

**The Body as Currency: Queered Masculinity and the Commodification of Male
Desire in Kunal Basu's *Kalkatta***

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Abstract

Kunal Basu's *Kalkatta* (2015) occupies a critically underexamined position within contemporary South Asian Anglophone fiction. Unlike the nostalgia-driven aesthetics of Partition trauma narratives or the reflexive interiority of diasporic fiction, the novel strides its intervention in the morally ungoverned, affectively dense spaces of urban Kolkata—a city the text itself refuses to name officially, asserting instead on the migrants' phonetic corruption, *Kalkatta*, to signal that the city is most legibly read from the vantage of those permanently excluded from its social contract. This paper examines the figure of Jamshed Alam, a Bihari Muslim of Bangladeshi origin, raised in the political shelter of Zakaria Street, and drawn into the city's informal economy through the commodification of his body. The paper argues that Jami's experience as a male sex worker in the novel resists both the sentimentalism of victimhood narratives and the reductive framework of pure exploitation. Drawing on Raewyn Connell's theorisation of hegemonic and complicit masculinity, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and the analytical frameworks of postcolonial queer theory, the paper proposes the concept of *queered masculinity* to describe the contingent and commodified modes of masculine self-presentation. In Basu's novel, the body does not merely bear the marks of structural dispossession; it becomes the primary instrument through which subaltern agency—precarious, circumscribed, yet irreducible—is enacted and contested. The paper further challenges that *Kalkatta* functions as an unspoken critique of *bhadralok* sexual normativity with considerable formal and ethical complexity, the desires

that bourgeois respectability officially refutes. By centering subaltern male sexuality as a site of both economic negotiation and identity formation, the novel opens a conversation that South Asian literary scholarship has yet to meaningfully engage. This paper locates *Kalkatta* as a significant but neglected contribution to ongoing critical discussions on gender, sexuality, and urban precarity in postcolonial South Asian fiction. This paper sets out to fill that gap.

Keywords: Kunal Basu, *Kalkatta*, queered masculinity, subaltern sexuality, gender performativity, urban precarity

I. Introduction

There is a particular kind of invisibility that urban modernity imposes on those who arrive from elsewhere, those who carry no documentation, no language credential, no ethnic kinship with the city's dominant community. Jamshed Alam arrives in Kolkata not as an immigrant who has chosen a destination but as a human parcel, migrated across a border that was drawn before he was born, sheltered in Zakaria Street—a neighbourhood that the novel describes as a little Baghdad. It is into this condition of structured invisibility that Basu introduces us to his protagonist, and it is from within this condition that Jami's entire path—social, economic, and sexual—must be understood. What is immediately striking about Basu's presentation of Jami is that there is no extended meditation on loss, no psychologized account of displacement trauma, no long backward glance at the Bangladesh he never really knew. Jami's attention is entirely forward-facing, pragmatic and trained on the question of how to become a Kalkatta-wallah, a genuine citizen of the city—a question his mother has lodged in him like a compass bearing, and which the novel follows him trying to navigate by whatever means the city makes available. Kunal Basu describes "Ammi had vowed that she'd raise her children so that they'd never have to become refugees again 'You must become Indians, become Bengalis, a true Kalkatta-wallah and Kalkatta-wali,'" (Basu 7-8). This imperative of belonging runs through the entire novel as an invisible pressure on Jami, shaping his choices and desires. The community around him understands solidarity as a prerequisite for survival: "Refugees must support refugees" (40). Yet the city's logic of belonging is riddled with its own codes of conduct. Basu formulates this with wry precision when he describes "Rule number five of a true Kalkatta-wallah...Think before lying as everyone was related to everyone else in this city" (82). To belong to Kalkatta is to internalize

its rules—its hierarchies, its silences, its obligations. But for Jami, belonging is never secure. He remains, even within his closest domestic world, “Stranger in Number 14, living like a refugee in my own family” (96)—a formulation that precises his double displacement: unwanted by the city and unhoused even at home.

The academic literature on *Kalkatta* has, thus far, cruising primarily through the coordinates of ethnicity, religion, and Partition history. Studies have explored how Basu deploys Jami’s Bihari Muslim identity to illuminate the layered marginalization of non-Bengali refugees in post-Partition Kolkata, the ways in which the city’s Left-political infrastructure both sheltered and exploited the undocumented migrant community of Zakaria Street, and the relationship between Jami’s personal liminality and the broader socioeconomic fractures that Partition opened and left unhealed across generations. When Jami’s mother says “She was tired of grazing from field to field like lost cattle, packing and unpacking our meagre belongings; spending her entire life begging for a tiny spot she could call her own in Allah’s vast universe. (8)” These are valuable readings, and this paper does not dispute their insights. What it does dispute is the scholarly assumption that the analysis of the novel is complete once these coordinates have been mapped. Because what Basu’s novel also does—with notable care, remarkable honesty, and amazing moral complexity—is stage the body: Jami’s body, specifically as a site of desire, transaction, performance, and social negotiation. The fact that this body is male, that it is desired rather than desiring, and that its sexual labour is what enables Jami’s slow, and always fragile ascent through Kolkata’s social strata—these facts together constitute a set of questions about masculinity, and power that the existing scholarship has not yet asked.

This paper asks those questions. It does so through interlocking lines of inquiry. First, in what ways does Jami’s sex work constitute a performance of gender rather than an expression of a stable masculine identity? And second, how does the novel deploy what this paper calls queered masculinity—a masculinity that is neither hegemonic nor simply subordinate, but transactional, and strategically variable in a rigidly stratified postcolonial city. Together, these questions lead to a central argument: that Jami’s masculinity in *Kalkatta* is queered in the precise theoretical sense of the term—it is performed, contingent, and structurally necessary to a social order that simultaneously depends on and officially denies it. *Kalkatta* thus occupies a significant and largely overlooked position in the literary representation of non-normative male sexualities in South Asian fiction, and this paper is an attempt to mark that position and begin to explore what it means.

II. Theoretical Framework: Thinking Through Queered Masculinity

2.1 Connell’s Masculinities and the Postcolonial Subaltern Male

Any serious attempt to think about masculinity as a relational, historically situated phenomenon must begin with Raewyn Connell's foundational work. In *Masculinities* (1995), Connell argued, against the prevailing paradigm of sex-role theory, that there is no single, stable thing called masculinity that men either possess or fail to possess. Instead, she proposed a model of multiple masculinities—hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalized—organized in a hierarchy of power that is always relational, and historically contingent. Hegemonic masculinity, in Connell's framework, is not simply the most common form of masculinity; it is the culturally dominant form at any given historical moment, the one that legitimates men's authority over women and the hierarchy among men, and it achieves its dominance not primarily through violence but through the consent and aspiration of those it subordinates. Crucially, most men do not actually embody hegemonic masculinity in its full form; they benefit from it through what Connell calls the patriarchal dividend while performing a more moderate version—they are complicit rather than fully hegemonic. Subordinate masculinities are those actively devalued in the hierarchy—most notably, in Connell's original formulation, gay masculinity. Marginalized masculinities emerge through the intersection of gender with structures of race, class, ethnicity, and colonial power. Although they remain part of the broader hierarchy of masculinities, they are denied the full social authority and legitimacy accorded to hegemonic masculinity.

Applying this framework to Jami in *Kalkatta* requires some important adjustments, and those adjustments are themselves theoretically productive. By the conventional axes of Connell's hierarchy, Jami should be multiply, perhaps irredeemably, subordinate. He is a religious and ethnic minority—Bihari Muslim—in a city whose cultural and political life has been organized around Bengali Hindu identity for generations. He is undocumented and economically dispossessed. He is engaged in sex work, which in the patriarchal moral economies of both South Asian society and much Western scholarship has been coded as a form of labour that feminizes or degrades its practitioners. If masculinity is, as Connell argues, partly constituted through the domination of women and the hierarchy among men, then a man whose primary economic activity involves making his body available for the pleasure of women would seem to sit at the very bottom of the masculine hierarchy. And yet this is not what the novel shows us. What it shows us instead is that Jami's sexual desirability—the fact that his body is wanted, sought out, and paid for by women of a class and social standing he could never otherwise approach—grants him a form of access and of power that no other resource available to him could provide. His body becomes a pass, a key, an instrument of transgression across boundaries that the city has otherwise made absolute. Connell's later work, particularly *Southern Theory* (2007), is important here because it

insists that hegemonic masculinity cannot be understood in the abstract but must be read through specific historical and geographical formations of power. The bhadralok masculine ideal in Kolkata—educated, cultured, politically engaged, committed to a particular form of Bengali respectability—is an ideal that Jami cannot access through conventional routes. His body is not bhadralok. Neither his language nor his religion or ethnicity: none of these can be converted into bhadralok cultural capital. And yet through sex work, through the economy of desire, he enters the drawing rooms and bedrooms of Alipore, and from within those spaces, however temporarily and precariously, he becomes someone the city must reckon with.

2.2 Butler's Performativity and the Contingent Male Body

If Connell gives us the structural coordinates within which Jami's masculinity operates, Judith Butler gives us the philosophical tools to understand what that masculinity actually is. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler mounted a comprehensive challenge to the assumption, shared by much feminist and social scientific thinking, that gender is an expression of some prior, stable identity—biological, psychological, or social. Against this, Butler argued that gender is performative: it does not express an inner truth but produces the effect of it through its repeated enactment. Gender is, in Butler's famous formulation, not something one is but something one does—a doing rather than a being, a practice of repeated acts that, over time, creates the illusion of a natural and stable gender identity. The crucial point is that there is no original template being imitated; the original itself is produced through the process of imitation. What looks like gender expression is, in fact, gender constitution.

The implications of this argument for reading Jami are profound and, in some ways, liberating. If Butler is right, then we cannot ask what Jami's 'real' masculinity is, as if there were some authentic male identities being distorted or compromised by his sex work. There is no such original. What we can ask is how Jami's gender is performed in and through the specific acts the novel stages—the encounters with clients, the negotiations of desire, the careful calibration of self-presentation that his work requires. And what a Butlerian reading reveals is that Jami performs different masculinities for different patrons: the virile, uncomplicated physicality that the bored housewife from Alipore desires; the exotic and slightly dangerous otherness that the tourist wants to consume and carry home as a memory; the attentive, emotionally available companion that the lonely executive needs for an evening in a Kolkata hotel. These are not false performances overlaying a true self; they are, in Butler's sense, constitutive performances, each one a real enactment of masculinity, none of them the original, all of them equally real and equally contingent. This is what makes Jami's

masculinity genuinely queered: not because his sexual activity is non-heterosexual, but because his masculine identity is radically plural, and dependent on the desire of the other for its temporary form.

III. The Body's Performance in *Kalkatta*

3.1 The Body as the Only Capital

There is a moment early in the novel when the reader understands, with sudden clarity, the economic logic that governs Jami's world. He has arrived in Kolkata with nothing: no citizenship, no education that the city recognizes, no community ties beyond his uncle's politically motivated patronage, no claim on the city's resources or identity. What he has is a body—young, healthy, and, as the novel makes clear without coyness or sensationalism, physically desirable. Basu's prose at this point in the novel is notable for its matter-of-factness, its refusal to load Jami's physical situation with moral commentary. The body is not presented as a site of shame, not as evidence of degradation. It is presented, with a kind of quiet precision, as a form of capital—the only form that Jami possesses and that the city's economy actually wants from him. It forces the reader to confront the economic structure that produces Jami's situation: a structure in which certain bodies are systematically deprived of all other forms of capital and are therefore systematically available for commodification. The novel makes this commodification explicit in the scenes where Jami is initiated into the economy of sex work. His mentor delivers the foundational lesson in blunt terms: "From now you must start thinking yourself as a product" (137). The transaction is laid out without ambiguity when Jami is told that a woman "has to pay if she wants your services" and warned: "She's no longer your friend. She's your party. It's your choice if you want to give her free service. But I'd call you a fool" (137). What is striking here is the absolute substitution of relationship into transaction—friendship melted away into clienthood, affection rewritten as a market failure. The gigolo's training extends even deeper into the erasure of selfhood:

"The first thing you learn as a gigolo is to forget your wishes. You must always think about her pleasure. You'll fail if you think about your own. You must stop when she wants you to stop, sleep the whole afternoon by her side even if you don't feel sleepy. You must act like her lover even if she reminds you of your mother" (150).

This instruction enacts the Butlerian logic of performance in its most extreme form: the complete subordination of the self to another's fantasy. Yet the ironic framing with which the novel surrounds these instructions—the claim that this constitutes "the best job in the world—a dream job" (150)—exposes the ideological violence that masquerades as

opportunity. The market metric of success—“In my line you are known as a star if a party pays you 2000 rupees for a shot” (161)—reduces the entire horizon of masculine aspiration to a price point.

The language through which Basu describes Jami’s body and his relationship to it is consistently spatial and material. Jami does not narrate his body from the inside, in the mode of interiority that the realist novel conventionally provides for its protagonists. Instead, the novel describes his body from the outside, in the same register in which Kolkata itself is described: as a landscape to be navigated, a resource to be managed, a surface on which the city’s social relations are inscribed. This narrative choice is theoretically significant. It enacts, at the level of form, the Butlerian insight that the body is not an interior truth waiting to be expressed but a surface of inscription, a text written by the social forces that act upon it. Jami’s body does not speak for him; it speaks for the city—for the desires, hierarchies, oppressions, and the occasional generosity of Kolkata. And in this speaking, it performs a masculinity that is always defined by its relationship to others’ desire rather than by any autonomous masculine self.

3.2 Queering the Hierarchy: Desire, Class, and the Inversion of the Gaze

The most theoretically striking dimension of *Kalkatta*’s treatment of male sex work is the specific configuration of desire that Basu constructs. Jami’s clients, or at least the clients who receive the most extended narrative attention, are not men. They are women—and not just any women, but women of the Bengali upper middle class and the upper class: the cocktail-sipping Alipore set, housewives of the kind that bhadramahila tradition has trained in the management of respectability, the performance of cultural sophistication, and the suppression of erotic desire. This configuration is not accidental, and it is not simply a titillating inversion of conventional gendered roles. It is a deliberate structural choice that enables the novel to perform a sustained ideological critique. By placing the desiring gaze in the hands of upper-class Bengali women, and the desired body in the person of a subaltern Muslim migrant, Basu creates a field of power that is crossed by multiple, contradictory directions: gender, class, religion, ethnicity, and what we might call the hierarchy of respectable versus non-respectable desire.

From the perspective of Connell’s framework, the dynamic is particularly revealing. Jami’s clients occupy a position of structural superiority on almost every conventional axis: class, ethnicity, legal status, and the cultural capital of bhadralok identity. And yet, in the economy of desire that the novel stages, it is they who seek and Jami who is sought; it is they who need and he who provides; it is they who pay and he who is paid. This reversal does not simply invert the power hierarchy—it complicates it in ways that make straightforward

readings of either domination or liberation inadequate. The women are not liberated by their desire for Jami; they remain thoroughly enmeshed in the bhadramahila structures of respectability that both enable and conceal their transactions with him. And Jami is not straightforwardly dominated by the economic relationship; he navigates it with what the novel presents as genuine tactical intelligence alongside the purely transactional encounters. The picture Basu paints is one of mutual implication, mutual need, and interest in the maintenance of secrecy—a secrecy that serves the women’s respectability and Jami’s survival in roughly equal measure. Basu dramatizes this configuration with particular acuity in Jami’s account of accompanying a wealthy woman: “Whenever I was with Mrs Goswami, I felt visible. People pay attention to you when you’re with a beautiful woman, doormen salute and open doors; rather than throwing down a menu, waiters unfold napkins on your lap. You feel special” (83). The passage is remarkable because it shows how proximity to upper-class femininity confers, for the subaltern male, a momentary social legibility he cannot otherwise claim. Visibility here is not granted by the woman but is produced by the class semiotics that surround her. This logic of borrowed status illuminates the mentor’s blunt maxim: “No man can resist a girl who wants him badly, ugly or not. To succeed, you must resist your resistance” (150)—a formulation that acknowledges masculine desire only to immediately prescribe its suppression in the interests of professional performance. In my line, Jami learns, “only parties are allowed to dream, not those who serve them” (150).

This configuration maps onto Bell Hooks’ important analysis of the commodification of Otherness: the way in which racial, ethnic, and class difference is not merely incidental to certain forms of desire but is in fact what is being desired, what is being consumed. The Bihari Muslim body is not desired despite its otherness. It offers what the bhadralok masculine world of the client’s official life cannot offer: a form of encounter that is outside the normal structures of recognition, reputation, and social surveillance. To desire Jami is, for his clients, to desire something that does not circulate in the economy of respectable exchange. And this means that Jami’s ethnic and class difference is not merely a fact about him; it is part of what he sells. His queered masculinity is inseparable from his subaltern position: the two are constituted together, in the same transaction.

3.3 Lack of Originality in Masculinity: Performance as Survival

This is not to say that Jami is without interiority or without desire. The novel is careful to show us that Jami has genuine attachments and aspirations. But his deepest aspiration is to become a Kalkatta-wallah, to belong to the city as a citizen rather than as an interloper, which is an aspiration not for a particular form of masculinity but for a form of recognition. What Jami wants is not to be a man in any specific, culturally prescribed sense;

what he wants is to be someone the city acknowledges, someone who has a claim on its spaces and its futures. Sex work, in this reading, is not the expression of a masculine identity; it is the instrument of a civic aspiration. The masculinity is a vehicle, not a destination. And this instrumentalization of sexuality—this refusal to treat sexual identity as the deepest truth about a person—is itself one of the ways in which Jami’s queered masculinity operates as a form of subaltern critique. It refuses the identity-politics logic that treats sexual behaviour as identity-constituting, and it stipulates on understanding Jami as a full human subject whose sexuality is one resource among many in the navigation of a biased world.

IV. Critical Discussion: Limits, Silences, and Literary Contexts

Having established the case for reading Jami’s masculinity as queered in the theoretical senses developed above, it is necessary to address the limits of this reading honestly and without evasion. The most important limit concerns the question of agency. This paper has argued that Jami’s sex work constitutes a form of subaltern agency—a tactical navigation of structural exclusion using the only resource available. But it is crucial to distinguish tactical agency from structural liberation. Jami’s queered masculinity does not change the conditions that produced his vulnerability. It does not undo the ethnic and religious discrimination that made Zakaria Street his only possible home. It does not challenge the bhadrak order that simultaneously exploits and disavows him. At best, it secures a temporary and precarious form of access to social spaces that the city otherwise forbids him to enter. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s caution against romanticizing subaltern resistance is directly relevant here. The danger of a reading that emphasizes Jami’s tactical intelligence and strategic self-presentation is that it can inadvertently aestheticize the conditions of his exploitation—can make what is in fact a structure of profound injustice look like a kind of freedom. This paper has tried to avoid that aestheticization, but it is important to name the risk directly. The novel itself does not allow the reader to forget what aestheticization risks suppressing. There are moments in *Kalkatta* that insist on the raw violence of the economy in which Jami operates. One such moment occurs when a client, “smiled seeing my puzzled face... shut my eyes with her palm, cradled like a mother, then made a quick move to stub out her cigarette on my chest” (164–165). The gesture condenses in a single act the full horror of the transaction: the maternal tenderness inverted into cruelty, the body of the male sex worker available not merely for pleasure but for pain, the client’s power absolute. Other episodes make the degradation of client encounters equally explicit: the novel records “a few bad calls: asking about my size and how many minutes I could last,” (242) and a party who demands, “Why don’t you strip, Jamshed, so I can see if you’re suitable or not” (244)—a reduction of the body to a consumer product to be inspected before

purchase. These instances cannot be mended into the language of tactical agency or strategic self-presentation. They are violations, and the novel records them as such. The cumulative pressure of this economy reaches its crisis point when Jamshed, arrested on one instance, reflects: “If I could have killed myself, I’d have done it that night” (246)—the single clearest utterance in the novel of how the logic of commodification has driven him. And the novel’s sharpest articulation of public shame arrives when Jami sees his own photograph in a newspaper under the headline “Gigolo King of Calcutta” (292)—a moment of violent visibility that makes him feel, in his own words, “queer and ashamed.” The city’s gaze, when it finally turns on him, does not recognize the complex subject the novel has sketched; it produces only a spectacle.

A second limit concerns the narrative silences that the novel maintains around Jami’s own erotic interiority. For all its honesty about the social and economic dimensions of Jami’s sex work, the novel is notably restrained about what Jami himself desires. We know what his clients want from him; we do not know, with any depth or specificity, what he wants from or with them. We do not know whether his encounters involve pleasure, indifference, or the careful management of a body that is professionally deployed but personally withheld. This silence is, as this paper has argued, significant as a narrative strategy: it resists the pathologization of Jami’s sexuality that a psychology-heavy account might invite. But it also forecloses an important dimension of his humanity. The male sex worker’s erotic interiority—his desire, his pleasure, his relationship to his own body not as a commodity but as a site of feeling—remains unrepresented, which means that even a reading as attentive as this one can only go so far into the experience that the novel stages. There is a residual gap here that a subsequent study, perhaps one drawing on psychoanalytic frameworks, might address.

V. Conclusion

This paper began with the observation that Jami arrives in Kolkata with nothing but his body. It is worth ending by reflecting on what that body has done by the close of the novel—not in terms of the social mobility it has enabled or the aspirations it has served, but in terms of what it has revealed about the city and about the theoretical frameworks through which we try to understand gender, sexuality, and power in postcolonial urban India. Jami’s body has moved through the city’s social strata in ways that no other resource available to him could have enabled. It has entered spaces—the Alipore drawing room, the Kolkata hotel suite, the complicated intimacies of wealthy and lonely women—that ethnic and class exclusion would otherwise have kept permanently sealed. And in moving through these spaces, it has epitomised a social geography of desire that the city officially does not

acknowledge: a geography in which respectable women want subaltern bodies, in which class hierarchies are crossed and recrossed in the dark, and in which the carefully maintained boundary between the bhadrakalok world and its constitutive outside turns out to be far more porous, and mutually dependent, than either side would like to admit.

What the theoretical frameworks deployed in this paper allow us to see is that this geography is not incidental to the novel's concerns but central to them. *Kalkatta* is, among other things, a novel about the sexual economy of a postcolonial city—about who desires whom, about what desires are permitted to be visible and what desires must be conducted in shadows, about the relationship between the city's official self-presentation and the unofficial economies that sustain it. Jami's queered masculinity is the lens through which this sexual economy becomes visible. His body, performed differently in different registers and for different patrons, is the instrument through which the novel probes the contradictions of bhadrakalok normativity. And his aspiration—to belong to Kolkata as a citizen, not merely as a service provider—is the novel's way of insisting that even the most instrumentalized of human beings has a claim on recognition that exceeds his economic function.

The novel's title, as this paper noted at the outset, is a mispronunciation—the city's name as pronounced by those who have never been allowed to belong to it. Kalkatta, neither Calcutta, nor Kolkata: slightly off, slightly outside, perpetually marked by its own outsidership. Jami's masculinity works in exactly the same way. It is always slightly off-register, never quite fitting the template that the city's sexual norms provide, always performing from a position of exteriority that is both its limitation and its peculiar strength. It is, in this sense, the perfect symbol of the novel's larger project: the insistence that the city can only be truly known from the outside, by those who have been refused the comfort of belonging, and who therefore see it, with terrible clarity, for what it actually is.

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