



All That Jazz

& Other Pathbreaking Tales

A Romance Novella and 10 Short Stories

Lopamudra Banerjee



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Publishing Solutions by



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Dedication

To my friends and family, my old scars and faithful allies, the cities I have lived in, all of whom have made a storyteller of me

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Foreword

The book is a collection of ten short stories and one romance novella. The romance novella, ‘*All that Jazz*’ is marked by a fluid and unrestrained style, the lyrical cadences leave the reader’s heart throbbing with a melody all its own.

“She shrunk, slowly, surreptitiously, into a shadow of dark circles, seething, lingering in columns of smoke, burnt out conversations and the bubbly froth of forgotten kisses.” Who can resist words such as these?

Lopa Banerjee writes with an impassioned intensity, so reminiscent of Kamala Das and in a few scenes in the title story, ‘All that jazz’, her depiction of the scenes of physical intimacy reminded me of D.H Lawrence.

In the rest of the ten stories in the collection, one hears the strangulated notes of unsung songs, the strumming of an acoustic guitar and also the soothing notes of *Rabindra Sangeet*. As one turns pages, one glimpses the contours of seductive silhouettes and also sniffs the whiff of time’s indelible conspiracy, smelling the fragrant petrichor of long forgotten lands, hearing the sweet- whisperings of unadulterated love rising above the conceited human cacophony.

Before you realize it, you are lost in the wintry fog of the

characters' smudged conversations, the heart attuned to the pulsating of a fierce passion, often choked with overwhelming nostalgia, encapsulating myriad sunsets and sunrises.

I feel, the following line from the title story is the essence of this collection-vignettes of life forming myriad tunes coalescing into a seamless flow.

“I tell you, life is nothing but an unknown trail which we all have plunged into, head-on, with the various different tunes from all directions merging seamlessly into one subterranean flow.”

Thus engrossed, one inadvertently starts decoding the gnashed, resurrected language of bruised memory, feeling an itching in one's own raw wounds and being whipped by a strong gust of wind, as surreal moments from one's own life entwine, swirling before misty eyes, and enveloping one in an embrace of a jagged silence. There is a churning of a whirlpool of emotions and the forgotten contours of a bygone era furtively take shape. What eloquent power of language! What a sensuous delight!

I will not be guilty of hyperbole, if I say that this collection of one novella and ten short stories, is an intoxicating symphony, which serenades one with its notes- oft soothing, oft disturbing, oft making one's eyes tingle with unshed tears, and oft making one burst into a song- wistful and nostalgic, pining for those roseate moments buried under the palimpsest of time.

Dr. Santosh Bakaya

Author, Poet, Academician,

TedX speaker, Multiple Award-winner for Literature and Writing

Introduction

I have been following Lopamudra Banerjee's literary career with interest almost from its inception. I have read her as a powerful poet, and as a translator, especially of Tagore, as well as a superb non-fiction writer who excels at the art of the memoir in her book 'Thwarted Escape: An Immigrant's Wayward Journey'. As a result of all this she won the Reuel International Prize twice for excellence in literature and writing. This is my first chance to also speak of her as a writer of fiction. This is her first collection of short stories with a romantic novella in it titled 'All That Jazz.'

Lopa has already won accolades as a poet and translator, but here we find that she has matured much in her art, the art of writing and of literature, and the novella in this book especially, with its unforgettable 'heroine', Amrita, and its other three characters of Joydeep, Anindita (Annie) and Christopher is noteworthy. The story holds our interest throughout with a very clear delineation of settings that show a sound knowledge of the same on the part of the writer, whether in India or USA. The plot is modernist in its interweaving of poetry and lyrics, with one chapter being an email, but the power of Lopa's writing is the abandon and boldness with which she writes, intensely, and her sensual and sensory descriptions throughout. Long after the story ends, the character of Amrita will haunt us, with

her ability to make choices that scar her, but also make her a feisty and fiery woman. A woman who refuses to go the way that others want her to, thus becoming a feminist, though this leads her sometimes to conform, as at the beginning and at the end to unwittingly become the nemesis they say she will become or as she is destined to become, with her so called disobedience to tradition in perhaps being responsible for her mother's death. Her character is definitely a dynamic one that changes in the course of the novella, showing Lopa's awareness of technique. The best part of the novella in typical modernist fashion is its open-endedness as we do not know which way the future will go for Amrita or the other characters in the novella.

After the novella comes short stories, all of which show a restless expansionist who tries out various methods of narrating a story, as for instance the story 'Park Street' shifts to first person point of view from 'All That Jazz' which is in two points of view mainly, that of Anindita's and Amrita's, both having their own compelling back stories. To sum up, here is a debut collection of ten stories and one novella that absolutely has to be read as a welcome first collection of fiction, often searing in its style and content as the author gives it her all, and at other times detailed enough to keep us engrossed in it. In every way, this is a first collection worth reading.

Dr Koshy AV

Author, Poet, Academician,

TedX speaker, Multiple Award-winner for Literature and Writing

Acknowledgments

This collection of stories, long and short is the outcome of some deep, persistent periods of eccentric bouts in writing fiction inspired by life, and some long periods of procrastination. Somehow, I feel I have been able to connect the dots, and hence, I convey my deepest and heartfelt thanks to:

Dr. Santosh Bakaya, Dr. A.V. Koshy, two exemplary authors and academicians for writing the beautiful foreword and introduction to this collection of stories.

My former professor of English and the former Dean, Faculty of Arts, Calcutta University, Dr. Sanjukta Dasgupta for her unconditional support, motivating me for my humble literary endeavors.

My writing circle friends Rhiti Chatterjee Bose, Ipsita Ganguly, Gopa Bhattacharya, Antara Nanda Mondal, Sunil Kaushil, Meenakshi M. Singh, Satbir Chadha, Geethanjali Dilip, Sunita Singh, Sarmita Dey, Joyce Yarrow, Priscilla Rice, Kalpna Singh-Chitnis, Sunil Sharma sir, Jagari Mukherjee, Saheli Mitra, Sufia Khatoon, Nikhat Mahmood, Kabir Deb, Amit Shankar Saha and many others for believing in me as a storyteller, for always encouraging the spirit of the writer within me and letting me believe that I am a wordsmith,

above everything else. Special thanks and gratitude to Rhiti Chatterjee Bose for the brilliant artwork of hers as the cover of my book.

A few journals/e-zines and anthologies where some of the stories of this collection have found their home earlier, including *Setu: the International Bilingual mag*, *Café Dissensus*, *Plethora mag*, *SILHOUETTE I & II and Other Fiction*.

My parents who are no more in the physical plane, but whose blessings and faith in my creative journey keep me going.

My family, including my husband Shamik and my daughters Srobona and Sharanya for keeping me grounded and for bearing with me during my most eccentric days when the stories have taken shape in my mind.

My God, and my inner sanctum, not necessarily residing in temples, mosques or churches, but in the bounty of life around, and in the gift of human language.

“You may shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes, you may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I’ll rise!”

- **Maya Angelou**

“I want to be clear about this. If you wrote from experience, you’d get maybe one book, maybe three poems. Writers write from empathy.”

- **Nikki Giovanni**

All That Jazz
A Romance Novella

Chapter 1

Tireless, she meandered. The city looked like a painted whore with her chipped off nail polish, smudged kohl, smashed lips. It was suffocating, as she breathed its poetry of melancholy, yet it was liberating, as she felt the morning *raga* of the city. The cars cruised their way into the zigzagging highways. The numbness burnt her. She shrunk, slowly, surreptitiously, into a shadow of dark circles, seething, lingering in columns of smoke, burnt out conversations and the bubbly froth of forgotten kisses.

The mist and the sporadic orphaned tears that stung in Amrita's eyes, appeared known, all over again. But why? Hadn't the grief that had birthed it, long been murdered? There, Amrita had emerged under the same flyover of Gariahat, five years later, looking with her intent yet distant eyes at the people swarming out of tunnels, she had emerged in a city of chaos, sweating, swearing cuss words, waving hands, smoking incessantly.

“*Akashē chhorano megheṛ kachhakachhi/Dekha jaay amader bari...*” (Amid the clouds dispersed all over the sky, there we see our home, our love nest.) The tune of a long-forgotten, familiar song of *Mohin-er Ghoraguli*, Joy's favorite Bangla rock band wafted in the smoky air of a coffee shop where she caught

herself, face-to-face with her much younger self in the mild chill of a December evening. Joy, a scar of her university days, used to swear by *Mohin-er Ghoraguli*, LRB and Pink Floyd, eat, drink and dream rock music. His life had been an unwritten rock song, with its sudden rise and crescendo, its jarring notes, its intoxicating symphony, meant for those who could lose themselves in its turbulent waters.

“Most of the others are useless, anyway.”

He would say to her in their heydays, an unbridled arrogance seeping through his voice. He would display enough pride in his father’s designation as a forest officer, in his upbringing in the pastoral environs of the hills in North Bengal that he would say, brought music and poetry in his life in the first place. He was also proud of the very fact that though his father had strictly emphasized on the importance and urgency of sitting for the civil services examinations after his Masters’ he, on his part, had strictly maintained his rebellious stance. Yes, he was rebellious enough to discard that idea and perform rock and jazz music all over the city of Kolkata and the outskirts with a vengeance only he knew and understood.

“Was it here that I discovered Joydeep first, in that dainty little coffee shop, where the chaos of unknown voices spiraled out of control?”

“Wasn’t it here that we burst into unrestrained peals of laughter as we celebrated our first year of dating each other? What were the words that we had first said to each other?” She thought. Was it the sharp, shooting rain of the lyrics

of his songs, which were still sown as overgrown seeds in her innermost recesses that hungered for just one chance-encounter with him?

“Was it here that our differences soared, between the burst of our growing silences?” She asked herself in between the abrupt halts of traffic signals, shuddering, as she tried holding on to the embers of her memories. It seemed as if she was tied to him and his professed love with a silk rope, an invisible one for years.

“It’s just a short-lived University romance, it won’t last forever, anyway. Just trust me, Didi, let Amrita come to USA and resume her life here...let her explore a university life in the States and then eventually find someone worthy enough to settle down with, she will get over this fever sooner than she will realize.”

Nikhil Mama, her mother’s youngest brother from Washington DC had remarked when he came to visit her mother, six years ago on a chilly December evening that carried almost the same nip in the air.

Nikhil mama had apparently dated as many as nine women at the prime of his youth before getting married to Minnie, his half-American, half-North Indian wife of twenty years. Each of his experiences of loving and wooing and then eventually breaking up, according to his words, was a ‘learning curve’, ‘a worthy lesson in being human enough.’

“It won’t bruise as much as you think in your mind that it will.” He kept pouring in unsolicited words of advice in her

ears each day, during the three weeks of his India trip.

It did bruise when she wrote her last love letter in a plea before splitting up; it did bruise when their fingers and lips slipped into each other, when she gulped the pain of their thwarted union.

Chapter 2

At home, the relationship wasn't a secret anymore. Every single soul in the house asked Amrita if she was really 'committed' to that wayward, bohemian indie musician guy who refused to have a 'career', apart from his touring rock band which they had lovingly named 'All That Jazz'.

"Have you ever thought if it is a momentary whim? What future does it have for any of you?"

"Have you gone nuts, thinking you can walk out any time with a worthless, aimless boy? Why, you don't even know if he is capable of providing for you! ...Well, so you are going to provide for him, is that the idea? How do you think it can work?"

A slap. Words of cussing for a girl not abiding to the diktats of propriety and self-righteousness. Droplets of blood trickling from the corner of her lips.

"Get out of the house at once, you shameless girl, if you dare to call and meet that vagabond, good-for-nothing guy yet again. You have no right to stay in this house if you don't agree to our codes of conduct!" Her father had shouted on top of his voice.

“Get yourself a life as all your friends will eventually get one. And why, you don’t even seem to care for a better future to keep yourself going. Look at your cousins in our house, Raja dada getting settled in Silicon Valley in the States, Bony didi getting that wonderful fellowship in Australia and marrying a Doctor there! And look at you, all you care about these days is singing and writing songs in that rock band of yours with that worthless scum of a guy...” Her mother didn’t support her father in everything he did or said, but in this case, she became his closest ally.

“Ma, please... Joy was a topper at Presidency in his Bachelors and doing quite well in his Masters’ too, contrary to your uninformed remarks about him!”

“Topper! That seems history now...Not a single soul alive knows what he will do after his Masters’, not even he himself, or his parents! A worthless pauper, he will be, feeding off his father’s resources!”

“Ma, please, we are trying our best to come up with experimental music! You must know the facts before remarking so senselessly. We are quite a rage in the college fests in and around Kolkata! And why, we also get calls from outside Kolkata to perform...” She retorted, in the midst of her muffled tears.

“Experimental! How much money have you generated from your ‘experimental’ music yet? And how much respect? What are your future plans with your life?”

“Sky is the limit, Ma, if only you would be capable of understanding. Besides, you have conveniently forgotten that I have managed to create my own bank account in HDFC a year back! We are saving our resources and hope to make it big...”

“Sky, my foot! Joydeep’s own parents, I hear, have somewhat disowned him. And their equations are different, they have lived their lives in the hills for all those years. But what about us, our joint family, our relatives in Kolkata? And how much money have you saved from those useless shows? Are you going to sell off all my jewelry to make yourself the next Madonna, and your Joydeep, the next Michael Jackson?”

“But even celebrities all over the world have had their share of struggles in their early life, Ma...if only you and Baba would be sensitive enough to understand...” She muttered to herself in desperation.

She gulped in all of her parents’ mocking, disapproving words, their abuses hurled at Joydeep, occasionally shouting her heart out, occasionally choosing to brush it all aside, till the last day they met at their most frequented park near Rabindra Sarovar. How long could she fight alone?

.....It was yet another letter, to be piled up along with her other collectables in Joy’s clumsy, cluttered makeshift bedroom in his awkward rented home in New Alipore. A home which she still remembers as a cozy cocoon, unrestrained, bereft of the glaring eyes and voyeuristic remarks of her own stifling joint family which she detested. She would remember the room often, even now, a room where Joy managed to live

alone with his meager resources and dragged her into, to give him company. A room where she had torn open the core of her femininity, lost her precious virginity, led astray by an uncontrollable surge of passion. A room where she allowed Joy to explore her with wild abandon.

“Not now...not now, please, Joy, first let us...” She trembled at the beginning of the wild foreplay as Joy’s hands trembling with passion grabbed her, held her tight in an undaunted want.

“Let us what? Tell me? Let us get the sanction of your family of twelve conservative chauvinists? Or else, we must not touch each other?” Sarcasm danced in his eyes as he touched her, impatient like a child, to be one with her.

“No, not only that...what about your parents? To think that in their absence, we have been indulging in this sort of...” She managed to utter in her feeble, trembling voice. “Indulging in what, damn it? And my parents don’t live here, in the first place, *bujhechhish* (you get it)? Don’t be such a prude!” Joydeep made her lie down with one bold stroke of his dominant hands, and pressed his body against her.

In his body, as she surrendered, the first experience of making love in her life, she found the vast expanse of the ocean, the rims and crests between mountains, the dense forest with a haunting, unforgettable essence. As they shed off their clothes in the silhouetted darkness of the room, she looked at the window, the street lights blinking from the curtains, half-drawn.

“Let’s go...it’s getting quite dark now...you know how I will have to struggle with lies at home!” She teased him, giggling.

“What? You spoilsport, see what I do to you!” He replied in pseudo-anger, and sooner than she knew, his deep, passionate kisses filled her face, her eyes, her neck, the nape of her neck, her full breasts. When did he become so skilled in this game, Amrita wondered, as Joy lifted her in his arms and laid her tenderly on the bed, unbuttoned his shirt, and threw it on the floor.

The touch, the embrace that conjoined them in that small, untidy room, smelling of stale food and recycled melodies brought the two of them in a rhapsody, erupting in waves, engulfing their beings, satiating their parched hearts. The union of the two bodies seemed inevitable and eternal, like the river Ganga converging with the vastness of the ocean. They listened to their heartbeats racing, pounding against each other, as Joy drew his beau and music partner Amrita closer to his warm, inviting chest. A dormant volcano had just erupted, and they felt the lub-dub of their hearts pressing against each other in the messed-up room.

Within no time, they were kissing each other deeply, relentlessly, like there was no tomorrow. The wild, elemental Adam and his cherry-lipped, quivering Eve had waited for this moment of bliss since forever, engrossed in exploring each other’s bodies. The fire of their longings had consumed them deeply; Amrita knew it would rummage her body and being as long as it lasted. It seemed to last forever, the hunger and the eagerness to explore it all. Amrita felt the profound

undulations inside her body take her to the zenith of an intolerable pleasure.

Their heaving breaths intertwined with each other, and she answered, panting.

“Joy, please, *chhere* de, enough, not any more...I want to go home.”

“Why, you didn’t like anything of it? You don’t desire me?”

“It’s not that, you fool, you know that’s far from the truth. It’s just that...I don’t know where it will all end...where it will lead us...”

“But why do you want it to end, pray?”

Joy locked her lips with his, with intense, fiery passion, running through both their young veins.

“For God’s sake, hold thy tongue and let me love...” He uttered in her ears, and she couldn’t resist following up with her favorite lines from the verse. “Call us what you will, we are made such by love;/ Call her one, me another fly,/ We’re tapers too, and at our own cost die,/ And we in us find the eagle and the dove.” John Donne had spread his wings of poesy and their bodies adjoined, gave in to the demands of those fierce wings empowered, liberated by love.

She was too overwhelmed to utter a word. He kept looking into her eyes while thrusting harder and deeper, their libido reaching its crescendo as she let out a wild shriek, a heady concoction of an indescribable pleasure and pain. There were

numerous waves of pleasure that surged from within her, as she grasped Joy's hair, and drew his face closer and closer. He caught hold of her like she was the last thing in the entire universe before a catastrophe, his manhood ravaging her completely with steady, forceful strokes.

"We shall have children together...a boy and a girl, with names matching both of ours. I dream of their eyes, the tilt of their noses, their red lips, the arch of their little tender bodies. Don't you, Joy?" She said, clasping his hands as he lit a cigarette and took in its lingering smoke.

"Hmm, yes...but our songs, aren't they our children too?" He asked, flirting with her hair.

Making love had come to them easily in that cramped, confined maze, as easily as they would create the poems which they wrote to each other, as easily as the lyrics of the songs they would write and compose together for the umpteen number of fests where their band 'All That Jazz' took part.

....Five years had flown by in the blink of an eye, she thought, with a sigh. Years since she scalded within her, absorbing those intense episodes of being with the first man in her life. Years since the tug of war within her to stick to his side, no matter how much opposition she faced from her parents and family members, five years since she craved to break free and reclaim her own place, her own validation in the universe. Years since she could grasp the essence of the short-lived tale of love and excruciating longings, and her life as an immigrant woman in a foreign land that followed, as an inevitable turn of her destiny.

Wasn't that long, narrow alley in New Alipore the one that they both tread once, leading to Joydeep's rented apartment, his 'bachelor's den,' as he used to call it back then? As destiny would have it, she was trudging through that same alley after having coffee and snacks with an old acquaintance in a newly opened café in the area. Or was it something that she was dying to do subconsciously since she stepped foot in the city? She didn't know. She only felt Joy's invisible footsteps, mingling with hers, in the sudden burst of rapture and tears. She felt the tinkling sound of the key with which Joy used to open his apartment door and drag her inside for days. She felt the echoes of their words and kisses and the thunder of their fights whenever it was time for her to ask him about taking a job or being 'engaged' to her, whether or not their families approved.

She could see it all, hear it all, taste and sense and smell it all, their bickering, making love, their thousand spoken words and the myriad silences in between, her silent resolve to fight back her parents till the last drop of her persistence, until she couldn't take it any more.

...Yes, it was the same alley where she met Joy and pleaded to return all the letters she had written to him for three maddening, impulsive years.

"I don't think you will need those thousand stupid lines anymore". She said to him.

Lines about their future summer rental in a virgin, Gothic island with an ochre pool where kingfishers swim, where granules of strawberry and pink roses swim in the tranquil

water... Lines about their future twins, a boy and a girl who appear and vanish with swift switchboard clicks, whose tiny bodies sway on a leafy swing, the boy and the girl carved in their mashed-up images, in their bones, blood...

“I could have told you to tear them away, but for my own sake, I would want them back just to look at them in posterity to remind myself how foolish I had been.” She sighed. “I see... but you really want them back? Are you sure you won’t want to come back to me when you will glance through them again, some time in future?”

“I don’t know about that yet. Only time can tell...but no, it was ‘your’ decision, after all, to give no name, no destination to our relationship.”

“But why is loving you with all my might not enough? Why should there be a destination always?”

Joy stared, with a forlorn air of indecision. He knew the moment might be drawing near, but he was living in a fool’s paradise, breathing in the short-lived fairytale of their togetherness in the shady nooks of their university campus, inhaling its aroma as long as it lasted.

At his rented apartment which he called ‘home,’ his parents sometimes arrived, especially his authoritative father who would almost always ask about his studies and his choice of a career. Most certainly, the son’s answers were not enough to bring his father any amount of satisfaction. He knew for sure he wouldn’t sit for the civil services exams to prove his worth to his father, brimming with angst. He knew for sure he couldn’t

join the elite international school in North Bengal as a faculty after his Masters', which his influential father had almost decided as a second career option for him, in case he couldn't crack the civil services. He knew he would have to abandon all these and much more that many of his peers deemed as their destiny. He also knew he would lose Amrita soon, while trudging that rocky road to nowhere.

He knew Amrita might not remain an integral part of 'All That Jazz' anymore, he knew the future was thorny, he knew that he needed her for his sustenance. He even believed she would come back to him wherever in the world she went away, as soon as she would feel a gnawing pain in her chest, a parched emptiness in her heart. But once he had sealed in his mind the thought that 'All That Jazz' needed to stay, in spite of his father's incessant warnings, in spite of the stunningly beautiful love of his life breaking herself free from him, he knew there would be no looking back, come what may.

"I do not know what to say if you insist on breaking up today, right now. *Amake tukro tukro kore dibi?* Won't you take your hand in mine for one last time before you let me blow away in shards?" Joy tried hard to flash a smile, teasing her with a sugar-coated prose version of the lyrics of a song he had just composed a few days back, and was waiting to share with his girlfriend.

"Shut up, Joy! I just want us both to get real, for one bloody moment." She had screamed, desperate and lost.

Joy had grabbed her shoulders again, striving to open the

End of the sample preview.

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