



Book Review: *In An Ideal World*

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Bio-note: The reviewer is pursuing her doctoral degree on the novels of Kunal Basu. She has published research articles in several reputed national and international journals and also presented papers in national and international seminars. Her areas of interest are Indian Writing in English, Marginality Studies and Diaspora Literature of Indian immigrant writers.

In An Ideal World

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An unrestrained look at the dark and murky state of affairs in the country, a world of unruliness and chaos, of hatred, religious bigotry, decadence as well as hope for fraternity, this novel replete with the deep scar that has created a chasm in the heart of the country and empathy for the ordinary citizens falling prey to the manipulations by the powerful and mighty, a highly controversial topic that has been mostly shoved to the periphery and neglected in the realm of art and literature. *In An Ideal World* (2022) has been authored by Kunal Basu, an Indian author born in Kolkata who currently resides in Oxford and Kolkata. He was educated in India and the United States and is presently a University Reader in Marketing at Said Business School, University of Oxford. He was earlier a Professor at McGill University, Montreal, Canada for 13 years. He is the author of several critically acclaimed novels including *Racists* (2006) and *The Miniaturist* (2003) and a short story collection *The Japanese Wife* (2008), the titular story of which has been made into an award-winning film by Indian filmmaker Aparna Sen. He is a prolific bilingual author, who writes both in Bengali and in English. His novel *Racists* had been nominated for the Crossword Book Award, 2007 and his Bengali novel *Rabi Shankar* (2017) won the Anandolok Puroskar in 2017.





He is one of the very few practitioners of the historical fiction genre in Indian literature. His earlier novels were all historical fictions and *Kalkatta* (2015) was his first contemporary novel in English. *In An Ideal World* is his third contemporary novel published in English. The book is published by Viking India, an imprint of Penguin House India and has received international fame and praise since its publication. Its cover design, in form of wall graffiti, black on white and spray-painted in red, is mesmerising and has been done by Pinaki De. The renowned author Shobhaa De comments “A gripping novel in which the political meets the personal in a fractured land”. Indian parliamentarian and author Shashi Tharoor finds the novel “Evocative, engrossing, and shot through with the tension of a dangerous new era”. Ramon Magsaysay award winning journalist Ravish Kumar writes “This brilliantly absorbing novel tells the story of the human bombs and their victims”.

The novel encapsulates a variety of themes that resonates with the present times including religious bigotry, state of anarchy and unrest in the country, frequent upheavals and riots, hatred, fanaticism and college politics. It is also a family story about a liberal, open-minded couple desperately trying to bring back their only son from the other side of the ideological divide. This thought-provoking novel does not support any particular ideology but tries to put a mirror to the simmering tension in the society, bringing out the follies of both sides, the Left and the Right. It shows the fissures and fractures created by the politics of hatred, exclusion and fanaticism, which only leads to loss and destruction in which the youth of the country are the biggest loser. These are complex issues that have been handled with utmost respect and sensibility by the novelist. The novel is divided into three sections- The Call, The Lie and The Rock, thus giving the story a linear structure.

In An Ideal World is a fast-paced and gritty detective story involving campus politics and simultaneously is also a relevant story about the present times with immense psychological depth. It revolves around the disappearance of a Muslim student, Altaf Hussein from the college campus in the imaginary town of Manhar. The college authorities have denied a proper investigation into the matter and there are strong rumours of him leaving the country to join the jihadis in Iraq. Another sect believes that he has been abducted and murdered for resisting the Nationalist party on the campus. *In An Ideal World* is also a novel about parents, who are entrusted with the job of bringing back their only son from the clutches of his guru and his hyper-nationalistic political views into a normal life for a college-going youngster. Vivek or Bobby (as his parents call him way back in Kolkata), studies in a private university at Manhar, a few hours drive from Kolkata and is the only child of his parents, Joy and Rohini. Plunged into



active politics by his political guru Dadhichi, he is facing suspicion on account of the disappearance of a Muslim student Altaf. Joy, a former Communist leader during his college days, currently works as a manager in a South Kolkata branch of Bharat Bank and leads a comfortable upper class life with his school principle wife, Rohini. They share a beautiful bond, which is one of the highlights of the novel. As Basu writes “In Rohini, Joy had met the perfect antidote: the brute force of life neutralized the juvenilia of youth. Their life, built bit by bit with salary, increment and bonus, bore the hallmark of a solid plan. It had yielded a south-facing flat- a rarity in the city- twenty uninterrupted years without an affair on either side, and Bobby. For health, they had yoga, and servants for housework. There were friends carried over from college and new ones; for fun, an occasional joint to go with rum on weekends, and fucking on the open terrace when drunk” (Basu 19). Their placid lives come to a standstill when Joy’s college friend and fellow communist leader, Mimi, informs him about Bobby’s rise as the face of the Nationalist party in his university, steered by his ideologue Dadhichi and his vengeful politics of abolishing other religions to establish his own religion as the absolute truth. Bobby unquestioningly devotes himself to his charismatic political mentor and his views of making India free from all invaders and intruders and creating a veritable Hindu land. He grows more resolute in his mission in the proximity of his landlord’s family, whose daughter he is in a relationship with. This comes as a shock to Bobby’s parents, themselves having liberal ideology and staunch believers in the equality of all religions. Bobby’s political views are an antithesis to their own and he seems to be on his path to become a hardcore religious fundamentalist. The ideological and psychological distance between Bobby and his parents is immense. However Joy and Rohini decide to excavate the truth behind the disappearance of Altaf and bring Bobby out of such chaos and heinous politics. Their prime concern is to understand Bobby’s involvement in the alleged crime and whether he is guilty of such a crime. Rohini feigns illness to bring Bobby to Kolkata and understand the reality of the allegations against him. But Bobby realises their motive and returns back to Manhar, his parents are nevertheless convinced by this time that he has been deeply entrenched in Nationalist politics and decide to revert him back. Once in Manhar, Joy and Rohini unleash the sleuth in them to gather information about Bobby’s involvement in the disappearance of Altaf. They move from a shady hotel, to Altaf’s village, to a butcher’s shop, to a leading businessman’s factory to a wrestling pit with one ulterior motive but are unable to avert the ultimate tragedy at the end of the novel. They fail to fathom the entire truth, able to gather only bits and pieces of information and finally are forced to retreat when they face a brewing riot like situation at the university campus. The clash between the two opposing ideals of nationalism and liberalism coupled with misinformed narratives floating in the air culminates in a riot at the campus. The ending comes abruptly and seems too hurried. The racy, thrilling and fast-paced



detective novel suddenly rushes towards a conclusion which seems too rushed and fictional. The simmering tension throughout the novel deserved a more convincing ending. This is the only negative aspect of this novel.

Kunal Basu's protagonist Bobby is a well-etched character who is vulnerable to the constantly changing environment and circumstances around him, unable to judge the downside of extreme nationalism. Basu maintains a non-judgemental tone throughout the novel and hence nobody is labelled a hero or villain here. Bobby in the novel is a self-righteous youngster with honest revolutionary zeal and ardent nationalism but his passion is wrongly channelled by his mentor using his hypnotic brainwashing skills and mind games into something fanatic and vicious. He is compassionate towards their family cook, catches and punishes a molester outside a movie hall but lacks the intuition to realise that he has become a pawn in this game of fanaticism. Bobby also points out the hypocrisies of his parents and the like, who easily left their revolutionary past life to settle for a comfortable life with a steady salary and a liberal lifestyle. They are unable to grasp the ground reality, neither are bothered to move out of their bourgeois comfort and behave callously when their own house-help is in dire need of their help. They act as critics only from their comfortable cocooned existence away from the murkiness of the contemporary politics. However it is worth mentioning that Joy and Rohini are highly idealistic, honest and exhibit compassion, which is evident when instead of saving their son using their social clout, they undertake the journey to save both Bobby and Altaf. Compassion and love for fellow beings lies at the core of Basu's storytelling and this novel is no exception. Joy and Rohini are compassionate human beings and do not allow the love for their only child to blind them and are on their endeavour to find the truth. Basu's novels are often replete with human bonds of love and compassion between complete strangers, often living as a surrogate family. In this novel Bobby lives as a family member with Manish and Madhvi, his landlords who share a strong bond beyond blood relations or familial ties.

The women in Basu's novel are not passive, silent sufferers, they are bold, feisty and confident. In this novel, Rohini, despite being asthmatic, undertakes the excruciating journey to Manhar during a moment of crisis to protect two sons, not just her own but also her son's arch rival. Devi, Bobby's love interest who initially seemed like a passive character later reveals her own plan for setting up a business and also shows great strength and determination in the face of tragedy. Altaf's mother, despite being struck by a tragedy is rock-solid in her determination and refuses to be bowed down by any form of power politics and continues her fight for justice and integrity.



Basu does not present a single culprit responsible for the disappearance of Altaf and the ensuing riot at the campus. He shows how everyone from the local butcher to the elite businessman, from politician to police, from imam to professor are entangled in the mysterious web and are part of the mechanism behind the marginalisation and exploitation of the dispossessed and vulnerable. The novel also lays bare the difference between the two faces of India- the urban, educated, upper class, content with discussing politics and their liberal values at parties and the small town, humble, conservative middle class believing in the Nationalist views and implementing them in their daily life. In this novel the clichéd trope of a naïve small town youngster arriving at a big city to fulfil his dreams is inverted by the author to show Bobby, a young boy from a metropolis arriving in a small town to complete his higher education and landing in the brewing pot of menacing politics in the heartland of India.

The novel leaves an open-ended question for the readers to answer, which side of the ideological divide depicts the real India? Or more precisely, what is real India? Is it the pluralistic, tolerant, secular nation? Or is it a veritable Hindu land for Hindus, free from all other religion? It is a question that has seeped through across all strata of society, across all discussions and silently tearing the social fabric and even close relationships.

Basu avoids a tantalising and superficial look into this sensitive topic and writes this novel with the hope that his readers are able see-through this vicious political game of fanaticism and create a land of democratic co-existence, otherwise the country as a whole would be the ultimate loser in this vitriolic environment of mutual hatred and suspicion. He hopes that this novel will tug at the heart's strings to show that compassion, love, unity, empathy and mutual respect can invert this situation and help to overcome all obstacles to replace ugliness with hope and reveal that every individual's capacity to love others is infinite which often remains crushed under the weight of societal expectations.