable helplessness as he sees the pox scything through his father’s body and scudding it towards death:

Tertiary syphilis brooked no cure, he knew too well, there was nothing bigger than the venereal pox, nothing better than to put a bullet through his head. (12)

Basu seems to have done a meticulous research in understanding the disease closely. He calls it by the many names it has been given by various parts of the world, a plague that had no cure. He even refers passingly to its putative origin as he makes an exasperated and helpless Antonio brood over the disease:

Call it by whichever name – French Disease, Spanish Itch, German Rash or Polish Pox – it was the same old curse Dom Columbus had brought home from Hispaniola along with gold and talking parrots. (14)

Antonio, to his utter dismay, comes to know from his teacher Dr Martin, whose help he resorted in finding an answer to this conundrum, that the disease has found no cure in the last 400 years: “No one even believes in a cure for syphilis anymore. The French have given up on the French Disease! In Paris they’re threatening to hang the victims. There’s talk even of
branding them with red hot irons. In Madrid the syphilitics have been removed from the records and turned into ghosts!” (17).

However, all hope is not lost as one could always take recourse to alternate ways of medication. Dr Martin provides Antonio with a modest list of such avenues which may lead to a plausible cure for the pox:

…the Yoruba who expelled harmful germs – the kokoro – with ritual baths; about the Egyptian Inhotep, called the Prince of Peace, who could treat over two hundred diseases with herbs and plants; the mathematics of Al-Kindi, used to calculate the precise nature of a sickness; about the Ayurvedic masters of India, and NeiChing – the Yellow Emperor’s Canon. (18)

Having failed to find a remedy for the monstrous pox, Antonio finds himself setting sail for China to learn the mystery of the NeiChing canon. The section where Antonio, under the tutelage of Dr Xu and then Fumi, learns the intricacies of the Yellow Emperor’s canon shows the prolific amount of research that Basu has done in recreating the mysteries of NeiChing for his readers. Marc A. Shampo and Robert A. Kyle write about Neiching:

The NeiChing, or Canon of Internal Medicine, is probably the oldest known medical book. It is a combination of philosophy, medicine, and religion, and its influence on Chinese medicine spanned more than 2,000 years...In general, the book integrates moral and physical conduct and provides an important relationship between mental and physical states of health. The common theme seems to be moderation in everything, harmony with nature, contentment with oneself, and restraining and reducing one’s desires – sensible ways of handling physical and mental stresses and their devastating effects on health and longevity. (134)
Basu meticulously and, at times in a pedantic way, displays an array of the mysteries of the Chinese canon splicing it uniformly in the section where Antonio is learning it from Xu and Fumi:

Students were taught to *imagine* sickness, and those with the most vivid imaginations became masters of *NeiChing*. (106)

But the torpid nature of his tutorial triggers a sense of frustration in Antonio. He is learning everything except the thing for which he has undergone the tremendous pain to come to China, the cure for syphilis. He desperately needs to see a victim of Canton rash. Even at the Legation the talks about Syphilis are tarnished with a sense of disdain and dismissal, as John Harris the American minister at the Legation puts it:

“Just as the Jesuits thought the earthquake was a divine act of punishment for lascivious Lisbonites. Even today there’s no shortage of those who think that syphilitics should be burnt at the stake, married men with the pox castrated and their wives locked up in chastity belts.” (133)

It was only when he goes to see Oscar Franklin, the American doctor from the Locke Mission, that Antonio gets the price chance of witnessing a patient suffering from Canton rash being treated by Oscar’s wife Lixia:

A naked woman lay on her back on a reed mattress in the living room. Lixia, the Chinese wife of Oscar Franklin, looking prim in her dancer’s dress and wearing her silver hair down to her waist, knelt by her side and rubbed a lime green paste all over her skin...“The green lotion will kill the smell. It will let her sleep. When the fever returns at dawn she’ll be stronger to fight off her headache and nausea” ... “It’s her
first month. She went to visit her village for a few days and returned with the Portuguese Disease.” (251)

Oscar Franklin also tells Antonio that there are two cures for syphilis; one is meant for the Royals and the other for the commoners. The one for the Royals is mysterious, while the one for the common people is simple. The simple procedure involves the killing of the patient and stopping the infection thus, while the mysterious remains enshrouded in mystery.

Basu’s prodigious research on syphilis is amply clear by the way he addresses the vagaries of the horrible disease. He presents with immaculate precision and accuracy a vivid description of the menace it inflicted on the syphilitics.

**Boxer Rebellion**

At the end of the second Opium war (8 October 1856 – 24 October 1860) in the convention of Beijing, China had agreed to honour the Treaties of Tianjin wherein China accepted permanent residence of foreign diplomats in Beijing. Opium trade was legalized and proselytization to Christianity was allowed with a recognition of the rights to property and of the civil rights for the Christians. China also had to pay a huge amount of money to the British in reparations. With this treaty in place, the Christian missionaries were free to propagate their religion within China where they targeted primarily the commoners as the upper class or the gentry saw the new religion as a threat to their traditions and powers. Once converted, the Christian villagers had access to food, charity, orphanages and were also provided with protection by the missionaries in case of any property disputes. With this kind of privilege, the converted Chinese were considered a threat to the traditional Chinese values. As Kenneth Scott Latourette records in his *A Short History of the Far East:*
The conflict was one of civilizations. The English, as representatives of the Occident, viewed international intercourse from a position diametrically opposite to that of the Chinese. The Chinese esteemed their civilization as normal and regarded as barbarians all those who did not conform to it. They held as axiomatic the conviction that all men should be subordinate to their Emperor. Diplomatic intercourse on the basis of the reciprocally recognised sovereignty and legal equality of independent nation states was quite alien to all their conceptions. Their judicial procedures differed radically from those of the English. (369)

In fact, with the massive and humiliating defeats in the two Opium wars and also in the Sino-Japanese war where China’s ruling Qing dynasty had to sign the Unequal Treaties with the foreign powers, resentment against the foreigners started brewing up among the Chinese people, primarily among the peasants. In 1898 and 1899, a Chinese group who were called the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists (“I-ho-ch’uan” or “Yihequan”), started attacking the foreigners and the Chinese Christians. This group practised traditional martial arts and military techniques and they recruited people by showcasing their martial art techniques and also by claiming to be defending their land and values against the foreigners and the Christians. Westerners attributed the name ‘Boxer’ to this group of people due to the martial art techniques practised by the members of the group. Recording the origin of the Boxer uprising, Latourette writes:

The origin of the movement was mixed. It was partly spontaneous popular opposition to foreigners and their ways expressing itself under a traditional form of societies with religious features which offered the protection of magic against Western bullets. It was partly in the support of violently anti-foreign officials, largely Manchus. It was partly in local militia which the Empress Dowager ordered to be put in readiness for the defence of the country. To some degree it was through
troops which had been summoned to Peking for the defence of the capital, when an Italian demand early in 1899 for the lease of a bay in Chekiang had brought fear of a foreign attack. The militia and the anti-foreign societies attracted the ruder elements, some of them brigands, and many who had been thrown out of normal occupations by a drought-induced-famine. The name adopted by several of the groups, “Righteous Harmony Fists,” together with the gymnastic exercises practiced, won for the entire movement from foreigners the sobriquet of Boxer. (435)

With the propagation of Christianity, the traditional social values and rituals were disrupted or discontinued which was a cause of much angst in the Chinese gentry and the Boxers. Moreover, they thought that the railroads and telegraphs would bore misfortune for Chinese people. The Boxers fed the mass on three main principles: a) hatred for foreigners or Christianity, b) violence, and c) magic and mysticism. As Immanuel C. Y. Hsu in The Rise of Modern China writes:

Imbued with the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, the Chinese resented the invasion of Christianity under the protection of gunboats. The Treaties of Tientsin in 1858 had allowed its free propagation in the interior, and the Conventions of Peking in 1860 granted missionaries the right to rent and buy land for the construction of churches. Protected by the flag and the treaties, the missionaries moved about freely in China, although they had great difficulty winning converts. They resorted to the practice of offering converts monetary subsidies and protection against official or unofficial interference and insult. The Chinese disparagingly called these native Christians men who “eat by religion” (ch’ih-chiao) – i.e. they lived on income from the church. (388)
So, religion was one of the primary issues that were instrumental in conflagrating anger and hostility amongst the Boxer Rebels against the practitioners of other faiths, especially the followers of Christianity. Their minds were envenomed by a sense of suspicion and apprehension, ever arrested with the thought that the foreigners intended to defile and corrupt their culture by intruding through religion and social life.

In the middle of the year 1900, the Boxers congregated at Peking and Tianjin. Within the Peking area, they killed Chinese Christians and Christian missionaries and also vandalised and destroyed and churches, railroad stations and other properties. On June 20, 1900, the Boxers started a siege of Beijing’s foreign Legation Quarters (quarters of the foreign envoys). Referring to the mass mayhem and destruction the Boxers carried out venting their anger to and disapproval of all that was foreign, Hsu records:

At Tientsin, the Boxers were equally uncontrollable. They burned churches and shops that sold foreign merchandise and books, and killed Chinese Christians. They broke into prison, released the inmates, and coerced the governor-general into allowing them a free pick of weapons from the government arsenals. Facing such fanatic disorder, foreign officers on the ships outside the harbour decided to take the Taku Forts, which they overpowered on June 16 and occupied a day later. (394)

Years of humiliation by the European countries has caused among the Chinese traditionalist and nationalists resentment toward the foreigners for their intervention in China’s governance and policies. With the foreigners delving in the national matters the independence of the sovereignty of the state and the monarchy was at stake. The brewing tension culminated in an outburst when the foreign powers attacked the forts of Taku. On 21st June 1900, Empress Dowager Cixi, who was sympathetic to the traditionalists, declared war on all foreign nations that had diplomatic connections with China demanding them to leave China. She expressed
her support for the Boxers and took the opportunity to establish the imperial authority over the China all over again. However, the decision to support the Boxers was not supported by all the provincial rulers. It was perceived by the foreigners that the Qing court encouraged and sympathized with the Boxers and did not take adequate efforts to quell the rebels. The Boxer Rebellion came to an end on 7th September, 1901, when the Qing court was forced to sign the Boxer Protocol treaty. The treaty humiliatingly demanded that guilty Boxer and Chinese officials to be executed and punished and China pay 450 million taels of silver as a war reparation for the loss it caused to the foreigners. Empress Dowager, although she was advised to carry on the war by her counsels, decided to sign the treaty for the assurance given to her of continued monarchy. She also thought that China did not need to cede any more territories to the foreign powers. The treaty also demanded that the Foreigners were allowed to have troops in the Legation for their protection and prohibited China in importing arms for the next 2 years. Discussing about the Boxer Rebellion and the menace it hurled upon China, Julia Lovell in *The Opium War* writes:

The Boxers – drawn substantially from the lowest ranks of society – seemed to offer conclusive proof of the evil impulses of the Chinese race. It did not matter that local circumstances – famine, impoverishment, the imperialist scramble for north China and dubious missionary manoeuvres to seize land and protect ‘Christian’ bandits through the 1890s – made the Boxer explosion of anti-missionary violence explicable, if no less horrendous for those involved. Neither did it mattered that, over the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese immigrant populations in North America, Australia and Europe would suffer far more xenophobia than the Boxers meted out to Westerners through the 1890s. The debacle confirmed all the West’s worst and oldest prejudices about China; press and publishing were flooded by missionary and military accounts of the horror and
violence, which seemed to justify the unleashing of any kind of retributive humiliation on the Chinese people as a whole. In the aftermath of the rebellion, as thousands of foreign soldiers ravaged north China, anything Chinese was vulnerable to defilement. (278)

The effect of Boxer Rebellion on China made evident the weakened state of the dynasty and China’s poor defence and military capabilities. The Chinese nationalists and activists in exile, fearing a foreign domination, were instrumental in a few reforms initiated by the Qing court but ultimately the weakened monarchy could not be saved from the nationalistic uprising of 1911 that saw the collapse of the powerful Qing dynasty that ruled China for more than 400 years.

Basu has represented a very faithful account of the Boxer Uprising in China in his *The Yellow Emperor’s Cure*. Through subtle suggestions, Chinese foreign affairs and relations are hinted. Basu shows how there was a sense of inchoation that writ large between the Chinese people and the foreign merchants who have found in China a regular and potential clientele for their goods. The defeat in the Opium Wars made the Chinese desperate to gain back their shattered pride by any possible avenues, as Dom Afomso mentions:

> European merchants were sniffing around the country, trying to sell everything to the Chinese, from canons to railways. Their agents, arriving by the score, had turned the fortunes of Hong Kong and Macau. ‘China had always supplied the West, now she’s hungry for the miracles of Europe and America. It tells you what the vanquished would do to win back their pride!’ (54)

The Sino-foreign relations have been mentioned sporadically throughout the entire gamut of the novel. Christianity and Christian missionaries, as shown already, were not at well received and a surge of anti-Christian feelings took the country in its sway. There were
frequent riots and ruthless plundering and merciless destruction of Christian missionaries and churches. Joachim Saldanha tells Antonio about the anti-Christian feelings of the Chinese:

‘They hate us for luring away their flock. Curse the Chinese who have converted to our faith, call them “Rice Christians”, for having heard the call of their stomachs not that of the Lord!’ (58)

In his novel, Basu shows that the anger towards the Christian missionaries was ventilated by acts of strident aggression and vituperation. The state of the missionaries in China was in constant threat. Aspersions and invectives were showered upon the practitioners of Christianity and mass man-slaughter was followed by colossal destruction of missionary properties. There was a constant friction based on religion that fevered China. Saldanha registers these conditions as he tells Antonio about the communal aggression that the missionaries were exposed to in Tientsin and its neighbouring places:

Joachim Saldanha told Antonio the story of the Iowa pastor who had angered villagers by refusing to install CaiShen and Tu Di – Chinese gods of wealth and earth – on the church pulpit beside child Jesus and the Virgin. “The Reverend was accused of black magic: plucking out the eyes of babies to make potions, and vices that ranged from incest to orgy. Village elders announced that he has poisoned the well. Gardeners and servants were forbidden to serve him, and the sign of a bleeding hand appeared on the church door. On the night of the carnage, he was attacked by a mob armed with swords. The fields were white with snow, but he was stripped off his smock, kicked and butted on the head then bound in chains...The church façade was damaged, its steeple in ruins. Steps leading up to the altar were smeared with excrement. He [Saldanha] had discovered the Reverend’s corpse in a gully, chains
cut into his arms, worms crawling in the wounds and the flesh eaten away to the
bones, urchins poking it with sticks. (78)

Saldanha himself is later shown to be brutally tortured by the rebels for trying to save the
owners and orphans of a French Orphanage. He is, ultimately, cruelly killed by the Rebels.
Such acts of aggression towards the Christians and the missionaries were one of the many
ways by which the rebels vented their disapproval of all that was foreign. Basu has repeatedly
suggested that such a display of antagonism had its roots in the defeat of China at the hands
of the foreigners in the Opium wars. They wanted to avenge their shattered pride at any cost.

Other than the issues discussed above, Basu provides a very meticulous and graphic
picture of the Legation of Foreign Ministers in China, situated within a distance of twenty
miles from the Summer Palace. Mass brutality and acts of hostility inflicted by the Rebels on
the foreigners, as shown already, created a deep cleft between the Chinese and the foreigners,
a cleft which was punctuated by anxiety and suspicion. Basu shows that the Legation was
agog with the tales of such atrocious monstrosity:

A Russian man and his wife have already been plunged into boiling oil…news had
come just a week ago about the sad plight of the Belgian engineers held hostage in
Fengtai, as the locomotive shed built by them was set ablaze before their very eyes.
The Boxers hadn’t spared the Dowager’s special coach even, hurling it into the fire,
chanting slogans against Western devils and their evil machines. (135)

The Legation is shown to be imperilled with the duplicitous stand of the Dowager as well.
The invisible Dowager is a constant presence in the discussions in the Legation. She is
invisible and yet potentially functional in the ploys of the Boxers and the strategies of the
foreign Legation.
It was not just the foreigners but even those Chinese who became close to the foreigners by helping them in their domestic chores were the targets of the Boxer mischief. As Sarah Hollinger at the Legation says:

…the Boxers were threatening all those who were close to foreigners: cooks and washermen, gardeners, guards and sedan bearers. “They are butchering the poor Chinese Christians; dragging them out of their homes and killing them on the spot, or torturing them at their Boxer temples, gouging out eyes, skinning them alive…” …“They’ll attack the Legation after they’ve finished with the converts.” (136)

Antonio’s conversation with Dr Xu brings to life their (Chinese) side of the story. It suggests the way the defeat in the Opium Wars and the damage and insult it inflicted upon the Chinese have left an indelible impression on their psyche. Xu, in fact, dismisses Antonio’s and the Legation’s concern over the growing threats imposed by the rebels:

“Why would they be afraid of Boxers? With British warships in Tientsin barely a few miles away, they must feel safer than everyone else in China!”…“Last time the foreigners fought the Chinese over opium, English and French soldiers came over from their ships and brought the Emperor to his knees. They looted and destroyed the Summer Palace too. (186)

Yohan’s [the Chinese spy at the Legation] take on the word ‘rebel’ is also significant in this context:

“If you think being critical of foreigners for what they’ve done to China makes one a rebel, then most Chinese are rebels. I’m a rebel too! A rebel is born every time a foreigner spits on a Chinese shopkeeper for failing to win a bargaining match, or when he pokes his servant in the ribs with his umbrella. Who isn’t a rebel?” (227)
In the novel, there are news of raging hostility and ravaging of the city by the rebels. Bridges are being burnt, railway lines uprooted: it is, as if, an age of anger where terror rules supreme. The streets and markets are all empty. Soon the uprising reaches its peak, threatening and disrupting the peace of those at the Legation. Basu provides almost a dramatic declaration to register the beginning of the Boxer rebellion, parsing it up in just one sentence:

May 25th, 1900: The much feared Boxer rebellion had started. (271)

Immediately after this, steps are being hurriedly taken to fortify the Legation against the imminent siege of the rebels. As Roger Mckinsey, the telegraph operator, brings the news of the arrival of the army sent to aid the Legation, it brings a sense of relief from the torpor that has been plaguing the Legation members:

He had received a message through Russian Kamchatka that the allied guards were on their way and would arrive by train next morning, about three hundred and fifty men from America, Britain, Russia, France, Italy and Japan with Germans and Austrians set to follow soon. (282)

The marauding murderous Boxers brought about a bleary stain on the face of the Chinese History. It was a dark period and was gravid with the prognosis of reducing China to a state of absolute destitution and destruction. Ferguson tells Antonio:

In just a few days they’ll destroy the Great Chinese Civilization! Smash and burn everything that’s been touched by the foreign hand. They’ll kill each other in order to destroy us. And the Big Fat Buddha will bless her brave spirit soldiers, turn every man into a eunuch and every woman into a palace whore. (308)

Basu, thus, has drawn a very meticulous picture of the lurid condition of China under the impact of the Boxer rebellion. Some of the pages almost read like aseptic historical
documents of the rebellion. The prognostic comment of Ferguson too is a relevant and accurate one, for the aftermath of the rebellion indeed reduced China to nothing better than a helpless victim of an incurable pestilence.

IV

Basu, in *The Yellow Emperor’s Cure*, has once again successfully transported his readers to a bleak and bleary memory of China. By way of his narrative, he has migrated to a past, bringing to life the contents of the archives. However, Basu’s approach to history is quite distinct in this novel, as compared to the way he has contrived and re-created history in his other novels. Basu’s representation of the Boxer rebellion and its impact on the contemporary scenario do in no way challenge, interrogate or re-present the established metanarrative of history. There are, indeed, sections in the novel which almost read like accurate historical documents. Like a maven, Basu has evenly spliced the horrors of the Boxer rebellion and has very deftly collated it with the main theme, i.e. Antonio’s quest to obtain a cure for syphilis. The attrition of the upsurge on the life and quest of Antonio, the diaphanous proclivity and passion for Fumi, who is finally discovered as a Boxer herself, the bibulous gossips at the Legation where Antonio becomes a regular, and the blood bath and the brutalities inflicted upon the foreigners by the Boxers—all seem to convert the narrative into a riveting and compelling tale situated at the fag end of the 19th century Lisbon and China.

Basu, by way of a strategic connivance, construes his tale associating the two distinct subjects—syphilis and the Boxer history in China. As Antonio witnesses the mass mayhem, the merciless butchery that has turned china into a mass of hideous and suffering lot, a connection is established between the horrible disease that renders its victims into a helpless
bubonic putrifying flesh and the disease of hatred and acrimony that plagued China reducing it to a helpless state of putrid misery and suffering. The stench of corpses and suffering is, indeed, common to both. History, thus, becomes a ballast and plays a crucial part in giving the diegesis its plausible culmination. It can, indeed, be safely said that in *The Yellow Emperor’s Cure*, unlike in his other novels, Basu uses history with a purely aesthetic purpose to meet the novelistic demands.
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Chapter VI

Representation of History in Kalkatta

I

In his novel *Kalkatta*, Basu conspicuously addresses the issue of migration of people in connection with the partition of India that triggered the exodus of a huge number of people from their homes, leaving them destitute, homeless and perennially haunted by a sense of location/identity-less-ness. He also addresses the sensitive issue of religion that is quite inexorably related to and associated with the partition of India. In crafting the tale, Basu also touches upon yet another burning and almost tabooed issue of male sexual service, provided by the gigolos. This chapter intends to examine all these issues and, in so doing, tries to find out if there is any hidden political agenda in Basu’s representation of these issues.

II

In *Kalkatta*, Basu for the first time uses the first person narrative in delineating the story of Jamshed Alam, aka Jami, and his life in Calcutta. Thus the novel has the semblance of a memoir of a Bihari Muslim refugee (born in a refugee camp, called Geneva, in Bangladesh) who comes to Calcutta with his parents and his elder cripple sister with the only quest of finding a home for himself, a place to belong to and to become a kalkattawallah. It is Jami who tells us how he came to this city of joy and how this city treated him. To be a part of it, he was first to rid himself of the otiose birth certificate that would invariably indicate his place of birth as Bangladesh and thus flail him into the cesspool of illegitimate aliens. The first section of the novel tells us about Jami’s early years in Calcutta, how stoked and relieved his entire family was when a distant relative of theirs gave them shelter in Calcutta. Relieved
of the constant threats that plagued the refugees in a refugee camp, Jami’s mother Ruksana could not contain her happiness and his father Abu Alam too was hopeful of a better future for his children in the society of civilised brethren under the canopy of a sky which he believed freed them of the brandishing of a refugee. They were now residents of Number 14 Zakaria Street and the messiah who had given them shelter was Uncle Mushtak, a communist leader. Each character in the novel has been observed, analysed and deduced through the eyes of the protagonist Jamshed Alam, a meek, confused, ordinary Bihari Muslim refugee boy, rarely self-assertive or brash, who wanted to be a kalkattawallah.

Jami soon got his forged birth certificate and it was from then he officially started his meretricious attempt to become a part of this all-embracing and all-devouring city, Calcutta. The section ‘Resurrection’ quite vividly records Jami’s early years in Number 14 Zakaria Street. A veritable menagerie that it was, it housed all kinds of people—carpenters, lechers, jewellers, milliners and, of course, gossips. All of them, no matter how much scratched and detached they felt from one another, were woven into one yarn by one very strong string—a sense of homelessness, a common plight, the fear of being tacked as an illegitimate alien. Jami was immensely fond of his sister and they shared a very strong bond between them. She was his best friend until he started making new friends. With puberty, Jamshed was inveigled into a new world of experiences. He had found his way from the school gate straight to the gutters. He had become friends with Rakib and his gang. They were a bunch of unruly uproarious boys with evidently underhand insidious connections. Rakib was the leader of the gang, a cool headed curmudgeon. An unsettling turn of events could only be predicted as Jamshed got himself entwined with the group. The mention of Unani doctors, butchers, mosques etc gives a vivid and graphic presentation of Zakaria Street—a mini Pakistan in Calcutta as Jami’s mother had mistakenly thought it to be. With the help of Samina, Ruksana’s friend, Jamshed joined Galaxy Travels in the modest capacity of Rajesh Sharma’s
(Samina’s lover) sub-agent. It was a meagre and not so palatable a job of filling up passport forms for ‘hazy’ people and making them ‘real.’ Jamshed, however, found himself quite content with his work. He found a friend in Anirban Mitra, a proper kalkattawallah who too worked at Galaxy Travels. It was Ani who had swathed him with the precious knowledge of how to become or at least pretend to be a kalkattawallah. Slowly but surely, Jamshed was beginning to understand the concentric pattern of the beautiful chaos called Calcutta. At this time, Abu Alam, Jami’s father, lost his job. Thus, Jami soon felt the growing pressure of responsibility on his shoulders, a responsibility he could no longer just scour away with.

At this juncture in the novel, Jami met Monica Goswamy at Galaxy Travels. She was an old customer of the Agency. They chanced upon each other a few times outside the office, and then their friendship thickened and deepened. She started taking him to expensive places in contrast to the much modest shops or eateries Jami had been to. She was, as if, filling up many empty holes in his life, nursing all the disservice he had been exposed to at the hands of his loafer friends. It was a friendship that was plain and simple and salubrious, for it filled Jami with an ingratiating sense of joy and importance and his pockets with expensive gifts.

It was 2011 and the Assembly election was forthcoming. Uncle Mushtak was a candidate. Number 14 was suddenly transformed into the platform on which Uncle Mushtak’s election preparations were going on at full spree. Jami was to be the most potential pawn of Uncle Mushtak, entrusted with the responsibility of performing as the counting agent owing to his knowledge of computers. Jami’s physical and psychological engagements at Number 14 owing to the various events concerning the election have unwittingly burned the bridge between him and Mrs Goswami. A strange cold hiatus had crept in, and it had put Jami in a further unsettling frame of mind. There were troubles at Galaxy too, and Jami now was almost desperate to gain back the comfortable retreat that Mrs Goswami had provided him with. They (Jami and Mrs Goswami) finally met and resolved the differences and part
with the promise to meet on a day which, coincidentally, was also the day of counting the votes, the job that Uncle Mushtak had entrusted on Jami. Jami lost his virginity in the luxury of a special launch-ride arranged by Monica and, simultaneously, Uncle Mushtak also lost the election bringing down with him a 34 year old party rule.

Jami finally chose to become a male prostitute, with a mild goading and convincing from Monica Goswami, who slowly but surely had transformed from a friend with benefits to a ‘party,’ a client, for now she had started extorting priapic gratifications from Jami in lieu of money. Soon she had introduced Jami to her other friends and they to theirs, and in this way Jami’s clientele had bludgeoned to a prosperous extent with the promise of a lucrative profession in the offing. But soliciting prostitution openly would land him in trouble, and hence once again with some help from Monica, Jami joined a massage parlour Champaka. Thus, Jami had become a gigolo and had started liking his new job. It was Rani, the *hijra* manager of Champaka, who provided him with the necessary training that would help him to become a pro in his profession. Soon quite smoothly Jami acclimatised into the trade and became an efficient one at it. His increasing satisfaction in his job led to the demolition of any sort of attrition or attenuation. However, as a gigolo, his experiences were manifold, redolent of both pain and pleasure.

Things were going pretty smooth for Jamshed till Rakib and his cohorts came to know about his private trade. Rakib in his cool insidious way was hell bent to make use of the knowledge to his own advantage and upend the way Jami’s life was moving. He insisted that Jami joined his shady business giving up his present ‘laundabusiness.’ Jami’s life was taking drastic mauldering turns, raving meanders to put him in desperate situations. His father’s health was deteriorating fast and a tumour was diagnosed in his stomach. A surgery was imminent and Jami needed a lot of money for it.
For Jami, a carefree stroll past Keyatola had occasioned a chance meeting with Mandira Gupta. It was then that Jamshed saw Pablo, Mandira’s son, for the first time. Mandira’s husband had left her and Pablo, when he came to know that his son was suffering from blood cancer. After this, Mandira, the culture-rich and well-educated beautiful woman, had been fighting her battle, countering her misfortunes all by herself. The section ‘Paradise’ deals with Jami’s trundling towards an unfamiliar emotion crenulated by his emotional involvement with Mandira and her son, who was suffering from acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia. Jamshed felt a strange and curious attachment towards this boy, an affection he found hard to explain. This was for the first time that Jami was at such a close proximity with a cultured Bengali kalkattawallah. He was getting to know what went into their making, the constitution of their breed, and was trying, perhaps unconsciously, to imbibe the same in his recalibrating as a kalkattawallah. His and Mandira’s friendship grew. He lied to his family that he was soon to be promoted to the position of a manager in order to avoid joining his father in Satta business. Regrets have started settling in Jami along with a sense of trepidation. Jami decided to pay for Pablo’s treatment at Park Retreat leaving Mandira with loads of questions and a sense of embarrassment at the prospect of accepting money from Jami for her son’s treatment. Jami’s fate simpered as things in his life were getting unsettled and upended. Business was on the decline and worries were aborning, flooding in from myriad concerns like the expenses Pablo’s treatment demanded and the re-entry of zealots like Rakib in his life. Jami gave an advertisement for having ‘clients’ in a paper which was the beginning of the plummeting that was to follow. He landed into a trap, a vicious web planted by the anti-vice squad. He was easily framed and accused of soliciting prostitution. He was quite unexpectedly rescued by the chief of DD and was stripped of all charges and set free, but in lieu he was to become a lizard, a spy for the police and provide them with information about the movements of Kalimuddin, his future brother in law and an active
reactionary who was the face of the Young Islamic League. In a moment of confusion and vulnerability, Jami blurted out the truth about his job as a gigolo, to sate the curiosities of Raka Sen, the young journalist friend of Ani, impervious to the consequences it may lead to. He was even ready to join Rakib’s business. A sense of deference and reluctance had penetrated him: it seemed, as if saving Pablo was the sole purpose of his life. Luckily he met Monica and requested her to get him a job in Dubai as Champaka was to be demolished and a kindergarten was to be built in its place. Jami was all set for Dubai, all plans and arrangements were taken care of. Rakib and his gang had come to know that Jami was now a ‘lizard’ for the police and a scuffle ensued in which Jami was lynched badly. A listless drifting around the city brought him to the news stands where he, to his utter surprise and horror, found his photo printed on a popular daily under an article titled, ‘Gigolo King of Calcutta.’ It was the doing of Ani’s journalist friend, Raka. Suddenly he was left with no place to go, Kalkatta refused him a refuge. At this point, Yakub also brought terrible news of Miri’s and Kalim’s arrest and despite his frantic and earnest efforts, Jami couldn’t save Miri from an unjust incarceration. These tragic turns of events were getting too hard for Jami to accept. His heart ached for a glimpse of Pablo but by now he was sure Mandira might have found out the truth about him from Raka’s article and would not permit him to meet her son. Jami also came to know that Indra, Pablo’s father had returned and felt a strange sting of jealousy. And in a moment of frenzy, goaded by the mild inebriation, he had stepped out in the dark of the night to sit for his last portrait for Pablo. He died as he was hit by a taxi, in front of the Keyatola house. Kalkatta gave him her last and final gift.
III

Muslim Life

Since the novel is mainly based in Zakaria street of Calcutta, an area densely populated by the Muslims, and the protagonist of the novel is also a Bangladeshi Muslim refugee in India, the representation of the Muslim life in *Kalkatta* deserves special attention. The novel shows how the Muslims keep on living in India as the ‘other,’ as the minority. Once at the centre and gradually pushed to the margins, one can imagine a hurt and stabbed sense of superiority (since they were the rulers of the country for a long time) in the collective unconscious of this community. This is a relevant point to start exploring the greater picture of this ‘other’ in our country. As Rasheeduddin Khan pertly puts his finger on the point:

> In order to comprehend the peculiar nature of Muslim politics and leadership in India, it might be worthwhile to begin by understanding certain typical aspects of the Muslim mass-psychology which, however irrational and illusory, nevertheless remains subjectively the frame of much of their responses and stimulation, of their actions and reactions. Muslim consciousness of superiority…born out of the indelible memory of about 700 years of Muslim hegemony in the Indo-Gangetic plains and in many parts of the Deccan, is augmented in its separative aspect by the fact of their tenacious adherence to a faith, non-Indian in its origin and international in its character. (qtd. In Thapar 145)

This separative aspect operates on separate levels, polarising this community to precipitous heights – be it the fear of Hindu domination, a reservation in committing themselves to a complete identification with the nation, a pubescent, almost matured awareness, of their minority status and community cohesion.
However, the centripetal aspect of this constant sense of not-belonging comes from the major disparity between the traditional common law of Islam and the legislative law making processes in India. As Gopal Krishna writes in his “Islam, Minority Status and Citizenship”:

The Indian constitution has totally rejected the Islamic political theory. It rests on the principle of territorial nations constituted by citizens, irrespective of religious or any other identities. The state here embodies the moral unity of citizens, and lays claim to their primary allegiance by virtue of it. In place of Muslim ascendency or ethnic corporatism it has substituted the idea of fundamental rights and rights of minorities, and instead of a stable, if not permanent, grouping of the population in terms of ethnic bloc, it has instituted in the political sphere, fluid majorities and minorities, not fundamentally antagonistic towards each other. (354)

Contrary to this, it is a recurring theme in contemporary Muslim rhetoric that Islam does not draw any distinction between religion and politics.

The ‘othering’ of the Muslims in India calls for a closer understanding of the word ‘other.’ Saaed Naqvi in his Being The Other has quite succinctly tried to define it and give us a clear idea of the ‘other’ by particularly referring to Edward Said’s use of the term:

The Oxford Dictionary defines the ‘Other’ as ‘that which is distinct from, or opposite to something or oneself.’ In the late twentieth century, the Palestinian scholar Edward Said analysed this phenomenon. From this issued his seminal work Orientalism, on the ‘affiliation of knowledge and power’. This is how the West created an image of the East as the ‘Other’. The supremacist ideology of imperialism is structured on this platform. Looked at through this lens, it helps us see how, in India, an entire community, which comprises over 14 per cent of the total
population, has come to be seen as the Other, as something exotic, backward, uncivilised, even dangerous. (x)

Mapping his way to the inception of such a slicing of communities, Naqvi further registers how this deliberate ‘othering’ of the Indian Muslims, which was to have long term repercussions, had its origin in 1947, with the decision to divide the nation which, again, was done on religious lines and was therefore inherently communal in nature:

Muslims were all given the ‘option’ to go to Pakistan by a specified period – 1956. Many senior Muslim civil servants, officers in the police and the armed forces proceeded to Karachi, the initial capital of Pakistan, to help the new country stand on its feet. Many stayed on in India because it appeared to them to be tolerant and they didn’t feel under threat. It didn’t take long for Muslims who had stayed on in India to realize that they were being treated differently. Politicians, officials and a largely Hindu Police force would work progressively against them, decade after decade, especially in communally charged situations. (Naqvi, xi)

This realisation of ‘being treated differently’ triggered a sense of insecurity and ‘not-belonging-ness’ in the Muslims in India. In the Muslim psyche, a sense of displacement is immediately evoked with the mention of words like partition, separatist activism and ‘othering.’ And with it is attached a nebulous memory, a fear of loss, a memory of things possessed and the loss of them along with their memory: it is a loss of a past and its contents, a loss of one’s beginning, one’s roots and eventually a loss of one’s identity. This leads to a constant aggrieved sense of hopelessness and insecurity which further branches out as a haphazard gesticulation of revenge and aggression, often(conjecture). As Mushirul Hasan observes in his *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India’s Muslims since Independence*:
How did Muslims respond to their own situation in the post-Partition decade? Most accounts portray a community whose position was hopeless – irrevocably fragmented, bitter and frustrated, leaderless with no sense of purpose and direction.

(187)

So all Muslims, even those who have not officially crossed the borders can be reckoned as refugees suffering from the post-Partition angst of loss and destitution and abandonment.

In this context, one may refer to the Adoption Bill of 1972 which caused a general trepidation amongst the Muslims. Gopal Krishna records:

In June 1972 the Law Minister of the Government of India, Mr. H. R. Gokhale, introduced in the Rajya Sabha, a Bill to regulate adoption of Indian children. This was in compliance with the Article 39 of the constitution, which requires the state to protect children and youth against exploitation. In the ‘Statement of Objects and Reasons’ accompanying the Bill the Minister stated that ‘the Bill seeks to provide for a uniform law of adoption applicable to all communities […]’. It raised all the issues, religious and political, that had agitated Muslims for half a century or more: the threat to Muslim personal law and consequently the threat to Muslim identity.

(363)

This evidently suggests that self-determination, which according to the Muslims, is a condition of welfare in a plural society, is being greatly challenged and compromised. And thus they tend to or are made to remain in the margins, as following such discrepant mode of political and religious directives questioning their Islamic identity. As Krishna pertly quotes Khalifa Abdul Halim in discussing the Muslim’s obligation in a non-Muslim state in the theory of a ‘tacit contract’: “A Muslim who lives as a citizen of a non-Muslim state has
entered into a tacit contract with that government to abide by its laws, but in that contract he cannot jeopardise the essentials of Islam so far as his personal life is concerned” (367).

The Partition, which was strictly based on religious considerations, contributed greatly to the increase of insecurity among the Muslims in India. The exodus, in fact, primarily happened in two phases. First, during the Partition and then again during the 1971 war. A surge of such homeless destitutes prised their way to India with the hope of securing a home and security here. As Kalyan Chaudhuri records in his *Genocide in Bangladesh*:

There is no doubt that the aim of the military pogrom of 1971 was to drive the Easterners out of East Pakistan. In the wake of the killing, first in cities and towns and then in the countryside, Bengalis left their homes convinced once for all that East Pakistan could not or would not offer them the simple guarantee of security of life and property that should have been their inalienable rights as citizens in their own country. The exodus began from early April, and in millions, for at least a safe shelter in neighbouring places on the other side of the border in Indian territory. (68)

These people, of course, began their life in India as refugees. The concept of a ‘refugee’ carries with it a considerable burden of influence and anxiety. It is a cretin and boorish contemplation and sculpting of the ‘others,’ divesting them of rights that claimed equanimity and stripping them of their identity, their home, their Nation. Their non-acceptance in the new nation-state keeps on haunting them and even minor indications of discrimination might have deep-rooted impact on the psyche of the refugees. In an interview to Urvashi Butalia, Bir Bahadur Singh told her what he thought of the ways in which Hindus and Sikhs treated Muslims after the exodus:

‘… if a mussalman was coming along the road and we shook hands with them and we had say a box of food or something in our hand that would then become soiled
and we would not eat it, if we are holding a dog in one hand and food in the other there is nothing wrong with that food.’ (The Other Side of Silence, 40)

The acts of forgetting and remembering can be highly contentious and can be forged through by state power mechanisms and machinations. Partition and its aftermaths also involve such generative recalling of a dark past and tinted tainted feelings of hurt, wrath, fear and terror: stories of displacement are told and understood afresh in the generations that follow the victims of partition. Urvashi Butalia succinctly graphs the graduation to second generation experiences and impacts of partition in The Long Shadow:

The exploration of memory is also not something that is or can be finite. One cannot begin to open up memory and reach a point where the exercise is done and can be laid to rest. Every historical moment that offers us the possibility of looking at it through the prism of memory demonstrates that the more you search, the more there is that opens up. Onion-like, each layer peeled away reveals another beneath, the core itself being made up of layers within layers. When the initial works that opened up Partition histories, particularly those that drew on first person accounts, appeared, they tended to focus on the untold stories of Partition victims and survivors, mainly Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. It was only later that other studies, such as those of Sindhis or minorities, or Muslims who stayed behind in India, or stories of continued displacement, of caste and class and studies with other perspectives, began to open up (and it should come as no surprise that much of this exploratory and pioneering work of excavating forgotten histories was done by women historians, sociologists and writers). Today there is talk of second generation experiences and the impact of Partition, and the focus on migration and violence has broadened to include so much more. (The Long Shadow ix)
Despite the works done on partition by critics like Butalia, some are of the opinion that the true history of the exodus has not yet been properly documented. Maloy Krishna Dhar, for instance, in his *Train to India* writes:

> The story of the Great Human Exodus has not been recorded faithfully. Hindus and Muslims wrote their respective histories, some perverted mutilation of history called the history of Hindustan and Pakistan. Historians, who evaluate and present history from their own perspective, often rationalize human tragedy with their own interpretations. We were offered Congress, communist, Hindu, Muslim, swadeshist and several other versions of history. They dared not chronicle the pains of the Great Exodus because they were busy cushioning their chairs. (1)

Due to the lack of proper representation of the Exodus and of partition histories, there is still a scope of documenting the anger and anxieties of the victims of the exodus from new and fresh perspectives.

Basu, by way of Jami, records the same confusion, anger and helplessness of a refugee. Jamshed Alam, the Bihari, Bangladeshi Muslim refugee, tells the readers about how it feels to be a refugee, the product of a political decision. His narration is replete with suggestions, subjective interpretations as well as experiences, and invites one to investigate closely the issue to discover and explore newer spaces within this dialectics. Jami’s is an amniotic quest to divest himself from the slatternly identity of a refugee. It is this quest that catalyses the spate of coincidences that write his fate in strange and surprising tones. And the paradox of this recitative is that Jami, embroiled in this intaglio to shape himself as a true *kalkattawallah*, fails to completely cleanse himself of its (of a refugee’s) stench till the day he breathes his last. Calcutta accepts him and refuses him at the same time, and his profession as a male prostitute, thus, almost attains metaphorical significance. Even the very first line of
the narrative betrays this desperate need of not to be a refugee,. It shows his desire to belong somewhere and to rid himself of the ‘label’ of a refugee:

My name is Jamshed Alam and my earliest memory is of the day I became an Indian.

(5)

The word ‘became’ in here carries manifold significances. Ruksana, Jami’s mother, was obstinately insistent in cleansing the vermiform identity of a refugee carved on the forehead of his son. She had definite designs for her son’s future but a painful past and some disagreeable experiences goaded such designs in Ruksana, as Jami recalls her mother relating to the history of their homelessness and the sense of dire helplessness that it brought along with it:

Like a true author, Ammi never forgot to remind us why and when it had all started, with our grandparents fleeing India to East Pakistan during Partition because 30,000 fellow Muslims had been slaughtered in their native Bihar alone. Their children, my father Mirza Abu Alam and his wife Ruksana, both born and married in refugee camps, had produced Miri and me, a third generation of refugees. While still nurturing the hope that we’d all someday become legal citizens of some country, eligible for Government jobs and passports. But which country would that be? Ancestral India, Birthmother Bangladesh or pure Muslim Pakistan? Only Ammi among all their relatives and friends knew the simple truth… children and grandchildren of refugees had no choice but to become refugees again. She more than Abbu was desperate to leave Geneva and come to city praised by one and all, and called by various names: Kolkata, Calcutta, Kalkatta. (6)
This bleary slice of history, a sore to be more precise, manifestly highlights the paraplegic state of the refugees and their desperate zeal to break free from this malaise, incomplete identity.

It was on 25th of October, the day of Bolshevik revolution, that Jami obtained his legal ticket as an Indian: he got a new birth certificate, and he was born again, now as an Indian, freeing himself from the filthy cocoon of a ‘refugee,’ with a promise of renascence. Now in the womb of Calcutta, the Alam family and many others like them sought a safer haven, lurking no longer in the shadows as nobodies, they sought a tabernacle to free them of their anonymity and insignificance of existence, or perhaps, so they thought:

Perhaps they felt safer here than at the camp, not having to keep up a constant watch to protect their girl from pimps and their boy from agents who might take him away to race camels in Arabia. (30).

Coming to Number 14 was in itself a complex experience to grasp. A limpid Kalkatta was waiting arms wide open, to embrace these nebulous entities unto its bosom and transfuse a fresh lease of life in them. Kalkatta didn’t seem to deride or judge with inimical analysis the gauche demeanour of these hapless species and Number 14 Zakaria Street became a microcosm, a universe all by itself to the Alams and their likes. It, as if, probated a sanction to the rather shady hazy forms of these ‘others.’ It provided them with a sense of belonging, a release from the tramp like existence of shifting camps and remaining ever eviscerated of the rightful dignity of a human. As Jami says:

I hadn’t thought of Number 14 as temporary, like a refugee camp that we might have to leave one day. Like the other occupants, we felt we were owners, equal sufferers of the low water pressure and faulty wiring that left parts of the house in darkness every now and then, while it was true that Dadi had her periodic outbursts against
the ‘ungrateful residents’ who never paid her a paisa but enjoyed the pleasures of her haveli, it was put down to the state of her mind not that of her heart. Miri was worrying for no reason, I thought. Even if we had to leave, it wouldn’t be the end. We could live anywhere in Kalkatta we wished; on any road long enough to kick a little rock along, under any sky that sported a kite flight. (64)

Thus, Jamshed Alam and his family became the ‘homeless residents’ of Calcutta. No matter the sense of comfort and security it provided, they were however, always alive to this truth, or made alive to it by the world around them. Jami’s desire to curve out an identity for himself ended in despair and listless drifting by the condescending pressure that his ‘refugee-self’ imposed upon him. His family wanted him to be a kalkattawallah, training himself in all possible ways to fit the bill, ready to deliver his complete fealty to the city. And yet he was always alive to the ostensible status they were permitted, a sense of insecurity lurking and hovering around them all the waking hours. That is why the change in the government wracked their nerves to the limit:

What if Dr Sala’s party took revenge on Uncle Mushtak? The new government might call us squatters, ask to see documents. What’s the proof that the house was owned by Muslims before Partition? Number 14 Zakaria Street could be branded “Enemy Property”, and we’d be thrown out into refugee camps once again. (156)

Jami was repeatedly, ceaselessly being reminded of his statelessness, even in friendly jocular discussions, of his belonging to a separate species; only Jyotishbabu, whom he had met at the poetic soiree at Mandira’s place, had genially accepted their ‘other-ness’ as a one-ness, as something universal to all human in this opalescent, iridescent culture cosmos:
‘We are all refugees, aren’t we?’ Jyotishbabu gave a fatherly pat on my back when I told him I was from Dhaka. ‘You are from Bangladesh, whereas I am from East Pakistan.’ (218)

Indeed, even within the secured boundaries of Calcutta, Jami and his likes remained refugees, their identities severed and immolated, and they are, thus, in a perpetual quest to salvage one from the interstices of events and occasions that occur in their lives. Jami’s inexplicable fondness and affection towards Pablo can be reckoned as one such aperture through which Jami seeks to salvage his identity. In the brine water life of a hustler, Pablo was like a guiding star, one that gave him a purpose, a sense of belonging. Jami, being a male prostitute by profession, had known intimacy and sexual proximity. But the emotional surge that defined his extreme fondness for the little boy gives him a sense of surrogate paternity. In an onerous world of sexuality without procreation, he finds a refuge, an emotional redemption, in Pablo.

Calcutta, as argued already, plays a vital and central role in alienating Jamshed Alam from a definite identity. It gave him shelter but refused him a home. The dissident Calcutta, thus remained Kalkatta, the coveted Ethaca for Jamshed Alam, the Bihari refugee from Bangladesh:

I cursed myself for spending all these years lying, trying to live my mother’s dream and be normal like others when it was impossible for a son and grandson of refugees to live normally in Kalkatta. (255)

Jami’s life have had been a succession of impostures in his quest of knowing where he truly belonged. Even the spelling of Calcutta used in the context of Jami and his family is different and indicates a Bihari Muslim’s take on Calcutta. And that is why it is Kalkatta and not Calcutta or Kolkata.
Basu, by way of Jami and his family, has shown the plight and predicament of a refugee. It is a nation that gives one one’s identity. But a refugee can never claim to be a native. His is one ceaseless process to belong to a place, to ‘become’ a native but never succeeding in ‘being’ one. The angst and anxiety associated with this ‘not-belonging’ divest an individual of his very identity, and thus make his existence an amorphous one. Such a displaced person is in an age of long exile like an outcast desperately seeking a place to belong to.

Zakaria Street where our protagonist and narrator finds his shelter in Calcutta can be reckoned as a veritable Pakistan. Thickly and mostly populated by Muslims, the semblance is not a mere ganglion of an opinion. This is how Jami narrates his experience of entering the Zakaria Street for the first time:

A queue had formed before the butcher’s shop with burkhas and milky-white salwarkurtas crowding up Zakaria Street. Attar-wallahs sprayed rose perfume at passers-by. Zamzam water, from the sacred well, sold briskly. Unani medicine shops advertised cures for ‘secret diseases.’ Kaaba loomed over us in hoardings, and the street came to a standstill with azan…Ammi thought Abbu had caught the wrong train and brought us to Pakistan. (12)

The tale, no doubt, has been told in a lumpish way with unabashed use of expletives and a garish feel consuming the readers as they observe for the first time the representation of the Muslims of Kolkata and their ways of life in details. Such details are all the more validated by the fact that they come out from the mouth of a Mussalman narrator. Miriam, Jamshed’s sister, too, gives us a vivid and rigid picture of Islam, the religion, its reservations and stipulations, its concept of good and evil. Unlike Jamshed, Miri was an exceptionally bright student who had the unquenchable penchant of reading books. She would readily give up her
rikshaw fare and buy a book and take the pains (for her legs were deformed by poliomyelitis) of walking her way to the school. A ready reckoner about almost everything under the sky, Miri was fond of lecturing and sermonising and, unlike any other member of her section, she had the answer to almost all posers. And yet, there came a radical transformation in her (the source or cause of which remains slightly vague; whether it was any event or the reactionary zeal has not been clearly mentioned) to become true to her religion, to become a god fearing honest docile Muslim. She decided to take up the ritualistic veil, emblematic of a Muslim woman, and also the job of teaching Muslim girls in a Muslim orphanage. The state and location of the orphanage was not just only appalling but absolutely revolting and abominable, and yet she found comfort in providing her services to these girls residing in the orphanage. The girl, who knew or at least wanted to know everything about everything, now knew and wanted to know everything about her religion. It was like a stolid obsession, calm but in constant immolation and passion. She refused to complete her graduation and gave up her life for the saintly cause of teaching these orphans. In fact, what she taught them further gives us a clear indication of the religious enthusiasm that animated her:

‘Fiqh’, Miri had replied coldly. It was my sister’s turn to give Ammi an earful. Fiqh taught you how to be a good Muslim. It came from the Sharia and Sunnah, made you aware of the rules of prayer, fasting, purification and made much more. (171)

Her devotion and dedication had earned her merit in the eyes of others like her. Suleyman Sahab, at the orphanage, for instance, praised her in an incandescent way when he told Jami that Miri “deserves to be called Miriam, the only female name mentioned in the Koran” (171). It is no surprise then that she fell in love with Kalimuddin, the Maulvi, and got actively engaged with the workings of the Young Islamic League.
Referring to the days of his nonage, Jamshed sheds light on a very many interesting aspects that give a fuller scope and picture of the Muslims of India. Four different perspectives on the same subject have been ascertained in the novel—the Muslim view of the Hindus, the Hindu view of the Muslims, the Muslim view of the Muslims and finally the more complex, the Muslim view of the Hindu view of the Muslims. All the four perspectives seem to reek of an uncouth vacillating sense of aggression. Even a jest in earnest by one of the non-Muslim members of Rakib’s gang regarding Muslims, for instance, seems to have a diminuendo about it and may scathe or pierce the sensitive skin of a Muslim. When Bakki, in a rather coarse and loutish manner, said something quite harmless, it seemed to be potent enough to lam Jami so much so that he remembered it and thought it fit to record in his narration, “A vegetarian Muslim was like a virgin whore! (70)”

The novel also represents some of the common impressions of the non-Muslims about the Muslims. Time and again, it has been mentioned that Muslim boys, if not reigned and controlled in time, are to go wayward in course of time, as if it is a common and usual trait in them, as if they are prone to become lumpen or social deviants bringing shame not only to their families, but to their entire community. Sharma, for instance, complained to Samina about Jami indicating the obvious:

Jami was going the ‘usual’ way, he’d complained to Samina, meaning Muslim boys showing off fancy clothes and doing ladies business as soon as they caught sight of a few rupees. (111)

The concept of a Muslim in the eyes of a non-Muslim is, thus, shown as either comatosely indifferent or vehemently vicious and despicable. They are insulated within a generalised sullenness that manifests itself in various ways but mostly as an intemperate distrust. As Bakki blurted out in exasperation and anxiety:
Someone has convinced those chutiya Americans that Hawala money is used by Muslims to send money to other Muslims to buy guns and bombs. After 9/11 they’re going against hawala in the name of stopping terrorism. The chief of DD is himself interrogating the dealers. One false step and you could land up in Guantanamo.

(151).

This certainly had generated a sense of solicitude in the Muslims, queasiness plagued them for as is amply clear in the words of Kalim, “Muslims are required to prove their innocence wherever they go these days” (228). Thus a Young Islamic League was only forthcoming to safeguard and instil the true ideals of Islam in the Muslims and also to riposte against such incriminating generalisations. As Kalimuddin says:

‘Tell me Jamshedbhai, have you heard of “Young Islamic League”? going on to explain as if he hadn’t expected me to know about it. ‘It’s a forum for today’s Muslim youth to exchange ideas about our world. Ideas about everything – Islam, world politics, terrorism, yes, even that.’ (228)

This comment of Kalim clearly shows that Basu in this novel is using contemporary history like 9/11 and its impact in the form of ‘Islamophobia’ and situating them on a global scale. Kalim’s speeches show that the increase in the hatred/ suspicion for the Muslims is strengthening the binary of us/other and is contributing amply to the origin and growth of different Islamic organizations even in countries like India. The Muslim voice itself was seldom heard outside the Muslim world. But things are changing now and Basu is showing how the Muslims are getting trapped in a vicious circle of ‘Islamophobia’ and Muslim fundamentalism, which, often, is contributing to the growth of terrorism.
Male Prostitution

Male prostitution has its own history, though it has not been sanctified by documented historical canon. It is through various ancient texts that we find references to such institutions. In ancient Greece and Rome, it was a common practice, though, it was strictly homosexual in nature. Sexual services were provided by foreigners and slaves to people of fame and social repute to obtain special favours in academics, social prestige and the like. Later on, the institution became mercenary and was practised without any legal restrictions.

The western word for male prostitution comes from the Greek word *porneia*; which originally was the precise term for a kind of attitude to all sexual behaviours which the Greeks disapproved of and even to any non-sexual behaviour which for any reason was unwelcome to them. The etymology itself shows that it was not looked upon as something respectable. On the contrary, it bore the marks of disrepute and was considered a social taboo. In this context, it becomes almost necessary to quote from the work of Ronit D. Leichtentritt and Bilha Davidson to show the nature of marginalisation of the male prostitutes:

Despite their visibility on the streets, young men engaged in prostitution live marginalised lives on the fringes of society. They are rarely recognised as individuals with life histories or worthwhile current life experiences. (484)

But such hatred hardly had any effect on the trade and it continues, however, more furtively now, than it was before. In fact, it is now a rapidly growing trade, no matter how scornfully criticised and loathed at by the moral prudes of the society, and no matter how shady such professions are considered, gigolos do exist and will continue to exist. Maybe in course of time they will no longer be condemned as social diseases or outcasts, and will be granted a considerable amount of respect as is deserved by a human. Mack Friedman in his *Male Sex Work from Ancient Times to the Near Present*, sounds hopeful in this regard:
If we see the gay civil rights movement as an exemplar, maybe societies will come to a place where they accept sex work – even male sex work – as a protected, harmless, consensual act that is, for whatever reasons, a necessary human right. (30)

In India, the common sex-providers apart from women are the transgender. Male prostitution seems to be something of a new concept to most of the Indians. Yet field studies have shown that it has been growing steadily and widely with many jobless men choosing it as their profession at their own volition. Even men with a steady source of income often trundle onto these paths in order to gain some extra money. Though it is a bludgeoning trade, the documents registering this institution of male prostitution are scarce and scanty. Certain articles based only on field studies have provided whatever little knowledge we have of this institution.

Often recognised as threats to community health, sex workers undergo severe transformations as they enter this profession, the most important one being a decrease in their self-esteem with the decline of their values and a gradual loss of sexual interest and a lack of meaningful interpersonal relationships. These are a few of the transformations that a male sex provider undergoes. Ronit D. Leichtentritt and Bilha Davidson Arad in their case study (which is based on field work and is called Young Male Street Workers: Life Histories and Current Experiences) aimed to reveal the experiences of young male sex providers in Israel, providing a platform for the voice of this marginal section to be heard, and made almost an exhaustive case study of 9 such sex workers who related and shared the various experiences they had to undergo in the profession, of which a few have already been mentioned above. In this connection, it is, however, pertinent to share the information that Kunal Basu’s Kalkatta too is based strictly and absolutely on his personal field experiences, his personal interactions, as he wandered the streets of central Kolkata in search of his tale. In an electronic correspondence with the present researcher Basu has said, “I hadn’t consult
published source material while researching for *Kalkatta*. Rather, interviews and visits to several locations.” Thus, it can be safely claimed that Basu’s novel can also be treated as a case study sensitizing the readers of a subjugated reality. The novel itself can be reckoned as case study registering the life and experiences of a gigolo, Jamshed Alam.

Jami’s experiences as a gigolo were varied and many. Champaka, the premises of his new workplace, was way more exotic and comely as compared to Galaxy, with scented candles and balmy oils that exhumed a sense of release and relaxation, an ambience quite in contradistinction to his former workplace. Jami could not trace or map his way back to the first time ‘it’ happened, the first time he chose to be a dissident to the norms and ethics he was to follow as a social being, as a Muslim. He had become a gigolo and had started liking it. There were no compulsions or whittling, nor was there any such dire impoverishment that the Alam family suffered. They needed money, and his work at Galaxy as a subagent would have sufficed. Yet, he chose this particular means of earning money, propitiating both his pecuniary as well as priapic needs.

He was given the necessary training that was required to make him excel at his work – he was taught the diaphanous distinction between a ‘party’ and a ‘customer,’ the hygiene and appearance he was to maintain in order to become irresistible to his parties, the unctuous greasy ever obliging demeanour he was to own, in order to become proficient in this job. And soon quite smoothly Jami acclimatised into the trade and became a pro. There were occasions where he was to enact, be a lover or a husband to his customers. There were some who became considerably possessive of him and he was to give them the emotional sustenance they craved for along with their bodily desires. And then there were occasions when he himself fell in love or was almost at the very brink of it. As Rani pertly puts it, “Love is the most common disease in this line, not STD”(136). The encounter with Susan Hill landed Jami in such an indefatigable emotional turbulence. He fell in love with her, and was almost ready
to concur to her appeals to go around the world as her companion. But Calcutta wouldn’t allow him such indulgence. He was to remain a gigolo incarcerated within the bounds of desire to become a true kalkattawallah.

Rani too had a story to tell and a tragic one to that. Her story brings the plight of the female sex workers of Calcutta to the fore. Apart from her contentious position in the society, her life had been a cruel repetition of pain and pallor, which she tried to hide under the veil of conviviality that so becomes her. Born a hermaphrodite she was reared up by her brave mother as a girl, and grew up to become very handsome in her appearance. She fell in love with her private tutor Rabi who reciprocated her feelings and they fled to Puri and got married in some temple. Rabi’s implacable family would not acquiesce to such a shameful decision and they added amply to the misery and predicament of both Rabi and Rani, and finally Rabi gave in, and committed suicide. His family took away his body and didn’t allow Rani even to participate in her husband’s final rites. Such events had excoriated all finer feelings in her. Addicted to action films, Rani had learned how to survive. And yet totally aware of her reviled status, she too had simple desires to which she averred occasionally:

“I wish I could work in an office, just like them,” she spoke under her breath.

“Spend all day marking files, reading newspapers, drinking tea and cracking jokes, fighting with my boss, buying vegetables and a little fish on my way home and scolding my son for failing to pass his tests. Even smell as sweaty as them.” She looked at me from the corner of her eyes. “Don’t you wish the same?” (127)

Such accounts show the pallor and the pain beneath the make-up and glamour of the sex-workers. India especially is infested with transgender sex providers who are more than often treated as vermin and a disease, a carbuncle on the face of the society. They are looked down upon as lepers and are often subjected to unhealthy aggressive sexual advances, as if, they are
always ‘available’ and as if their personal consent does not matter. They are treated not as human but as commodities and such treatment is more than often brutal and ugly.

Owing to his father’s ailing health which required immediate medical attention, Jami was in desperate need of earning more money. Rani once again came to his rescue playing the impresario in order to earn that extra cash he was in desperate need at that time. She sent him to a ‘dangerous party,’ one who would pay him double the amount his best party could have given. Of the congeries of experiences as a male prostitute, this one particularly stands out for its terrible bedevilling, beleaguering nature. A horribly twisted episode of lovemaking, a perversion of the most revolting and painful sort ensued and it left marks and scars on both Jami’s chest and soul. Jami was taken by surprise by the vehement insinuation of this customer who lighted up a cigarette and asked if he would like to earn an extra 2000 in seconds, and then stubbed the lighted cigarette on his chest.

Such episodes clearly show the horrible face of this profession. It will be a mistake to consider that the profession of a gigolo is devoid of challenges or pain. It will be wrong to assume that such a profession give both money and sexual gratification to the sex providers and therefore is both a comfortable and pleasant profession for those who choose it. The way they are treated as ‘objects,’ which have been bought and hence the buyer is at liberty to exercise their wiles upon their bought wares, is both shameful and devastating. The trauma that such episodes, and many more such distorted other episodes, inflict on the body and the psyche of the sex providers is beyond conception. The way people like Rani and Jami are cauterised and singled under the vile intentions and perversions of this society and suffer from a perennial sense of insecurity is redolent of the dent this society has unabashedly made on their mind putting a hole into their soul.
Basu, in course of his narrative, shows the tumescent, dark, filth afflicted herd of male prostitutes hiding in the dark comforts of the nights of Calcutta, and the way their business was raving and raging – the friction that dwelt between the packs. And suddenly Jami was no longer one of them but a bystander, judging them and being hunted by them. Basu seems to introduce some kind of psychobabble by enunciating some such episodes. Sex workers like Jami are being constantly preyed upon, sought and yet not accepted. The night helps them to hide, and the night helps them to be hunted. It is a vicious circle in which they are perennially entrapped.

Jami comes to realise that he had committed an outrage of a sin by choosing the profession of a gigolo by defying the edicts of his religion. This is a perfidy that cannot be absolved; for the lure of money and comfort he has committed a great sacrilege and it all has only added to his problems and confusions. He was just trying to fit into Calcutta, but Calcutta has played with him most foully; in an offish way it has rendered him with no other choice than to mongrelise only as a Calcutta gigolo.

IV

The irrevocable displacement in various forms, be it cultural, structural, topographical or ethnographic, has led to an enormous deliquescence of Muslim identity. The face of this displacement has undergone reifications severally. It has become a strategic instrument in the hands of the state power. Maintaining this identity crisis in itself can be considered as conferring an identity of marginality and identity-less-ness to the marginalised people, and, thus, assumes political manifestations. Religion too is enmeshed with politics. Integration in this regard is not possible for the state does not allow it. The state maintains its power by eliminating and incorporating the ‘other’: in the case of a Muslim refugee, it is being
explained by way of subjugation, subordination and marginalisation. Of the many sensitive issues dealt with in the novel, Basu has conspicuously addressed the marginalisation of the Muslims. This particular aspect has not been dealt with by any other Indian writer of English in this way before and hence can be considered as a significant contribution of Basu in understanding the genomics of the issue.

Marginalisation of the Muslims like Jami problematizes the Kalkatta-Calcutta dialectics, which is the very staple of the novel, if seen closely. Jami’s Kalkatta is the ‘other’ of Calcutta. In the novel, a constant process of revival and reorientation goes on, Kalkatta is constantly being reoriented by Calcutta, and in the process the centre gets disoriented. It is not Jamshed Alam who alone is getting marginalised, but Kalkatta itself is marginalised by the demographic hegemony of the centre, i.e., Calcutta – this is how an immense cultural, social, political hiatus is created. The process of giving shelter to the refugees is also a means of ‘othering,’ exacting gratitude for the favour and depriving these ‘others’ the benefits of the citizen. Othering is thus essential for the state/polis to surreptitiously consolidate its homogenous ethno-cultural identity and yet sustain an appearance of cosmopolitanism. Such cultural subjection is of great detriment to a pleasant cultural assimilation. That such deliberate subjection is actively functional and operational in the modus operandi of the state /Polis is a matter of concern and demands a closer inspection and attention. Basu, by way of his novel, has quite successfully addressed this issue.

In depicting the marginalization of the Muslims in Calcutta, Basu has also skilfully touches upon the impact of ‘Islamophobia’ in a country like India. The global increase in the hatred for the Muslims after 9/11, on the one hand, has given birth to an attitude that divides the Muslims as ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ and, on the other, has created some space for the fundamentalist forces to consolidate the Muslims globally against anything that they consider ‘anti-Islam.’ The world, in recent years, has really seen the birth and growth of different
Islamic organizations that promote the practice of Islam within its rigid confines. Unreasoned hatred for the Muslims is also contributing to the proliferation of such organizations. How such organizations are gradually spreading their activities in a city like Calcutta is clearly shown by Basu in *Kalkatta*. He further depicts how uneducated Muslim youth, in particular, are often getting trapped in a vicious circle of hatred and blind faith.

The novel also meticulously deals with the issue of male prostitution: through such a representation, Basu exposes the underbelly of Calcutta. Basu shows that in Calcutta, male prostitutes often take cover under euphemisms like ‘maalish-wallah,’ people providing massage services in beauty parlours. They do not fall under the threat of legal issues for there is no law against male prostitution. There seems to be no dearth of the species, provided one has the ready cash to afford such services to satisfy one’s priapic needs. Basu, however, has thrown enough light on the marginalisation of the male prostitutes in Indian society. The word ‘prostitution’ itself is associated with our notion of something vile, corrupt, intemperate and cruddy, and something women are engaged with. The male prostitute, thus, seems to be a new species, while it is absolutely not so. Male prostitution, indeed, has been insulated in wraps of ignominy and debauchery, safe in the closet, though it is just as old as women partaking in such a profession. There is absolutely no doubt regarding the way prostitution is till date considered as a social stigma, an anathema that defiles the purity and the sanctity of the egotistical morally surcharged sections of the society. This, thus, calls for further displacement of the prostitutes. In the novel, prostitution as well as his gender identity as a prostitute make Jami doubly displaced. Jami, in fact, suffers from a three-fold identity crisis. He is a refugee; hence, the crisis of a national identity. He is a Muslim in India and hence the crisis regarding a continuous othering. His identity of a male prostitute again robs him of a proper professional identity. The moment Jamshed discovers love within himself, realizes his love for Pablo, he discovers his human identity. That very moment is his moment of
rehabilitation. With Pablo he ceases to be a refugee or a Bangladesh born non-Bangladeshi, or a Muslim or whatever he is. He becomes Jamshed of Pablo, the perfect *kalkattawallah*, Calcutta being the city of Love.

Basu’s deliberate use of the free indirect discourse sculpts out a more agreeable shape for the Muslims of today’s world. It serves both the purpose of hiding and revealing. Jami voices a *pucca* muted subaltern, one whose nebulous identity evaporates into thin air, the true non-entity, the caste of outcasts. His is the Muslim voice, and yet through him the other characters (including the non-Muslims) too jump up to life. The use of the first person narrative can also be reckoned as a device that suggests the uncertainty principle – how we look at things effects what we believe we see: we are, in fact, steered to look at things in a way to believe it the way the power principle wants us to believe. The voice is no doubt Jamshed Alam’s, but the language he speaks of is Kunal Basu’s. Readers often start wondering whether the views of Jami are the views of Basu as well. For instance, physical desire is something secular and is common to all communities. Why does then Jami, a Mussalman male prostitute, restrict his clientele to the Hindu community only? The narration of his sexual escapades includes the names of Hindu women and a few foreign ladies only. Does this imply that Muslim women are ethically and morally superior to those of the Hindus? Or that they do not have sexual urges? Or is there a hidden agenda to deliberately hurt the Hindu sentiments? The fourth possibility is that Jamshed Alam is an unreliable narrator; the fact that he himself is a Muslim makes him deliberately conceal the trysts that he had with Muslim women in order to lend them the virtue of being morally superior to Hindus or being ethically infallible. The depiction of Miriam, Jami’s sister, as an astute religious girl with a sound and responsible sense towards her religion, morals and ethics, further strengthens this doubt. But then again, whose agenda are these? Jami’s or Basu’s? The answer to each would yield two absolutely contradictory arguments. Like Janus’s head, the
novel forks out into two dimensions – pro-Hindu and pro-Muslim, or into both. There, indeed, seems to be an unusual complicity between the narrator and the author.

Such a complicity, however, does not undermine the marginalisation of the Muslim refugees in Calcutta. Basu, by way of Jamshed Alam and his family, represents the past in the present. He shows that even in 2011, the wounds and stench of the political decision made in 1947, have not healed. He further shows how such a memory infested with horror and anger was so deep-rooted that the brunt of its effect was still to be carried out by the new species that was the product of such a socio-politico-economical divide, the refugee. The Imperialist Machiavellian strategy of divide and rule has survived till date and the malice has only grown in its potency. Kalkatta shows how such political negotiations brought forth a rift between two religions, a divide between human feelings. And Jami’s profession as a male prostitute serves as an apt metaphor for a refugee, one who is kept but never accepted.
Note

1. Mamdani writes:

   According to some, our [Muslim] culture seems to have no history, no politics
   and no debates, so that all Muslims are just plain bad. According to others,
   there is a history, a politics, even debates, and there are good Muslims and bad
   Muslims. In both versions, history seems to have petrified into a lifeless
   custom of an antique people who inhabit antique lands. (3)
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Conclusion

In an interview with the present researcher, conversing about his own fiction in particular and Indian English fiction in general, Basu has said:

In contemporary fiction, there’s a huge premium on reality, like in constituency fictions—Parsees writing about Parsee life in Bombay, Gays writing about gays—nothing is wrong with that, nothing is wrong with any kind of fiction. But as if literature was a handmaiden to social commentary. I think the role of the fiction writer is to be a diligent student of social theory, various aspects of social history, anthropology, political science, economics and somehow distil all of that, and fictionalize. I believe that great works of fiction have grown out of tremendous feats of imagination. And in order to imagine something, you need some props. (Personal interview).

In fact, history and historical novel are forms of narratives and the act of narration is more counter intuitive than it apparently seems. The narrator or the storyteller (the former as in history and the latter as in novels) performs the role of a passeur, a ferryman, one who carries experiences from one place to another. And in this process, a sense of subversion intervenes, as there is often a forced migration of facts. From its moment of inception to its deliverance, a narrative undergoes a kind of translation. Any form of representation or narrative can therefore be safely called a translation. And if there be a law of ‘reperesentability’ that governs all narratives, then one can go to the extent of saying that it is often the individual event that decides how it wants to be represented. The event itself becomes the subject while the representor becomes the object. In Basu’s novels, we find a routine regular recurrence of anti-marginalization and anti-repression of historical truth. It is this law of representability that governs the representation of historical events in Basu.
Basu’s treatment of history, in fact, brings out two interesting facts. First, in most of his novels Basu has worked through a binary, the binary of the colonizer-colonized, ruler-ruled, white-black. Second, Basu seems to have a desire to challenge and sometimes even subvert the accepted ‘official’ history of a period or an incident. Precisely, for this reason, he seems to operate through binaries: it provides him the scope to take sides, mostly quite unconsciously and at times involuntarily. Sometimes he takes sides with Hiran, sometimes with Bihzad and sometimes not with a character but with an attitude that questions the meaningless debates and experiments that went on throughout the Victorian period in the name of science. It will be, however, unwise to think that he consciously uses history for the purpose of subverting it; he tells a story and in the process history gets subverted. This intention of subverting history is however, surprisingly, absent in The Yellow Emperor’s Cure. This novel, rather, attests to the facts recorded in the metanarrative of the Boxer rebellion in China. He has not taken side with the rebels, but has shown the causes and effects of such a rebellion at length. This could be taken as his comment on the metanarrative of the past.

A study of the past is like a conversation with the archives. Basu time travels into the past but in the process he is carrying with him the socio-political and economic construct or frame of mind of the present, his present self. There is a negotiation that matures out of this kind of a time travel, wherein the voiceless victims of the past, who have been refused the sanction to be chronicled, are sought and identified with. In the process, the unhistoricised past comes alive and is gravid with a prognostic commentary for the future. Ashis Nandy in his Time Warps has addressed the issue by using a clinical metaphor, which aptly drives the point home successfully:

For one interested in cultural and political psychology, the past is not only the objective history of a person or a group but a record of marks left in the form of
memories, experiences, scars and adaptive resources within personalities. In a clinical case-history, reconfigured memories are the stuff of contemporary subjectivity, and a theory of the past is actually a prognosis of the future; the patient’s self mediates between the past and the future and pilots the time travel between the two. Diagnosis, thus, becomes an attempt to read the past as an essay on human prospects, and health as the ability to live with one’s constructions of the past and deploy them creatively. (1)

Referring to Walter Benjamin’s concept of ‘after-life’ of all discourses or narratives, one may safely say that the very phrase ‘after-life’ is suggestive of the fact that it has/ had a life, that is, it is like any other thing that has a life, a living. And like any other living object, it grows, matures, withers and fades out. History is one such mnemonic narrative, and when it is represented, it undergoes a transformation, maturing, growing, withering, and at times fading out.

Within the scope of time travel, again, when the memory of a past culture is written for the present one, it requires a kind of translation, for there has intruded within the scope of time a transformation of culture, perceptions, ideas, knowledge etc. In order to define this present transformed state, it, therefore, becomes incumbent for one to delve into the past and seek metaphors from there though in a culturally and psychologically distinctive way. To quote Nandy again:

But a large part of the world continues to use its unhistoricised pasts as life-defining. Even among those who are seemingly immersed in contemporary ideologies and fully share contemporary historical sensitivities, there is often the awareness of another world of knowledge that refuses to die—comprising non-conventional systems of healing, non-formal modes of education, deviant theories of ethnic or
communal violence or amity, and so on. Many who live with these alternatives are in 
constant dialogue with their pasts, not defensively, but as a way of accessing their 
own tacit knowledge. They believe that the pathway to the future maybe through 
aspects of our pasts that survive as our undersocialised or less-colonised selves. The 
best studies of the future are also often the studies of the past. (2)

As cognition is also a form of narrativization, the present transacting with the past 
immediately recognises certain gaps and fissures in the putative conception of the 
unhistoricised past. This consciously/ unconsciously generates a desire, an impulse to bridge 
and fill up those gaps and fissures, which are then directly configured by the experiences of 
the present. This entire enterprise involves the very politics of self-awareness. As Nandy 
pertly observes:

…an ability to play with the past is necessary counterpoint to the dredging of the 
past that has become a standard marker of official enquiry commissions all over the 
world. It is not perhaps a terrible liability that, in South Asia, though the future may 
not always look open, the past rarely looks closed. I believe that social and political 
creativity requires this capacity for play. As the intellectually accessible universe 
expands, and as we confront disowned cultures and states of consciousness about 
which the presently dominant middle-class culture of knowledge knows nothing, we 
need more than ever our capacity to recognise the alternative realities that we are 
daily coerced to bury. (4)

The fallacy of the putative factual history which is, again, a subjective culture construct of a 
particular time is thus challenged and a fuller and more inclusive history that addresses the 
premises of the present is recreated. In most of his novels, it is this ability to play with the 
past and the present that Basu indulges in giving us a more comprehensive socio-cultural
understanding of our present times. History is being compensated with the ‘unhistoricised’
details and thus obtains a fuller and bigger picture. History itself is a compact of diluted facts
generated by the socio-temporal conditions and a creative intervention. Inchoation of certain
facts and ideas of the present only compliments it further, augmenting and enriching it, and
opening doors for further investigations. Thus, Basu’s becomes a constructive representation
of history, endowing it with a broader scope for inspection and understanding, in Benjamin’s
words, “Blast(ing) open the continuum in history” (262).

Narrativisation of historical incidents and characters can be interpreted as a concerted
attempt at relocating the past to replace the historical time with ‘spectral’ time. The
spectrality of literary narratives derives from the deconstruction it performs on the conflation
of the real and the present. The scope of the ‘real’ is broadened to include the past as well as
the future. In the essay, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living among Specters,” Georgio
Agamben raises the very fundamental question about the concept of the spectre, and, by the
way, even provides the answer to it:

What is a specter made of? Of signs, or more precisely of signatures, that is to say,
those signs ciphers or monograms that are etched on to things by time. A specter
always carries with it a date wherever it goes; it is in other words, an intimately
historical entity. (487)

In spectrality, the real and the existent cannot be conflated, they are mutually exclusive. The
dead and the generation to come do not exist in a sense, but, in some other sense, they do.
They comprise the complex phenomenon of the absent-presence. This undecidability of the
presence and the nature of spectral interventions are addressed by the assumption of certain
literary stances. The voices suppressed by the historical grand narratives are given new lease
of life or ‘after life’ by the literary author. They are like spectral traces of historical
experiences that keep surfacing, despite the efforts made by the powers-that-be to erase them out of the continuum of history. So, the occasional disruption of that continuum is found mostly in literature where the writer is armed with poetic licence to use supplementarity as a kind of dismantling tool. The undecidability of the spectral interventions works as a tool of deconstruction with the help of which the writer of fiction challenges the metaphysics of presence inherent within the history written by and for the powerful and the mighty. Spectrality, then, works as a subversive tool for problematizing the idea of history as truth.

Basu’s representation of history, in some of his novels, shows his engagement with spectrality. In *The Miniaturist*, for instance, both the characters, Akbar and Bihzad, are from the Mughal period. Akbar has been recorded in history and thus apparently may be considered as real, while Bihzad has been deprived that sanction of being documented, and yet he survives as real. Bihzad and his story may indeed be considered as the spectre, embodying the signs, the ciphers, the monograms that address the spatiotemporal context, the paradigm of the artist, patron relationship and the freedom of the artist, manifestly by his complex position of the absent-presence in history. This complex phenomenon of the absent-presence is what Basu has very strategically construed in his novels. It does not finally cancel historicity in any way but is a way of thinking of another historicity, not a new history, but another opening of event-ness as historicity.

In each of Basu’s novels except *The Yellow Emperor’s Cure*, again, the central characters are marginalized and all in different ways. But it is the marginal character that takes the central or pivotal role in his novels. Therefore, there is an interesting reverting of the concept of marginalization—it could be seen as a retort, a resistance to the very practice of constructing the suppressed. These characters are ‘othered’ or ‘marginalised.’ The whole practice thus becomes an anachronistic interpretation—mainstream, monolithic, ideology-driven history tries to suppress the powerless and all those dark shady areas that would create
problems, if revealed. They are not only suppressed but also ‘othered.’ This is where, as argued already, the New Historicists operate.

We know by now that New Historicism can be, in a way, defined as an epistemological relation between history and literature—it is like Janus’s face—one looks at the present, the other at the past and both look at the relation between fact and fiction. Basu as a writer of fiction is full of the conviction that by way of his fiction he would be able to bring to the notice of the present, a certain suppressed history or past. In his novels, Basu is not one of his characters; the narrator, in fact, is not part of the narration, but a figure from the present. He is an objective historian. His stance is not singularly of a fiction writer, but also of a historian. He is taking the pains to bring the margin into focus, and this can be reckoned as his New Historicist project in the domain of novel-writing, because he is using fiction in order to study the past and tries to situate and locate the idea of the marginalised in the scheme of things. Basu seems to be trying to analyse the context and the ideological factors responsible for marginalisation. This also explains his objectivity. His practice involves writing fiction as valid historical documents, investigating how the past is made to coexist with the present and how the seeds of the future are sown in the past as well.

Since Basu is an Indian diasporic writer of English fiction, his representation of history demands an analysis from some other perspectives as well. In the Postliberalisation and Post-Rushdie Indian writings in English, a tendency of exoticising the ‘otherness’ of the ‘Orient’ is clearly discernible. This particular phenomenon or, to use a better word, ‘trope,’ has a particular and very specific structure which has been consciously/unconsciously imbibed and inculcated by the authors known as ‘Midnight’s grandchildren.’ They seem to be guided by a desire to market this ‘otherness’ that they are brandished with, and this they do to their advantage, almost as a ‘strategic essentialism,’ to use Gayatri Spivak’s words. They are goaded by a desire to get recognition and fame in the global literary market and thus they
need to ‘produce’ that which this market ‘demands’ or will ‘consume.’ Since India as the ‘other’ or the ‘Orient’ sells in the market,¹ most of these writers have represented India using the tropes of Orientalism. Such representations, of course, have been identified by the critics as attempts at re-Orientalism. While defining the term ‘re-Orientalism’, Lisa Lau writes:

... ‘Orientals’ are seen to be perpetrating Orientalisms no less than ‘non-Orientals’ and, moreover, perpetrating certain selected types of Orientalisms. Where Said’s Orientalism is grounded in how the West constructs the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident,’ re-Orientalism is based on how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalised East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether. (1)

Lau clearly suggests that these authors, who are acutely aware of their Oriental status, try to use the re-Orientalist tropes to their advantage, like increasing their readership and having recognition in the global literary market.

The rise of this kind of fiction has, indeed, contributed to the development of a critical theory, known as re-Orientalist theory. Writing on this critical school, Anis Shivani raises a fundamental question that leads us to the understanding of the working of this phenomenon in the present day literary world:

Re-Orientalism theory investigates the process and workings of re-Orientalism in order to begin to address why it occurs: for instance, may Orientals, perceiving that there is a demand for low quality, exotically flavoured fare, deliberately pander to this demand and voluntarily self-Other so as to provide an unsustaining diet which will leave the consumer ever hungry, ever insatiate? (3)
As there is an intersection of culture, an obscurity (due to the disparity between the two cultures), which is often romanticised as exoticism, is generated and therefore the re-Orientalists are required to act as translators translating one culture to/for the other. But even in this communication/translation a specific intentional gap or separation needs to be retained, for it is this ‘separation,’ this ‘otherness’ of culture which lends the romance and the desired mystical exoticism to the Orient. So, a conscious, deliberate self-othering is always operational. The tropes of Orientalism, thus, are being regenerated with a specific and deliberate intent.

This mechanism triggers a necessity to represent India (the Orient) or Indian-ness in its authentic best for such representation of the Orient has already claimed a stable and safe market. But in delineating this ‘specific authentic,’ the creativity of the author is often limited and compromised. As Lisa Lau in her article “Re-Orientalism in Contemporary Indian Writing” in English points out:

It is becoming more and more rampant that IWE (Indian Writing in English) is celebrated for how true a story it can tell, rather than the quality of the story it is telling. The demands for authenticity are limiting and damaging, both to authors as artists and to the writings they produce. It limits what will be well received, and therefore what will be selected and published, and in turn, what will be made an authorial concern in this circuit of production in the literary world. (23)

To further the argument one may refer to Angshuman Kar’s article, “Commodification of Post-Rushdie Indian Novels in English: Kunal Basu and the Politics of Decanonization,” where Kar pertinently addresses the issue of the production and consumption of Post-Rushdie Indian English novels.
Kar’s essay shows how marketing denominations and economic factors are instrumental and functional in producing a particular kind of writing in the domain of Postliberalisation Indian English fiction. Correcting Mee’s thesis that India sells in the market, Kar argues that India of a particular kind sells in the literary market:

…only India of a particular kind sells in the literary market. A purely historical novel about India’s past, even if it exploits India’s exotica to the extreme, does not seem to have good prospects. Recent past of India sells; remote past sells too, if used to make sense of the present. The fact that the success of The Shadow Lines is relatively greater than that of any one of the other novels by Ghosh not only attests to this fact but also shows that even the non-Indian readers of Indian English fiction love to see India represented in specific ways. (13)

It is within this frame of the literary market where a set design of India or Indian-ness and the gaze of an NRI sell, Kar situates Basu who refuses to adapt himself to such trends. This in itself can be considered as one of the most cogent reasons behind the relatively low reception of Basu. Basu’s erudite and quintessentially elitist upbringing and academic career obviously indicate the fact that he is a novelist ‘in the know.’ He is fully alive to the events and experiences of India’s recent past, and such knowledge, in the form of novels, has a ready market. But to his credit, Kar argues, Basu refuses to tread the beaten track in the lure of recognition and pecuniary concerns. Instead, he chooses strange romantic realms in sculpting his story and punctuates it with history, a beautiful alchemy of fact and fancy. Kar registers the polychrome of subjects that Basu addresses in his novels:

The Opium Clerk, for instance, explores the dynamics of the nineteenth-century opium trade and the India that we see in the novel is the India of a remote past seen through Hiran, the protagonist of the tale. Basu’s second novel, The Miniaturist,
narrates the story of a miniaturist, Bihjad, the son of the chief artist of Akbar. Set in sixteenth-century India, the story documents, on the one hand, the great Mughal culture and art and, on the other, records the crisis of an artist confronting a bitter reality. Basu’s third novel, *Racists*, in no way is related to India. This is, perhaps, the first Victorian novel written by a contemporary Indian English writer that addresses the great nineteenth-century debate on race. (15)

Kar’s article is a refreshing investigation into the inner genomics and dynamics of global literary commodification and by way he has very meticulously situated Basu out of this terra firma. In fact, even when Basu is using the ‘Orient,’ he is using it in such a way that situates his novels outside the typical tropes of re-Orientalism. Details about Oriental art and history are indeed so woven in the story that they become integral parts of the tale and never seem to be imposed. It is clear that Basu is using the Oriental history not simply to produce an ‘authentic’ image of the Orient: he has a specific purpose of re-writing that history as a form of subversive narrative.

In this context, however, it is relevant to mention that Basu’s latest novel *Kalkatta* explores and represents the nooks and crannies of a shady contemporary Calcutta. In this novel, he touches upon the exploitation, the filth, the coves of destitute and the venality of the rich—things that make Calcutta the veritable ‘other.’ This is, indeed, an image of Calcutta that sells in the literary market. Of late, Basu has also started writing in Bengali and the theme of his first Bengali novel, *Rabi-Shankar* (2016), is the Naxal movement of Bengal. So, it seems that Basu too has started responding to the demands of the market by making the recent history of India the subject of his fiction. However, any hasty deduction, in this regard, may be unjust, since he is a prolific writer and is very much in the trade: he will definitely write more. So, no conclusive statement should be made on the basis of a couple of
aberrations. Basu’s next enterprise might, indeed, surprise us in ways beyond our
imagination.
1. This is what John Mee has written on this issue: “Many of the novelists seem to regard India’s wealth of literary and mythical tradition as freely available to rewrite in the present. A different perspective might construe this trend as the self-serving attempt by section of the elite to represent their own modernity in terms of continuity with India’s past, papering over the cracks in the national imaginary, as it were, to affirm their own authenticity. Similarly the celebration of plurality and openness could be understood as doing the ideological work of economic liberalization, presenting Indian identity in terms of the shifting surfaces of late capitalism, privileging mobility and cosmopolitanism over local cultures and communities […]. It is also true that the marketers of the Indian novel in English have also shown great canniness. There has developed over the past few years, a sense that India sells abroad” (335).
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