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## **Gunter Grass and his Relation with Kolkata**

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One item in The Statesman newspaper read: "Nobel For A Part Calcuttan" after Günter Grass received the 1999 Nobel Prize in Literature. All three of the writer's visits to the city a brief excursion in 1975, a stay of over five months in 1986–1987, and a return in 2005 were characterized by the headline. It was 1975 when Günter Grass first set foot in India. His stay in India was brief because he was invited to give a speech in New Delhi by the Indian government. The talk, titled "According to Rough Estimates," shamelessly attacked the government's failure to address poverty.

It's not a simple connection to put into words, because being in each other's presence has brought about equal parts joy and rebellion. Calcutta, or Kolkata as it is now known, had mixed feelings for Grass, who passed away on April 13th in Germany at the age of 87. In an interview with film producer Mrinal Sen that took place in 1975, Grass allegedly referred to Calcutta as "God's excrements." In his book "My Broken Love: Günter Grass Through India and Bangladesh," Martin Kampchen describes this episode in detail. The 1984 interview with Subhoranjan Dasgupta, a journalist, revealed that Calcutta "changed me radically" according to Grass.

In a 1989 speech he delivered to the Club of Rome, an international think tank, the famous author alluded to the city. His 1959 first novel, *Die Blechtrommel* (The Tin Drum), startled readers all over the globe. According to Kampchen's account in *My Broken Love*, he included a short chapter about Calcutta in his 1999 book *Mein Jahrhundert* (My Century).

Their connection did not take long to become strong. One chapter of his 1977 book *Der Butt* (The Flounder) takes place in Calcutta. The 1988 publication and translation of *Zunge Zeigen* (Show Your Tongue) depicts a goddess Kali and is based on his 1986 visit. Both bear witness to the writer's profound influence from Calcutta and his persistently pessimistic and viciously caustic perception of the city.



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He wrote about his travels to India in 1977 in *Der Butt* (The flounder), particularly in the chapter "Vasco returns," "It alludes to the Portuguese explorer and colonizer Rco da Gama, who lived in the fourteenth century. Additionally, he made stops in Delhi, Kolkata, and Mumbai. The author's life took a dramatic turn after visiting the Calcutta Social Project with Grass. Gracha and Manoharpukur are slums in South Kolkata. In 1969, a group of middle-class women began the Calcutta Social Project as a social partnership experiment to fight urban poverty, stimulate non-governmental activities, and solve basic nutrition issues. The grass settled on coming back. He and his wife, Ute Grunert, returned to the city eleven years later. *Zunge zeigen* develops into a work that absorbs this experience in two parts: the confessional and the diary. His frustration with politics and the academy is reflected in the Calcutta Social Project's struggle against urban poverty and its non-governmental action practices.

"Why not a poem about a pile of shit that God dropped and named Calcutta," In his book *The Flounder*, Grass used the dramatized words of real-life explorer Vasco da Gama. "How it grows, swarms, stinks, and lives. "Frankfurt would have been the result if God had shattered a pile of concrete," he wrote, drawing a comparison to the German city. He would later claim at a Delhi event that "the problems of Calcutta" are global issues affecting all of India.

"What I am flying away from: repetition that claims to be news, from Germany and Germany, the way two deadly foes, armed to the teeth, grow ever more alike, from insights achieved from too close up..." He detailed his departure from West Germany in 1986 prior to unification in *Show Your Tongue*, outlining his intentions to settle down in Calcutta.

When all was said and done, Calcutta was the force that pulled the author out of his Eurocentric life. Being a state guest of the Indira Gandhi government surrounded by the imperial grandeur of the city's Raj Bhavan, as well as Grass's experiences as a commoner in a garden home in Baruipur and an artist's in-laws at Lake



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Town, the city could evoke, in many ways, the conflict and contradictions that he had endured during his first two visits.

“In *The Flounder*, I come to Calcutta as Vasco da Gama. It’s a polemic. I’m explaining my broken love for Calcutta. You only come back if you love something,” Grass spoke about his 1986 visit to Calcutta in an interview with Darryl D'Monte for *India's Illustrated Weekly*.

Even though he said it was a city that "eats its own excrement," he was still very much in favor of it. "If Calcutta is dying, then every city is dying," he said a questioner in response to then-prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's controversial comments regarding the city at an event in Delhi. The essay about Grass's journey in India by journalist and novelist Khushwant Singh documents this.

Grass explained his fascination on Calcutta in the interview.: “People in Calcutta don’t complain from morning to evening about their misery; they are alive. And if you look at the face of rich people in Germany and we are still rich there you don’t find many people laughing in the street. They are very serious and very eager to go about (their business). This I didn’t see in Calcutta.”

His forthrightness made him an admired and reviled figure. It was "painfully" revealed to Mrinal Sen by Vasco that he had been "misquoted" in *The Flounder*. “This book reminded me of an essay in bad taste by the Italian film-maker (Pier Paolo) Pasolini called *The Scent Of India*, written after visiting the country for just a few days," Sen wrote in a letter to Kampchen.

When Grass showed up at the home of poet, translator, and proprietor of the Writers Workshop publishing business in Kolkata, Prof. P. Lal, in 1975, for an English poetry reading, he became embroiled in a more serious conflict. Because of "literature which refuses to confront reality," Grass was disappointed that Bengali poetry did not address societal realities. In his book *My Broken Love*, Professor Lal explained that



grass was present when “a preconceived idea” about Indians who use English; “this was somehow not the proper thing to do”.

Zunge zeigen clearly has a plethora of confusing and uncertain situations. Poetry readings in *The Flounder* would be extensive: The bustees are not far away as forty individuals sit spiritually on fiber mats under a fan propelled by a draft outside the windows. Their clothes are loose-fitting.

“Vasco admires the fine editions of books, the literary chitchat, the imported pop posters. Like everyone else he nibbles pine nuts and doesn’t know which of the lady poets he would like to fuck if the opportunity presented itself.” Subsequently, a gathering of Bengali authors and poets was arranged at Duke's restaurant by journalist Sankarlal Bhattacharya. Although Grass much enjoyed Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, he admitted to Dasgupta in 1984 that he was woefully ignorant about modern Indian writing.

For more than ten years before he won the Nobel, people in Bengal would often ask him how likely he was to win. When he stated that, he was probably irritated, “You people make too much of the Nobel because your great poet (Rabindranath) Tagore won it”, cheery when he chimed in again with a comment, “I think after Tagore I shall be the second Bengali to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.”

Worth mentioning is Monika Shafi's discussion of the postcolonial critic's positionality in her examination of Grass's work: “To Grass, India presents an aesthetic challenge which makes him question the meaning of art and his own role as an artist. . . . [Ingeborg] Drewitz and Grass, however, seem unable to recognize the position of authority they assume, and by which they perpetuate precisely those Eurocentric stereotypes from which they so urgently wish to escape.”



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In contrast to Shafi's assertion that Grass lacks the capacity for self-criticism, I perceive how Grass's scrutiny of that particular authoritative figure predominates throughout his work. He feels uneasy dealing with significant parts of Germany's past in his play, which is why he temporarily escapes from Germany intellectually.

Grass's work elucidates why the West maintains its monopoly on historicity. Because of its status as an immutable starting point, the East is unable to achieve a Hegelian transcendental historicity, but it is endlessly available to the West as it reimagines its own historical development on a global scale. In Grass's work, there are more and more instances of ambiguity, of shifting from stereotyping to self-criticism, which counteract this ahistorical immutability. As I reread his work, I find myself questioning and revising nearly every point I made in my initial analysis. Grass, like his heroine Kali, has a strange knack for destruction, and he manages to find creative energy even in a city that is overrun with trash. Grass reveals something that prevents him from mystifying or aestheticizing a "third world" that has so far been amenable to neat packaging and compression. The richness of his writing, drawings, and poetry is a reflection of the fact that he carries with him not just his own European intellectual heritage but also resources pertaining to India.

Like a city famously entangled in its own paradoxes and contradictory stances, Günter Grass appears to have mirrored the nuances of this city in his own distinctive manner.



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