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Human Geography in Kunal Basu's *The Opium Clerk*

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Abstract:

Human geography is a branch of geography which focuses on the social, economic and political activities of human beings and their impact on the environment. Recognised as a relatively recent development within the discipline, human geography has significantly influenced literary and cultural studies. Carl Ritter, often regarded as the father of human geography, contends that geographers should analyse geographical features in relation to the people inhabiting them and their interactions with the environment. Human geography examines and maps migration, cultural landscapes, global culture, language, religion, ethnicity, race, and resource redistribution. Analysing human geography in literary texts requires an interdisciplinary engagement that integrates methods and perspectives from literature, cartography, and environmental studies, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of spatial and cultural phenomena depicted in literature. This perspective investigates the organisation of political and cultural spaces in literature by exploring the relationships among places, spaces and human conditions, while also offering fresh perspectives on history and anthropology.

This paper scrutinises Kunal Basu's novel *The Opium Clerk* through the analytical framework of human geography, reinterpreting the history of the nineteenth-century opium trade from geographical, cultural and environmental perspectives. It further examines the intersection of themes such as migration, race, ethnicity, ideology, boundaries, and urbanisation as depicted in the novel. Additionally, the analysis considers how Basu alternates between land and sea, suggesting that a maritime perspective can enrich understanding of colonialism and colonial geography.

Keywords: Human geography, cartography, migration, maritime, colonialism.

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Introduction

"Places make us—let's not imagine that once we're here anything else does. First genes, then places—after that it's every man for himself, God help us, and good luck to one and all." — William Saroyan, *Places Where I've Done Time* (Memoir, 1972)

Kunal Basu is recognised as a prominent contemporary Indian writer of English historical fiction. His novel, *The Opium Clerk*, presents a complex narrative that explores the intricacies of the colonial underworld. The central question that guides this study: How does Basu employ shifting spaces, geographical, social, and imaginative, to interrogate the entanglements of power and identity under colonial rule? The novel traces the historical opium trade route while simultaneously examining the personal experiences of individuals across diverse lands and continents. The novel constructs a phantasmagorical world characterised by fantastic tales, vivid visions, and hallucinatory experiences reminiscent of the effects of opium, thereby blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination. It presents a diverse group ensemble of characters who represent a range of cultural, ethnic, racial, social, and gender backgrounds, such as Bengali Brahmins, British, Chinese, Sikhs, Malays, Dayaks, Tankas, Hongs, and Parsi traders.

Basu's debut novel spans the period from 1857, encompassing the Sepoy Mutiny, the birth of the protagonist Hiranyagarbha, and the death of his father, through to the Second World War. Central to the narrative is the idea that mobility—across geopolitical boundaries, social divisions, and imagined landscapes—operates as a technology of colonial power. By orchestrating journeys that both link and differentiate spaces under imperial control, Basu exposes how traversing these territories signifies more than physical movement; it becomes a mechanism for asserting colonial order, negotiating identities, and enacting resistance or complicity. The novel's temporal scope encompasses diverse geographical locations, including the Indian subcontinent, Calcutta, Canton (Guangzhou), and Kuching in Sarawak. The

narrative foregrounds the different spaces where its characters live and traverse, with the motif of the journey serving as a central organising principle. Characters travel between India and Canton, India and Kunming, and visit the Viper Islands. This analysis examines how Basu's novel uses shifting locations and journeys to construct a compelling narrative of power and trade, positioning *The Opium Clerk* as a postcolonial work.

Bhadralok and Kerani

One of the common cultural constructs of nineteenth-century Bengal was the figure of the 'bhadralok'—literally, gentlefolk—referring to a social class of English-educated, upper-class male Bengali professionals who served as officials, managers, and clerks in the British Empire to oversee the Raj's economic interests. This group, predominantly Hindu, was known for wealth and cultural sophistication, and typically did not do manual labour. In contrast, a Kerani lived on low pay and a poor standard of living, even though they worked hard. Basu's narrative highlights how the imposition of bureaucratic modernity during the opium trade era in British-controlled Indian provinces created a complex environment in which individuals, influenced by liberal and enlightened ideologies, remained subject to colonial authority and racial divisions in the workplace: "'The west wing?' Hiran wondered, looking across to the windows opposite. 'Only to be entered by permission, jewel. That's where the British officers have their desks'" (OC 29).

Devaluation of the Past

Hiranyagarbha, or the 'Golden Embryo', the novel's protagonist, initially receives his education in a toll, studying Astrology, but is soon transferred to a Mission school to be immersed in English culture and adapt to the convent environment. This abrupt transition from indigenous learning to a Western mission school illustrates not only a disruption of Hiran's connection to his heritage but also a deliberate imposition of colonial authority over his identity.

Concerted efforts to erase the past undermine the traditions of his native culture. This process of forced assimilation exemplifies what Fanon describes as the ‘disease of imitativeness,’ whereby colonised subjects are conditioned to internalise the language, habits, and values of the coloniser. For Hiran, the psychic violence of colonial education results in the suppression of selfhood and enforced mimicry, ultimately leading to alienation from his origins. As Barry observes:

Fanon (a psychiatrist from Martinique) argued that the first step for colonised people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past. For centuries, the European colonising power will have devalued the nation’s past, seeing its precolonial era as a pre-civilised limbo, or even as a historical void. Children, both black and white, will have been taught to see history, culture and progress as beginning with the arrival of the Europeans. If the first step towards a postcolonial perspective is to reclaim one’s own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which that past had been devalued. (192)

Vehicles as Markers of Mobility, Social Status and Transgression

Vehicles play an important role in Basu’s narrative, particularly in showing how people moved around in the nineteenth century. The frequent references to ticca-garis, a horse-drawn taxi, popular at the time, highlight both mobility and social status, since these vehicles were typically hired by the upper class. Hiran and Uncle Mahim explore Calcutta in ticca-garis, and for Hiran, the ticca-gari becomes a symbol of transgression, transporting him into forbidden zones. These nocturnal journeys also facilitate discussions of taboo topics: “In the course of the year, as they rode their ticca-gari back in the middle of the night, Hiran began to revel in their arguments. In their walks through the vice-lined streets of Boubazaar, it didn’t occur to him to press Mahim for personal details, except to ask, ‘Is it true that you’ve taken beef?’” (OC 18).

With the onset of the Second World War, fighter planes changed how we see the world map and distance, removing vast geographical distances and making faraway places accessible in hours rather than months. Basu's narrative also shows a shift from traditional ways of conquering by land or sea to a new world shaped by aerial power. The protectorate ties, once secured by the British Empire's naval strength, are now weakened by the reach of enemy planes, a consequence of new technology that leads to the fall of the Brooke dynasty:

Nineteen forty-one. The news from Europe was depressing. It was clear Sarawak was going to taste the same medicine as China. Their protector needed protection herself; there was no point looking to England for help now. Even before the Japanese started their sweeping charge, before the first enemy aeroplane had flown over Kuching, they knew the end of the dynasty was near. (OC 298)

Male Gaze and Vantage Point

The roof serves as a liminal space situated above street level. From here, schoolboys ridicule Hiran for the proximity of his home to Boubazaar. The reference to women from Lucknow, Nepal, Africa and China shows the city's social diversity, while also revealing the biases and sexualisation these women face. In this setting, the male gaze treats women as objects for masculine pleasure, increasing the feeling of being watched. This close watching breaks down the line between public and private spaces and reveals what is typically hidden. As a result, the rooftop vantage point, combined with the male gaze, transgresses these spatial divides and transforms private experiences into public displays: "From the roof, they'd bet, he could pry into the intimacy of baijees from Lucknow, hill sluts from Nepal, insatiable Coffreesses, pink and yellow Chinese. They sang bawdy songs that made his thirteen-year-old cheeks blush" (OC 19).

Carceral Cartography

Lefebvre, in his seminal text *The Production of Space*, argues that space is not a neutral container but is socially produced, which affects spatial practices and perceptions: “Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics. It has always been political and strategic. There is an ideology of space. Because space, which seems homogeneous, which appears as a whole in its objectivity, in its pure form, such as we determine it, is a social product.”

In Lefebvre's terms, “representational space” refers to environments that are invested with meanings, feelings, and associations by those who inhabit or imagine them (that is, space as it is lived or experienced, not just mapped or planned). Crime maps are instruments of power, stigma and social control. The narrow alleys of Boubazaar act as ‘representational space’ for they become visual representations of delinquency, where the honest souls are juxtaposed with the rotten, indicating a mix of inhabitants and also an implicit division. The metaphor of undergrowth suggests that Boubazaar is overrun with hidden dangers, difficult to see and escape. Sarladebi and Hiran’s apprehensions are mapped on the carceral cartography of Boubazaar’s alleyways: “Hiran had heard of the dangers stalking honest souls forced to live among the rotten in the alleys of Boubazaar. He knew of thieves, of kidnappers who sold young boys to ship’s captains, the undergrowth that had filled his mother with foreboding at the thought of moving back to Calcutta” (OC 22).

Opium Routes

Basu traces the transregional movement and transformation of opium across regions like Turkey, Persia, Egypt, the Caucasus, and Asia. Each group has a unique way of consuming opium, indicating how local traditions adapt a single commodity as it moves through space. The crossing of the Caucasian mountains represents a significant spatial and cultural shift, signifying entry into a new world (Asia): “Each had it in their own way. Turks ate the fetid, brackish cakes flavoured with nutmeg, cardamom, cinnamon, and saffron. Persians drank it

with wine. Egyptians dissolved it in delicate balms. From kings it passed to soldiers–and those who deal in pain. In one giant leap, the Arabs took it over the Caucasian mountains and into Asia" (OC 44-45).

Curated Library as a Microcosm of Colonial Hegemony

Mahim's library and his collection of portraits all cater to his notion that the West is the seat of all intellectual and cultural thoughts and studies. The spatial arrangement of Western texts transforms the personal space into an enclave of European intellectual authority: "He started by gazing at books he couldn't read, books with strange titles and strange names—Bacon, Hume, Paine, Bentham, Voltaire—copies of the Calcutta Gazette, and the Calcutta Chronicle, with his uncle's long hand in their margins" (OC 16). The co-existence of revolutionary or regional books on his shelf suggests an uneasy embrace between the coloniser and the colonised, where indigenous identity remains present but is encased and overshadowed by the colonial framework: "But his uncle's glass cases held not simply the alien but a familiar Iswarchandra, Hemchandra, Bankimchandra, Nabinchandra. Climbing on the mahogany cabinet, Hiran found the two in embrace, both still intelligible" (OC 17). His portraits and his library give us a microscopic view of the role of European intellectuals in influencing the colonies. The portraits, especially that of Derozio, make visible the internalisation of colonial hegemony: "Staring at the painting of a boy on the wall, barely older than himself, dressed in gold frippery, he was reminded of Mahim's praise: 'Derozio is the greatest of them all.'" (OC 17). Colonialism is inherently linked to exploitation, annexation and conquest, with its hegemonic power sustained by constructing binary oppositions such as self/other, white/black, good/evil, superior/inferior, and so on. This dynamic enabled one part of the world to assert supremacy by persuading others of the legitimacy of "white man's burden" and his "civilising machine" (77). Mahim exemplifies what Fanon describes as the disease of imitativeness in "Black Skin White Masks."

Panopticon Space of Prison

Traditionally, people conceive of the prison as a place of refuge or containment. The panopticon structure of the prison intensifies the risk and precarity faced by those inside. Rather than offering sanctuary, the spatial configuration empowers guards to enact emotional and physical violence against the incarcerated female inmates. Vinny's account of abandoned babies on rafts extends this spatial violence beyond the prison walls, mapping trauma onto the landscape itself. The river becomes the corridor of loss and dispossession: "'Simple. The peasants bring them over—newborns floating on red rafts, abandoned by their sailor fathers and coolie mothers. Sometimes, the prison guards go on a rampage, female prisoners paying for their fun'" (OC 108).

The Viper Island

Basu also makes several references to the islands Hiran visits during his voyage. One of them is the Viper Island, a part of the Andaman Islands. The reference to this island evokes its colonial legacy. Lt. Archibald Blair named his island after the British ship HMS Viper, on which he came to the Andaman Islands in 1789. The British government constructed the infamous Cellular Jail in 1906, which became a site for inflicting atrocious and barbaric torture on the convicts of India. In the colonial past, Viper Island served as a site of imperial punishment, isolation, and the erasure of native resistance: "Over a row of lowered heads— convicts praying in a long cabin—Hiran saw Reverend Martyn" (OC 110). Today, heritage discourse often frames Viper Island as both a memorial of suffering and a symbol of collective remembrance, encouraging reflection on national identity and postcolonial reclamation. Basu evokes this colonial intervention in his narrative. By doing so and by critiquing the process, he creates a postcolonial cartography of the place. The island becomes a site where the colonial and the postcolonial ideologies clash in Basu's narrative.

Social Stratification

Basu's spatial rendering highlights how imperialism constructs Western privilege and social stratification, excluding the native population. The enclosure itself becomes a spatial manifestation of power, granting and denying access and visibility. Basu describes one such area: "About a hundred men with their families sat at the guest-of-honour enclosure: Secretaries and Magistrates, Commissioners and Aides-de-Camp, Justices of the Peace, men of ships and trade, cadets, members of the rugby shield" (OC 112).

Insurgent Cartography

Political rebellion, often conceptualised as 'counter-mapping,' becomes a crucial tool of resistance and political mobilisation by challenging state policies. Counter-mapping is the practice by which marginalised or indigenous groups develop alternative maps or spatial representations that directly contest dominant—often colonial—cartographic and spatial controls. This form of rebellion, also described as insurgent cartography, operates in Canton to amplify the disruption of the opium trade and to challenge Eurocentric interests, thereby reasserting the indigenous blockade. As these political and spatial dynamics evolve, shifting realities in Canton alter the destination of trade ships. The Warrior Queen, too, faces a similar fate near Canton. Within this context of spatial resistance, Vinny describes the complex geopolitical situation the ship confronts as a result of Imperialist interest in the opium trade:

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!' (OC 125)

Outlying Islands as Treaty Posts

The Second Opium War altered the trade cartography between China and colonial ambitions. The treaty ports of Canton, Macao, Lintin, and Hong Kong are marked as legal zones for the British opium trade, serving as islands of foreign control carved out of imperial violence and unequal treaties. Beyond the treaty ports, opium becomes contraband. These spaces become fraught with hidden dangers and unpredictable resistance. Hiran explains the new culture of bribery that these trade hotspots have subsequently developed:

The Chinese lost the opium wars; they had to accept our opium, just as they had to accept Reverend Fowler's church. But they don't like it. As soon as you go beyond the treaty ports, it becomes illegal to sell opium. Then, the Chinese Viceroy's boats are upon you, demanding a bribe… It's legal in Canton, Macao, Lintin, Hong Kong, but legal doesn't mean safe, jewel. Where there's mud there are crocodiles too, no? (OC 150-151)

Space as a Site of Exclusion

Basu also explores the link between gender and geography in the novel. He documents the human geography of Canton, which gate-keeps the entry of foreign women against the backdrop of the Opium War and Confucian patriarchy. While trade outposts make space for foreign men, authorities and social norms sharply curtail women's mobility and subject their presence to both official and unwritten restrictions. Institutional practices—such as the official barring of foreign women from Canton—reinforce this spatial exclusion, keep female presence provisional, create zones of reinforced homo-sociality, and ensure that the empire maps its boundaries along gendered lines. How do these policies and spatial controls reveal the deeper anxieties of patriarchal authority—both colonial and Confucian—about femininity, assimilation, and power within contested spaces? The then Qing government believed that the lack of female company would keep the foreign presence provisional, leading to the marginal presence of women in trade outposts. The captain of the ship explains how women chart an

alternate cartography of migration in such a situation: “Foreign women were still barred from Canton. So, they waited for their husbands in Macao” (OC 152-153).

Marginalised Spaces of Respectability

Basu further portrays Boubazaar as a site of illicit relationships. For example, Mahim often slips into one of the city's lanes to visit his paramour. Basu’s Boubazaar is marked by darkness and anonymity, existing on the margins of respectability, yet deeply embedded in the city’s social fabric:

One evening, Annada came to Hiran with a red face, motioned him to follow her to the dark stairwell. Mahim, she said, had been seen entering a house—a ‘known house’—in Boubazaar’s alleys. The man frying oil at the corner had seen him: an umbrella covering his face, a string of jasmine coiled around his arm. ‘He’s been trapped by a tigress! Spends all his money on her. You must save him.’ (OC 231)

Ship as a Space of Quarantine

Foucault identified ships as the “heterotopia par excellence”—spaces of freedom, mobility, and possibility. However, Basu subverts this idea by transforming the ship into a site of confinement. In the narrative, the ship becomes a sequestered space marked by illness and danger. Douglas learns from the captain that the latter has been confined, illustrating the ship as a floating prison: “A sickness following a mystery fever in the outer islands, he explained, had him confined to his cabin. A wound suffered at the hands of pirates refused to heal” (OC 255-256).

Sarawak as a Unique Geography

The co-existence of culturally and nationally diverse subjects forces the sharing of territory. This cohabitation alters the pre-existing geography and leaves its imprint on space. Sarawak is depicted as one such place. The Rajah’s dual status as both a subject and a cousin to

the King maps a unique hierarchy, placing Sarawak on the margins of empire, both connected and apart. Perkyns maintains that this place is a colonial dream location and explains how different colonial markers create distinct architectural forms:

The first thing the Germans do when they occupy a country, you know, is build a barrack. The French build a railway. The English build a Customs House! Sarawak grew rich. Even made a contribution to her big sister fighting the Germans in Europe. Raffles and bazaars, balls, all raising funds for the defence of the Empire. It's not like India. Sarawak isn't part of the Empire, you see. Our Rajah is both the King's subject and his cousin. They're fellow monarchs. Sarawak is the dream of a few Englishmen, but not quite a part of Britain. (OC 257-258)

Conclusion

Kunal Basu's *The Opium Clerk* is a compelling literary exploration that investigates the intersection of imperialism, the opium trade, human displacement, and identity negotiation. By tracing struggles and transformations of individuals amid the chaos, social upheaval, and disruptions engendered by significant historical events—including the Sepoy Mutiny, the Opium Wars, and the World Wars—Basu elaborates on how shifting geographies and historical forces shape identities and lived experiences. In this way, the novel employs the motif of shifting spaces and journeys, as outlined in the thesis, to illuminate the complex ties between power, place, and subjectivity in a colonial and postcolonial context.

Rather than merely cataloguing real and imagined spaces, Basu's *The Opium Clerk* interrogates how spatial dynamics actively shape characters' agency and subjectivity within the colonial milieu. The novel's depiction of dominant, liminal, and political spaces critically reveals how space can both enforce subalternity and provide opportunities for subversion. As characters traverse these unstable and contested geographies, Basu foregrounds the tension between adaptation and resistance, illustrating how the negotiation of imperial and indigenous

spatial orders is central to identity formation and empowerment. By weaving together the tangible and psychological terrains where colonial subjects struggle to reclaim autonomy amid upheaval, Basu crafts a nuanced exploration of space. By emphasising mobility and spatial negotiation, this paper demonstrates that *The Opium Clerk* not only reimagines colonial geographies but also offers a framework to reconceptualise mobility as a site of both complicity and resistance, providing a new critical perspective for future postcolonial studies of space and movement.

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