

ISSN:0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 7, Issue-I February 2016

7 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

www.the-criterion.com

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Novel as History: A New Historical Reading of the Mughal harem in Kunal Basu's *The Miniaturist*

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Till the emergence of post structuralist 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 its dubitable loopholes in the central metanarrative known as 'history'. Kunal Basu, a contemporary writer, has challenged the purity of the traditional metanarrative by constructing, focusing and imaginatively creating an aspect of Mughal History which has hardly been recognized as an integral part of history proper. Thus Basu creates a novel which creates a new historicist version of the metanarrative in his *The Miniaturist*, which can be described as 'Novel as History'.

History contributes and corroborates much to the flavor and ambience of Kunal Basu's *The Miniaturist*, an apt ballast to hold the strings of the plot together. Basu skillfully weaves the yarn of his story in the wheel of history. The story is set in a historical situation- Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, under the rule and reign of Akbar. Historically substantiated, Akbar the imperialist manifestly appears in Basu's novel. But Basu begins his delineation of the Emperor therefrom where the chroniclers end their account. Bihzad, despite being warned and coaxed to record Akbar, the Emperor's exploits and court activities, cajoles his brush and color to indulge in depicting Akbar, the man's private life. Basu's opinion about the use of history in fiction is manifestly invested in Bihzad's personal '*Akbarnama*' – an artist's vision intervening, fleshing up and moistening the dry bones of facts and personages; a discerned refraction, a departure from what may be called an official chronicling of the emperor's exploits, exercises and explorations. Bihzad declines to conform to the established accepted norms of art, and Basu, to history.

Basu etches the rich, luxurious and opulent Harem of Akbar with much vividness and graphic details. An interesting peep into the secret chasms of Akbar's Harem is what Basu impishly indulges in. As a voyeur, the reader is invited into the much adorned but least talked about harem of Akbar, as Zuleikha (the young foster mother of the protagonist)

opens its doors for the readers' admission. She skillfully 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 favorite, 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 spend all day bathing and perfuming, braiding their hair, dressing up in robes and jewelry – 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 begums 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 wretched carried the next emperor, their future guardian, in her wretched belly?' (Basu: 37)

A vivid tale indeed, including the secret ingratiating priapicescapades the whims and wiles of the emperor.

The doors of the heaven 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 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, concubines and the slave girls were only vassals to his desire. In their secluded world, their sole ambition was to be their master's favorite, and their nights and days were given in pursuit to obtain his attention. Akbar was like their god, and they were ever so eager to serve him in the best of their abilities. A perpetual joust thus kept them busy throughout their day .Each trying to look prettier than the other, to obtain the attention of their master.

The 'Chamber of Dreams' was, thus, always agog with such piquant chores. Zuleikha was the favorite of all the mercenary women who were permitted entry to the harem with lovely wares that the queens coveted. She knew the tricks of the trade well and was welcomed with much aplomb by the inmates of the harem:

'None, though, was more popular than Zulehikha – the merchant of beauty. She dealt in hope. A touch of a rare herb could turn the fortunes of a forgotten wife, make her the emperor's favourite once again. And unlike the other merchant women, she didn't hurry to leave the harem, but spent long afternoons in the Chamber of Dreams- bathing and anointing the emperor's women, escaping in the summer to the cool vaults dug underneath the palaces. The Kalmuk guards of the

harem knew her well. Hilal Khan, the head eunuch, was fond of her perfumes. She entered and left through the heavily guarded doors as if she was a begum herself...' (Basu: 19)

The raconteur Basu goes on to 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 was permissible to maintain its modesty. Wishful rumors and chimerical fanciful accounts sprouted all around it. Especially, tales were spun when Akbar, who was 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 rumors 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,' (Basu: 66)

Throughout the entire gamut of his story, Basu keeps on referring to the Harem, imagining with the sheer delight of a story teller, the world that was kept hidden so meticulously from the voyeuristic inquisitiveness 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 alone have ever pried in it:

It reminded him of Sikri, the screens around the emperor's harem, that allowed the ladies to see without being seen.' (Basu: 199)

The mention of the harem is made, even in light – hearted confabulations between the Khwaja, the chief artist of the Kitabkhana and his wife Zuleikha, as she teased the former by calling him the chief queen of Akbar's second harem, the Kitabkhana, and goes on to say, in jest, that the stories the artists paint in the Kitabkhana are the ones that Akbar tell his wives to entertain and amuse them:

'He needs your stories to amuse his wives. The emperor is the chief storyteller of the harem. He needs your pictures to keep them happy.' (Basu: 22)

And thus reference and tales of Akbar's harem is spliced evenly in Basu's *The Miniaturist*.

And then, Basu tells us the story of Hilal Khan, once the head-eunuch of Akbar's harem. Within this diegesis, the recit de voyage, that dealt with the artist Bihzad and his tumultuous dynamic life, Basu subtly and with great care, incorporates the character of Hilal Khan. 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 paid attention to. 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. Their lives, their desires, their pain and sufferings – Basu seems to have captured much through this character:

‘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.’ (Basu: 115)

But just to consider him on account of his countenance would be to eviscerate the true genius that lay under the rough exterior. It was not the body of a ‘half man and half beast’ (Basu: 118) that interpellated the true Hilal Khan. 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. He was the head eunuch of Akbar’s harem and surely he was given this honor not for nothing. And it does not end there. He was the sole of his kind who was respected like a courtier and was given the rare privilege of having the emperor’s audience whenever he wished for it. He was a rare genius, a magus, a sorcerer and knew his trade well. Zuleikha is all praises when she told Bihzad about Hilal Khan:

‘It is ‘he’ who rules the harem, not Akbar!’ He was both a servant and a master to the women, she had said, serving their innocent pleasures, entertaining them with music and dance, relieving them of their anxiety, escorting them wherever they went, plying them with wine then waking them from their dreams. ‘He’s a true master! He can tell if a slave girl is a virgin or not without laying a finger on her!’ (Basu: 119)

But then, one day, surreptitiously and suddenly he disappeared from Agra, from his home, his harem. Rumors and stories were spliced explaining his sudden departure. Some said he was an ‘imperfect’ eunuch. The implication alone, though quite revolting, should be looked in closely. They believed that he was not a ‘clearly shaven’ eunuch and perhaps thus, after the discovery of it, he could not be trusted with the beautiful women whom he has attended all his life. And maybe in his new-found manhood he has grown close to one of the hundred harem wives. The jealousy of the rest perhaps, has paved the way of his exile or banishment:

‘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 others.’ (Basu: 119)

But there lies a far more grotesque and ghastly tale behind the making of such ‘monsters’ . Hilal Khan narrates the process to Bihzad, as one day they heard the appalling cries of a

child, outside Bihzad's window in Hilal Khan's Serai. They heard the voices of the owner of the child and that of the barber along with the inconsolable wails and sobs of the child. It all sounded as if a customary ritual was in process. 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' (Basu: 161). Hilal Khan, shaking and crying, as he was reminded of his own 'day of Blood', sighs 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.' (Basu: 161)

The physical pain will die, but the mental suffering will plague him 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.' (Basu: 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:

'Because only eunuchs care for the decayed wives of the harem, but no one cares for decayed eunuchs'. Turning his face towards the dark sky, he kept on talking. 'A eunuch lives for hate. Everyday of his life.' (Basu: 138)

Glossing over the pages of the aseptic version of history, let us now consider what the chroniclers have recorded about the harem and the eunuchs during the regime of Akbar. Referring to the copious and abounding harem of Akbar, Bamber Gascoigne harrumphed:

'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 later came from 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.' (Gascoigne: 73)

Marriage was essentially a strategy that Akbar followed to expand the bounds of kingdom. In comport with Muta marriage, he took many Hindu wives, which in the long run earned him the allegiance and loyalty of many a Hindu Rajahs and thereby making them his consorts.

‘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.’ (R.Nath: 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 practiced Jauhar:

At first no one among the Moghuls knew who the distinguished looking Hindu was who had died, but soon fires appeared at several points in the fort and Bhagwan Das was able to explain to Akbar that the bullet must have found Jaimal and that this was the janhar, 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 transmogrify 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 stone screens through which the ladies could see but not be seen. (Gascoigne: 86)

It was altogether an organized 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 organized and systematic way much in comport with the other government departments. The term harem 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 uses during the medieval times. (R.Nath: 26)

Thus the security of this auspicious abode of revelry was not a joke. Eunuchs were appointed for this special task of guarding the portals of the harem. And they were the 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. (R.Nath: 22)

The Mughal Harem represented a perpetual state of dungeoning. It was designed with the single intention to provide pleasure and respite to its Master. A bastion though intended singularly to slake the concupiscence of the emperor, and was only unlike the pleasure houses or brothels for its lack of churlish ribaldry:

Behind the stone screens of the harem quarters was a domestic world with its celebration of birth, marriages, and deaths, religious festivals, and social occasions. The wives, concubines, and female relatives of the master were ranked by seniority, blood ties, and favor in a strictly prescribed hierarchy. Hundreds of female maid servants, 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. (J.F.Richards: 61)

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

The historians have had 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 has been told about the harem and life that dwelt there in. Many historians have tactfully avoided or merely made a passing remark on this important institution. In some history books there is no mention of harems 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. R. Nath succinctly lours at this scanty supply of information regarding such an important institution:

Truly, the Persian chroniclers were either prevented from knowing what happened within the four walls of the Mughal harem owing to strict protocol and purdah, or even when they had access to this knowledge, they did not have the courage to

write on this sensitive subject. The Mughal life, consequently, remained a closely guarded secret.

It is here that imagination and fancy was 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 the Metanarrative has recorded? How much has been excluded? Undoubtedly, something was excluded since it is an ideological construct. And from here, Basu thus constructs an ancillary history, and he is not just constructing a new history, but complementing and making viable the present one – a rewriting of history, only to provide a clearer picture of the time – then and now. And the author can hardly be alleged of any perfidy or mendacity in doing so. As Alex Rutherford would say,

Also because the chronicles cannot tell us everything – their writers would never have dared reveal certain things – I have used the novelist's freedom to imagine some incidents and of course to attribute motivation. (Rutherford: 395)

Thus Basu's *The Miniaturist* can be considered as a chronotope. Once brought within the walls of the harem, the women were not allowed to leave it during their lifetime. They were to stay there as long as they lived, whether they liked it or not. No man, apart from the emperor was permitted entry into the harem. He alone was their only connection with the world outside. The concept of Purdah, that was so meticulously observed, can be looked upon as an imposed discipline and therefore a weapon to subvert and marginalize. There were the eunuchs too. The role of the eunuchs in this doctrinaire of secrecy of the harem, deserves a special reckoning and understanding. A eunuch is not born a eunuch but is made into one. They 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 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. He tells them about the concatenation of wiles and jealousies that so thicken the air within its walls, the imponderable emotions that breathes 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. It has been designed thus. 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 threat 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. The brutality of the castration thus becomes simply unfathomable. His phallus shaven clean, but his priapic urges still holding him a prisoner. The immensity of the psychological as well as physical suffering makes this whole business a horrible pandemic practice, a sinister torture, and it is in here

that the frame of the Imperialist slowly but surely shapes up. This intolerable infliction of mental and physical pain is but a savage way of creating a new section of people and thwarting them to the margin. As if the oppressor creates the oppressed just in order to inflict sufferings upon him, supping thus on the pleasure of being in power. It is a punitive infliction upon the body, a body subjected to be productive.

...the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (Foucault: 26)

Productive not in the sense of child bearing but in the sense of aiding the oppressor and hegemonising sexual pleasure over the inmates of the harem.

The harem in itself thus becomes a mechanism of punishment and subjection. An institution to inflict subjection in an hierarchical order. The imperialist emperor subjects the eunuch to an unspeakable punishment by castrating him with the purpose of keeping a strict vigil upon the inmates of the harem. The eunuchs thus work as a deputy to the emperor. The queens and the prized possessions of the harem inflict a similar sort of subjection upon the slave girls within the walls of the harem. And thus the process of subjection and punishment is functioned in a rally.

In short this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the 'privilege', acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; (Foucault: 27)

Everything was meticulously and religiously private about the harem and all the emperor's liaisons with women. It was not considered as a fit subject to be recorded, save for the fact that he mastered a bludgeoning harem, which again was particularly included in order to convey the emperor's virility and power.

New historicism involves almost a raucous, skeptical and aggressive method of interpretation as opposed to the docile, slightly laid back approach of the traditional historicism. There is, however, never the repudiation or derogation of the sense of deep gratification that artistic representations provide. But they are animated with the urge or necessity to critically examine the cultural matrix wherefrom these artistic representations emerge. This hermeneutical aggression, wherein culture is deliberately included as an important text – a prerequisite for the understanding of an artistic representation have led to the expansion of the range of objects to be read, interpreted or considered. Many a thing that has been dodged or dwindles in the shadows, which were excluded from the canon merely on the basis of the fact that they were too minor to fascinate or hold the interest of

the historian or the storyteller, were now being considered. As Catherine Gallagher would say,

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, semiliterate political agitators, coarse faced peasants in hobnailed boots, dandies whose writings has been discarded as ephemera, imperial bureaucrats, freed slaves, women novelist 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 cities. (Gallagher: 9)

Thus we see there is an incorporation of the marginal with a specific intent. Basu's novel thus helps to reconstruct a very important and significant part of history, so long neglected and deliberately kept outside the metanarrative.

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