Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Impact Factor 6.8992 (ICI) http://www.rjelal.com;
Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com; ISSN:2395-2636 (P); 2321-3108(O)

Vol.13.Issue 3. 2025 (July-Sept.)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

Kunal Basu's *Kalkatta* and the Post-Partition Complexities of Identity, Belonging, and Marginalization

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DOI: 10.33329/rjelal.13.3.97


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Article info
Article Received: 15/06/2025
Article Accepted: 22/07/2025
Published online: 29/07/2025

Abstract

Kunal Basu's novel *Kalkatta* (2015) vividly portrays the turbulent aftermath of the Partition through the life of Jamshed Alam, a Bihari Muslim smuggled from Bangladesh into the marginalized Zakaria Street in Kolkata. This paper explores post-Partition complexities by highlighting the socio-economic and ethnic marginalization of non-Bengali refugees, revealing their struggles with identity, exclusion, and survival amid urban poverty and illegal livelihoods. Through Jami's journey—from a displaced refugee to a shadowy gigolo entwined with diverse city strata—Basu captures the fractured identities and harsh realities spawned by Partition-induced migration, ethnic tension, and class disparity in the urban fabric of Kolkata.

Key Words: identity, marginalisation, partition, history, postmodern.

Introduction

Kalkatta, published in 2015 by Kunal Basu, stands as a significant contemporary Indian novel that probes the labyrinthine intersections of history, migration, and urban transformation. Centered on the life of Jamshed Alam (Jami), a Bihari Muslim refugee who grows up in Kolkata after being smuggled from Bangladesh, the novel becomes a lens through which the long, unfinished business of Partition, urban exclusion, and the desire for belonging are examined. Through narrative strategies closely aligned with the subaltern studies tradition and intersectional analysis, Basu's novel not only represents the struggles of marginalized figures but also critiques the larger structures of power and memory that shape Kolkata's post-Partition existence.

Post-Partition Kolkata: The Historical Context

To understand *Kalkatta*, one must begin with the wrenching historical events of the Partition of India in 1947 and the creation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The arbitrariness of borders recast millions—Bihari Muslims among them—as stateless, rootless refugees. Kolkata,

long renowned for its cosmopolitanism, received successive waves of migrants. For the refugees, the city was both a land of possibility and a theater of constant negotiation with exclusion and suspicion. Basu's novel foregrounds this emergence of marginal populations and the ongoing struggle for survival, acceptance, and dignity in a city fissured by ethnic, religious, and class divides.

The protagonist, Jamshed Alam—nicknamed Jami—grows up in Zakaria Street, a district that Basu renders as the pulsing heart of the city's non-Bengali, migrant minority. His family's hopes are modest: to assimilate, to become"pukka Kalkatta-wallahs," genuine members of the city's fabric. Yet the reality is endlessly complex. Jami's descent—from a promising schoolchild to passport forger's assistant, to a gigolo offering illicit services to the city's elite—maps onto a broader story of alienation and continuous border crossing, literal and metaphorical.

Jami's personal journey is marked by estrangement—his ambiguous ties to his family, his awkward relationship with Kolkata's intellectual Bengali core, and his ambiguous client relationships. Redemption, if it comes at all, is contained in his love for Pablo, a terminally ill child, and Pablo's mother, Mandira.

Partition and the Making of Marginality

Basu's narrative forcefully illustrates the double exile experienced by Partition's victims. For Jami's family, the move from Bangladesh to Kolkata is not the end, but the continuation of statelessness: "The victim of Indian partition of the past, with the emergence of borders". The trauma is both historical and ongoing. Ammi, Jami's mother, is the keeper of the family's memory—a living archive constantly reminding her children why and how their suffering began. This framing echoes Gayatri Spivak's assertion that Partition for many has resulted in a "subaltern" existence, wherein voices are persistently marginalized within dominant historical narratives. The ambiguous location of Zakaria Street—"perhaps a Baghdad or a Cairo, smelling of attar and slaughtered animals. Under a sky dotted with colourful kites… frequent call of Azan and temple bells"—serves as a metaphor for 'in-betweenness', a setting neither fully embraced nor truly invisible. The constant negotiation and evasion required for survival in this "alien planet" underpin the psychological liminality of partition survivors, caught between multiple histories and no legitimate present. Basu taps into the idea of "residual culture"—practices and memories that persist, quietly shaping life beneath the surface of city modernity. Jami's family, alongside countless other migrants, cultivates traditions and narratives that defy assimilation, even as they remain geographically and socially peripheral. 'Kolkata', as imagined by Basu, is not the genteel city of Tagorean nostalgia, nor the creative utopia of Satyajit Ray's films. It is a city where "more than half the population is non-Bengali" and where "cultural ascendance by Bengalis perpetuates a hierarchy in which non-Bengali, Muslim, and 'outsider' communities are systematically marginalized". The idea of the "pukka Kalkatta-wallah" becomes a satirical touchstone—one never attainable for people like Jami. Jami's friend, Anirban Mitra, lampoons the arrogance and delusions associated with being a true Kalkatta-wallah. His rules enumerate the shallow markers of belonging: self-reliance on rumors, shallow ambitions, and performative gestures. This is not an inclusive citizenship, but one contingent on exclusion and boundary-making. Basu's psychogeographical reading disrupts the myth of an integrated city by foregrounding the spatial marginality of places like Zakaria Street, which serves as a refuge for "those whose illegal presence would go unnoticed and unchallenged". The city within a city, brimming with languages, religions, and survival tactics, is not merely a backdrop, but a central mechanism for the continuation of division and exclusion.

Jami's experience with Kolkata's Bengali intellectuals—particularly within Mandira's poetry group—serves as a sharp indictment of theoretical abstraction devoid of lived experience. Here, the suffering of refugees and exiles becomes mere fodder for academic debate, "devoid of any real life experience". This distance further isolates the marginalized, whose problems remain unresolved and unrecognized by those with the power to effect change. Pressed to survive, Jami joins the city's thriving, if hidden, sex industry. His role as a gigolo is a nuanced exploration of how silenced identities—religious, ethnic, class—intersect with gender and sexual exploitation. This body economy, far from being unique, embodies the desperation and precarity thrust upon the urban poor, especially upon those excluded from legitimate avenues of work. While male sexuality is foregrounded in the text, Basu is careful to show the double burden faced by women migrants and minority populations. Jami's mother and sister, for instance, exist at the intersection of patriarchal authority and cultural deracination. Their stories, though less explicit in the novel's plot, echo the realities of millions who negotiate migration through family secrets, compromises, and silences. The job of a gigolo deepens Jami's sense of inauthenticity: he is neither Muslim enough for his family, nor Bengali enough for the city, nor a legitimate Kalkatta-wallah for the elite. Every persona adopted in his double life only underscores the impossibility of a coherent self. In this, Basu interrogates larger post-Partition narratives about "new beginnings"—showing instead the fragmentation and exhaustion of continually reinventing oneself for acceptance.

The central irony of Jami's journey is the perpetual "almostness" of belonging. Even at his most successful, he is "a stranger to himself," haunted by the impossibility of assimilation, and the inescapability of history. This anxiety is not merely personal but emblematic of a collective condition for refugees perennially locked out of the mainstream. Basu's Kolkata, with its overlapping micro-societies, is no utopia of diversity. Rather, it is a fragile arrangement in which tolerance sustains itself only so long as boundaries are respected and hierarchies upheld. Jami's fate—his repeated efforts and ultimate failures—speaks to the enduring violence of cosmopolitan mythologies, unable to overcome ingrained prejudices. Jami's fleeting romance with Mandira and his profound bond with Pablo offers a modicum of redemption, yet these too are shaded by the novel's pervasive melancholy. The very love that revitalizes Jami also threatens the fragile stability of his world. His story raises the question: Can individuals truly find home in cities built on the ruins of Partition? *Kalkatta* is notable for its narrative strategy: it privileges the viewpoint of those traditionally rendered invisible. Through Jami's eyes, Basu reroutes the reader's attention from the city's well-known landmarks and stories to its "planets"—parallel worlds rarely intersecting, filled with their own codes, dangers, and rhythms. The vividness of Basu's style—sometimes raw, even bawdy—serves to force readers into uncomfortable intimacy with stories often suppressed. While unflinching, *Kalkatta* resists nihilism. Basu treats his characters with compassion, even as he exposes the systems—bureaucratic, patriarchal, and economic—that hem them in. Critics note the novel's unsentimental tone, arguing that Basu's realism often renders characters like Jami more archetypal than individuated. Yet it is precisely this tension between the individual and the collective that gives the novel its force: Jami becomes the everyman of a city where everyone is, in some sense, an outsider.

Basu's treatment of place is distinctive. Zakaria Street, for instance, with its "goat blood and vultures" and its chaos of languages, becomes both a literal and figurative borderland. Its depiction disrupts the sanitized myth of Kolkata as a space of creative elite and reveals the city's deeper, less acknowledged histories. *Kalkatta* is urgently relevant in a world where migration—forced or economic—exceeds

the ready solutions of states and cities. The experience of being perpetually liminal, of having to hide in plain sight, is shared by millions far beyond Kolkata. Basu's novel demands that readers recognize the cost of these exclusions—not merely in material terms, but in the slow erasure of selfhood and the corrosion of solidarity.

Conclusion

Kalkatta by Kunal Basu is an ambitious, essential intervention in Indian English fiction, defying the familiar through its focus on the city's rarely narrated realities. Through Jami—at once a product and victim of history—Basu dramatizes the psychic and material costs of Partition, the limits of urban cosmopolitanism, and the unending quest for identity and acceptance.

By privileging the voices and spaces of Kolkata's marginalized, Basu throws into sharp relief the enduring complexity of belonging after borders. *Kalkatta* thus remains a potent meditation on the city as both promise and prison, and on the endless negotiation that marks the condition of the post-Partition refugee even decades after the event itself.

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