



A Bad Character

Deepiti Kapoor

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Deepti Kapoor

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A highly charged fiction debut about a young woman in India, and the love that both shatters and transforms her

She is twenty, restless in New Delhi. Her mother has died; her father has left for Singapore.

He is a few years older, just back to India from New York.

When they meet in a café one afternoon, she—lonely, hungry for experience, yearning to break free of tradition—casts aside her fears and throws herself headlong into a love affair, one that takes her where she has never been before.

Told in a voice at once gritty and lyrical, mournful and frank, *A Bad Character* marks the arrival of an astonishingly gifted new writer. It is an unforgettable hymn to a dangerous, exhilarating city, and a portrait of desire and its consequences as timeless as it is universal.

A Bad Character Details

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From Reader Review A Bad Character for online ebook

Jd2408 says

I read the book last night. Came back from dinner and finished it in one sitting, it is hard to put down. The books grips you and sucks you into its 'darkness'. Very gripping, flows very well and breaks the boundaries of traditional moral high-ground. Its about love and sex, poverty and wealth, the tiredness of living in a Delhi that belongs to men, its about passion, drugs, lies and dreams of a young free woman.

I liked the dramatized characters, the extremism, the madness, the ease with which the author describe the pain, dirt, web of dark Delhi that many may not believe exists.

Overall I think it's an extremely well written book, a fantastic read, heavy I must confess, a story which is hard hitting but enjoyable yet can be read quickly ... a story that will stay in my head for a while.

Definitely worth reading.

Nick says

A romantic and sentimental ode to Old Delhi and its dust, heat, sweat, violence, faith, and passion--above all the intensity American readers associate with India. It becomes an allegory for the modernization of India via the obsessive control of the narrator's lover, a Westernized man with a God complex, obsessed with the "future", which for New Delhi looks an awful lot like a shopping mall. Kapoor uses sex as her illustration of the power struggle, sometimes a little crassly if you ask me.

Devyani Saini says

Haunting and surprisingly real. Gave me shivers. The writing is lyrical but raw, leaving no room for doubt. Somewhat disappointing end, but it was to be expected. Will be reading more by this author.

Stephen says

this novel was about female desires and corruption in delhi felt that the novel itself was a good idea but the author should of developed it further and skimmed around the plot abit but this book maybe not going to be everyone's cup of tea though.

Isha says

Narrated in vignettes, altering fluidly between the past and the present, the novel poignantly encapsulates the

angst of a middle class young girl, desirous of breaking free the manacles of societal and filial expectations.

Elucidated as a voice of the twenty-first century Delhi, *A Bad Character* is the story of a young girl, Idha in her twenties, narrated ten years later in retrospect by her much mature self. Left alone after the death of her mother and the absent father who abandons her, Idha comes to live “in east Delhi over the filthy Yamuna, in the care of Auntie”. Raw, young, inexperienced, she constantly writhes between the societal expectations of the other “proper” Aunties of the world to be “a good girl”, “...to be same as them, to smile the right way, to say the right things, to be grateful at all times, to be seen and not heard” and her desire to rupture the shackles placed on her by society and be free. Shrieking to escape from the monotony of her bourgeois life, to break free from the claustrophobia of her aunt’s world; she encapsulates her desolation, “The agony of being alive, of functioning like a human being. Can you understand this? This is who I am.”

Restless, living in the twenty-first Delhi which is “no place for a woman in the dark unless she has a man and a car and a car and a gun”, she meets her nameless lover in a café in the Khan Market who is “ugly with dark skin”, who has “something of the animal in him”, who is “not a typical ‘Delhi boy’”, “a vagabond who’s been scrubbed clean”. Pitted against the boys “they want me to marry”, he is a “bad character” who turns her on, takes her to the forgotten monuments, lost dreams, the dark drug labyrinths of Paharganj, “one of those places good Delhiites don’t go”; to a black market of foreign films, to the rave parties, to the “foundation emptiness of Gurgaon” where the future resides.

Resembling to the landscape of the city which is ugly, black, fetid, rotten and putrid; her lover is also ugly, dark skinned which “turns him into a mystery”. Part inquisitive, part restless, part defiant; she consciously tries to rebel against the prejudice of her peers that treats dark skin as “ugly, poor, wrong”. However, remaining very much a product of her conditioning, she is fixated by his darkness, “he looks like a servant”, “combined with his ugliness, his confidence, his dark skin, it’s intriguing”, “but more than this I have misgivings about his face...the question of what it will finally say about me”, “he is still ugly, I am still beautiful”, “...his face was ungoverned, appearing monstrous”. Although sullen to her aunt’s proposition to get her married to a rich, settled guy; she desires the same thing in her lover “that he would become rich, successful, respectable. Respectable above all else, because of his ideas and the wealth they would bring”. Even after his death, she chooses a rich businessman who provides her with a small apartment in Defence Colony and pays for her apartment till the time she finds a real job for herself.

Naïve and untamed, she plunges into the unknown and dangerous world of her lover marked by her first sexual experience: “He is a god to me. I’ve never known with such certainty what my body is for.” Bored by the domesticity, humdrum of her aunt’s static world, she keeps going back to him, “he who is setting me free”. However, like everyone else around her, he tries to tame her, to possess her completely, “It’s not the girl that he desires, it’s this possession of her, what he’s made, the dressed-up thing.” Delirious, she lets him make her “a lump of wet clay”, “I’d walk for him and he’d obliterate me, take everything...”, “...and know that I was owned”. However, still desirous to get released of her chains, Idha doesn’t give in completely and this makes him angry, “...angry because I leave, because of the way I guard myself, the way I never let go, as if I’ve learned nothing from him.” Set on the path of self-destruction, the duo plays out their love story till the very dark end. Like the city, where the violence is residing just beneath the surface, her nameless lover also gets violent with her when defied, hits her, spins her around; shove her to the ground in his ultimate act of trying to take possession over her.

Inept to deal with the darkness, the loneliness of the city, the city “rotten with the sons of men”, she too, descends into the world of drugs, sex with “the urge to destroy”. However, standing on the periphery with no one to claim her, tell her what to do, “she felt the bliss she’d been searching for from the start.” Ending her

story on a triumphant note, the narrator declares “...Fuck you, I survive.”

A beautifully written prose, skillfully delineating the coming-of-age story of a young girl, exploring the psyche of the narrator in vivid details, this book is highly recommended for anyone interested in bourgeois lifestyle of the twenty-first century Delhi.

Rajat Ubhaykar says

Breathlessly narrated memoir posing as fiction. Has superb impressionistic prose with some of the best descriptions of Delhi I've read (and I'm counting *City of Djinns* and *Capital* here). Female sexual awakening & the perils of living in Delhi are the central themes of *A Bad Character*; how a 20-year-old college girl discovers life beyond classes and staid middle-class existence, aided by an 'ugly', dark, animal-like man (who looks like a servant, if not for his New York accent) whom she picks up at a cafe in Khan Market, because it turns her on, him being ugly and her being beautiful. He takes her to places in the city she would have never known, woos her vigorously and with considerable charm, before both of them latch on to the customary fate of rich, entitled Delhi boys who don't need to work a day in their lives: the high road of alcohol, drugs, sex and ennui. Yes, the risqué Indian novel is finally here.

I suspect the author wrote this book as therapy, in a sort of mad hurry to expel the memories of descending down the self-destructive spiral of substance abuse and casual sex out of her system. There's an honesty to it that seems autobiographical (and this cursory hypothesis is backed by an article by her on HuffPost about how Ashtanga Yoga helped her stop being a 'party girl'). However, *A Bad Character* is ultimately let down by its unimaginative plot, though narrated imaginatively, with a jagged narrative structure that alternates between first-person and third-person; it's a brave book that narrates an all too familiar tale with a style that's all her own; a slim book that you'll probably finish in a sitting, like doing a quick line of coke in the hotel bathroom.

Jessica says

I wouldn't have heard about this author or thought of reading this book if I hadn't attended the Jaipur litfest and heard her speak about it during a couple of events. To me the novel was more related to 'writing the city' in particular 'Delhi' than about a love story. The relationship between the two characters didn't come across as love but as some kind of sick, escapist obsession between a twenty-year old dying to escape her life and a twenty-eight year old who doesn't know what to do with himself and who, in my opinion, has self-destructive notions bordering on nihilism. The description of Delhi is so black and bleak even when it tries to uplift itself that the relationship between the characters falls into the descriptive black hole that the city is portrayed as. What I did like about it is that it doesn't rely too heavily on the clichés that seem to categorise Indian writing in the last few years. Having lived in Delhi for a year I could relate to some of the descriptions. It's a short novel and the language isn't heavy or emotionally demanding so it was easy enough to read in a couple of days. As a first novel, it's a great attempt and I would easily pick up the author's next book out of curiosity.

Aishwarya Saxena says

Deepti Kapoor's *A Bad Character* is about a tumultuous period in one college-going female student's life in New Delhi. Kapoor's novel seems influenced by the novels of writers like Marguerite Duras, Jean Rhys and Kate Zambreno, but it's being marketed as one of the few contemporary novels by non-white, non-Western writers that explore the intersection of female urban experience and sexuality in a South Asian city.

Kapoor's novel is about a 20-year-old protagonist whose actual name is never revealed—though, at the start of the story, she gives herself a name, Idha: “lunar, serpentine, desirous”—and her slow disintegration into a life of drugs, drink, sex, and aimless meandering. When we meet Idha, she is living with her well-meaning but utterly proper and bourgeois aunt; her mother died when she was 17 and her father has slowly drifted into a new life in Singapore that doesn't include his daughter. As Idha explains, “I don't know why it happens. I can't explain why I've been abandoned this way”. Her aunt, like most upper-middle-class Indian women, wants for her niece what she herself was trained to want: a husband, a family, a nice home, some children, comfort, and luxury if she's lucky. Idha chafes against these imposed restrictions even while dutifully fulfilling what is required of her: attending classes, hanging out with female college mates, going for “visits with Auntie”, and acquiescing to meet prospective husbands.

On the inside, however, Idha is raging, but very quietly. Alone and introverted since she was a child, Idha finds it hard to adjust to bourgeois society's expectations of *A Good Girl*: “The agony of being alive, of functioning like a human being. Can you understand this? This is who I am”. So when she meets a man—or rather, allows herself to be met by him—in a coffee shop one day, even though everything about the way he is goes against what she was raised to want, she allows herself to fall into his orbit.

Much of Idha's subsequent depiction of the events that occur feel this way: she allows things to happen to her. Little is known about what Idha wants, desires, or is curious about, except the fact that she can't bear to go on living as she always has. In one way, this is understandable—sheltered as she is, Idha's love affair with this man was one manner of trying out a life. However, this option to experiment is of course not afforded to all young women of Delhi, and Idha's story is just one very privileged perspective among the many narratives of female experience that exist in the city.

Many reviews of *A Bad Character* draw attention to how this book has arrived at the right time, since feminists outside of India, particularly Western liberal feminists, are suddenly paying attention to India after the Nirbhaya rape case made international news. What's disturbing is the silence by the majority of reviewers around the particular perspective that Idha brings: that of a privileged, financially-secure young girl who, no matter how much she experiments, will always have the safety networks of family connections, due to her class position, to see her through to relative safety, or at least help her land on her feet.

In any case, these recollections are being written by a mature, and we presume, older and wiser Idha, we learn that the only person who ends up dead is the man she was with—and though Idha refers to him as “my love”, it's hard to know if she ever loved him. If love is meant to be in the showing instead of the telling, it's hard to tell if this is a weakness of Kapoor's writing, or her intention to muddy the waters. Either way, the result feels vague, inconclusive, and not in the manner of Duras or Rhys, where the vagueness or indecipherability has a narrative goal, in that it reflects the character's psychic volatility. In Kapoor's case, it just feels like a deliberate effort at being poetic or literary to no particular end. There are also perplexing switches of narrative voice from first-person to third-person that do nothing to either anchor the story or free it from its constraints.

From the start, Idha tells us that her lover had dark skin, and was ugly: “Ugly with dark skin, with short wiry hair, with a large flat nose and eyes bursting either side like flares, with big ears and a fleshy mouth that holds many teeth.” There’s a moment when Idha lectures us: “It’s the years of conditioning that make me think his dark skin is ugly, poor, wrong. Which makes me think he looks like a servant.” This is all well and good, this awareness, but it has not translated to knowledge, as the older and wiser Idha continues to tell us that the fact of her beauty in contrast to his ugliness is what turned her on. In her society, this dark-skinned man will be thought of as ugly, more properly a servant, but Idha is held apart from this society, as someone different, someone who will actually have sex with a dark-skinned man who “looks like a servant”.

It’s hard to know whether the older Idha is aware that this fetishisation is as abhorrent as her family’s and friends’ condescension of people who look this way. When Idha loses her virginity to him, she notes that “he was a part of me, his ugliness, his black skin”. It’s an utterly disturbing observation, and not because this declaration is brave and subverting established norms, but because of its lack of self-awareness. Whatever it is, naïve and lonely Idha is shrewd enough to be well aware of her own value in contrast to a dark-skinned man when she has sex with him for the first time.

Caste and class politics are erased, both in Idha’s narrative and the reviews that praise *A Bad Character*, but a fundamental fact of Idha’s attraction to this dark-skinned, ugly man—so hot, apparently, when considered in contrast to her beauty—is that he speaks well, with an accent that sounds American, and is conveniently very rich. Idha knows it’s years of conditioning that makes her think he looks ugly, like a servant. Yet, she enjoys how he has money but doesn’t flaunt it, how his accent and “educated” voice and his manner of speaking English indicates his class position—yay, he’s not a servant!—and the unique cool factor this brings: “It marks him out as different too. Combined with his ugliness, his confidence, his dark skin, it’s intriguing. For someone who looks like him, it turns him into a mystery”. At this point I’m not sure if the reader is supposed to stop and applaud or perhaps give Idha a medal for being an affluent pretty young girl who is so vastly different from her shallow peers and female relatives that she has decided to be with an affluent ugly young man who may be mistaken for a servant because he has dark skin, but who (plot twist!) is actually not a servant.

Brave Idha! Resisting and subverting Indian middle-class norms by being with a bougie Indian man who doesn’t look the part. Slow clap?

If I sound impatient, it’s because I am. Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* is a formative, if brief, analysis of how blackness and the fetishisation of it is deployed, intentionally or not, by so-called liberal white writers. In “playing with darkness” through form and content, those canonical works actually uphold and solidify white supremacy in America and lay bare how the spectre of blackness is how the white American subject comes to know and understand itself and its place in the citizenry. Similarly, the work of “dark skin” and its spectre in Indian society, particularly middle-class, caste Indian society and specifically in the context of what is then sold and marketed as a form of liberatory, universal feminism, is worthy of analysis.

Colourism in India is, of course, produced by racism and the aftereffects of colonialism, but how does it continue to live on and take material proportions? The fear and fetishisation of dark skin is a thread that runs throughout this book but not once does Idha, who finds all things about middle-class Indian society stifling, look the matter of caste and racism squarely in the face. This would have probably been too “extreme” for a liberal novel; it would become “too political” and not “art”, presumably. On the other hand, Idha’s inability to see much beyond her own situation is the most striking symptom of her privilege. The narrative utilises her youth and femininity as a shield to preemptively protect her from criticism of being (there is such a thing) dangerously self-absorbed, and accordingly, the reviewers follow suit in taking their cues about how to think about the book by the book’s very ideology.

All this doesn't mean that Idha's lover is blameless. It seems quite obvious that he is also clearly using her to his own ends; excitement, sexual variety, the allure of forming young pretty college girls into his own image, as if they were clay. Again, the reader is meant to see this as love, and it's entirely possible that love existed between these characters, but the facts of Idha's narrative also point to a curious intermingling of misogyny (he sees her as a lump of clay waiting to be formed but grows contemptuous of her naïveté, and then becomes outright abusive), and a particular form of Indian colourism (she sees him as ugly and dangerous, and makes constant reference to the monstrous, animal-like qualities of his face). At one point, his face is even described as taking on a "tribal" quality, whatever that means. Actually, perhaps we know what that means.

This dark skin of his is also imbued with an animal-like quality and is supposed to indicate the madness that exists in him, his Shiva-the-destroyer side. The fact that Idha tries to make associations like this: dark skin reflects madness, or that madness is made animalistic, wild, and tribal, is possibly an indication of poor writing or a weak imagination, or that both the writing and imagination are such because of the years of "conditioning" that the writer has been subject to. (There are other similar revelations: another dark-skinned man, a drug dealer, is made palatable by the way his face "catches the light", while a waiter is described as being handsome "in a mountain way, Kashmiri, Himachali, or Afghani, a killer" a description that is notable for the way it embeds multiple bigotries in one sentence!) This is a recurring theme: servants have a certain look, the uneducated have a certain look, killers have a certain (racialised) look, and Idha is constantly taking note of how people behave differently from what their image represents to her without seeming to actually learn anything from these observations.

Sometimes Idha's observations are so trite as to be embarrassing, her privilege producing a vision of the world so naïve that while sitting in a cafe as a paying customer, she manages to think of the waitress, who is from the North-East, as more fortunate than her: "the kohl around her eyes looks like rebellion, around mine it is a prison." No doubt the waitress experiences her ethnicity in India as a form of prison, considering the systemic ethno-racism of the Hindu Brahmin majority (Idha's aunt, for example, refers to this woman and others like her as "Chinky"), but perhaps lining her eyes thickly with kohl as she works a low-wage job serving Delhi's pampered youth enables her to be free? One is not quite sure.

The plain fact is that Idha's worldview is steeped in racism and class privilege, but we are meant to sympathise with her because she is so very sad. The reader's emotions are manipulated toward a very particular end; that of excusing much of Idha's views due to naïveté, youth, and femininity. In some ways, it's an insulting view of youth and femininity.

Idha generally doesn't think well of most of the women in her life; be it her college classmates, or the women of her aunt's circle, or even the Muslim women whom she encounters while going to enjoy the transcendent effects of qawwali at the shrines of Sufi saints. The women of her circle don't understand how deep her river flows, while the Muslim women present a nice exotic tableau upon which both Idha and her lover can project their desires straight-out of some embarrassing orientalist fantasy; lust on his part, apparently, for "their enormous kohl eyes etched in black, for their lips made up with ruby-red and lashes rising to the moon" and her romantic musings on this curious others, these "heavenly girls of milk-white whose skin the sun does not see—they glide past us in silence with their painted cat eyes framed in black."

I'm not sure if these Muslim women are even part of this planet, much less India. The sun does not see them but their lashes are rising to the moon, so at least they'll have somewhere to land, we hope. As part of the pampered elite, Idha and her lover are cultural tourists in their own city. While it becomes clear that a middle-class Hindu woman can have access to these spaces safely in the presence of a middle-class Hindu man, once she has access to these masculine freedoms Idha can only pontificate about Delhi, the city of

“meat and men”, in terms of the freedoms of the men of her class, religion and caste. One hopes for Idha’s lashes to rise to the moon, to take her out of this bubble in which she seems trapped intellectually and emotionally.

When female-centred narratives like this appear on the market, there is a rush to praise and support them in an effort to somehow curb the sexism (often disguised as mere preference for “work that’s good, you can’t blame me that it’s men who are producing good literature!”) that proliferates in the publishing world. I’m gonna say it: “as a woman”, I understand this impulse. But there is also the danger of presenting all women who write about specifically feminine experiences as above criticism, as though simply being a woman means that they must be spared critical scrutiny or that all such scrutiny has its roots in misogyny. This is dangerous in its own way, conveying the idea that women are eternal victims who cannot be responsible for what they produce, and erasing differences between women that arise out of caste, class, and race.

Most often, this is because the “feminine experience” that often sees the publishing light of day reflect a bourgeois worldview that is then praised by reviewers who come from the same background. Any criticism on the grounds of class or race or caste is often drowned out by accusations of misogyny. The positive praise for Kapoor’s novel that doesn’t address the troubling aspects of this book at all fall into this category. Would this book have been written if it wasn’t about a middle-class girl who is tainted by proximity to darkness and black skin? I find it hard to imagine that this book would have come into existence in this way if the man in question, the man who sets things in motion, was fair and lovely. The spectre that haunts *A Bad Character* is the spectre of darkness.

In the end, it’s hard to shake off the sense that while Kapoor can write with originality and imagination about Delhi (though even here one gets the unsettling sense of a distinct bourgeois aversion to Delhi’s “masses”, those awful people who are dirty and everywhere and stare at Idha with mean eyes), the story she tells about men and women and sex isn’t new or refreshing or subversive. It’s the same old story: Young girls are made interesting by their beauty, and men, no matter how unattractive or sexist, are made interesting by their wealth. Even after she learns of her lover’s death and spirals further into depression, Idha goes around meeting men and ends up having a fling with a rich businessman who sets her up with her first post-college job and apartment. Before that, the first random guy she picks up at a cafe is a blonde Danish expat who is boring and generally unappealing, but dresses in a manner that indicates a “pardonable air of wealth”.

Kapoor’s entire narrative sets Idha on a collision course with hypocritical Indian bourgeois morality, but as it turns out, all Idha ever wanted was to feel a little more comfortable in her skin within that milieu. She may complain about Delhi’s “meat and men” and its rich, entitled sons of wealthy patriarchs (“Delhi is rotten with the sons of men”), but the crucial fact is that it’s the men with wealth who often grab her attention and end up in her bed. Feminine disgust and fear of the city and its dangers has its roots in sexual violence, but it’s mediated by ethnicity, class, and caste.

Too many reviews of this book universalise Idha’s experience and praise it for providing a window into the Indian woman’s experience. Which women? Having gotten to know members of Delhi’s upper classes, people who generally want for nothing but appear to be skilled at destroying their own lives and the lives of others, the reader has spent considerable time with more than one bad character and is none the better for it.

Lavanya says

I am probably in the minority when I say this, but I was underwhelmed by this book. It begins well - it is

gripping, and Kapoor's unique narrative style has all your attention, but towards the middle, it meanders - a lot - and by the time you reach the end, you just want the book to get over.

Having said that, Deepti Kapoor is definitely a writer to watch out for, and I am looking forward to read more of her books!

Emily says

He was known to us, he was a bad character.

It's a phrase they use sometimes, what some people still say. It's what they'll say about me, too, when they know what I've done.

This was not at all what I expected. You can describe this novel as a girl's sexual awakening in modern India, but a one-sentence description does it a disservice. I'm still not exactly sure what I read. It's a character study, told in occasionally beautiful and occasionally maddening prose, about the narrator's experience of falling in love with both the Bad Character of the title and, you can argue, with Delhi.

The world that the narrator inhabits is socially dangerous, somewhere between living with her lover and living with her guardian (who believes she's taking French lessons when she's actually shacking up). It's dangerous in many ways. There's the sex, of course, risky to her future marriage prospects. But she also begins to break out in other ways: driving alone, staring back at men in the street. And then once she is estranged from her lover - as she'll tell you herself on the first page - she moves into drugs and the underworld of the city. It's a narrative that moves fluidly from present to past, that captures transcendence in relationships and in experiences.

But it's also frustrating to read and can sometimes be too slow, and the ending was exasperating. It's such a strange novel that I have no idea who I would recommend it to (or if any of my friends would like it), but I would definitely read something else by Deepti Kapoor - especially something set in her Delhi, which is so beautifully depicted here.

The hardcover edition of this book has my favorite cover/title combination ever. You can't see how gorgeous it is on Goodreads, but it sparkles!

And lying on my back just like the girl I've always been, I watch the clouds drift and glow across the roof of the world, becoming newspaper headlines that tell the story of my life, the last one saying, Fuck you, I survive.

karen says

And across the room he is staring at me.

I've been stared at a lot of course; it's what happens here, it's what men do. Every day from door to door, on the buses, stepping through rubble on the edge of the road, in the car stuck in traffic, at red lights. Stares of incomprehension, lust, rage, sad yearning, so vacant and blank sometimes it's terrifying, sometimes pitiful. Eyes filling the potholes, bouncing down the street like marbles, no escaping their clank. Eyes in restaurants,

in offices, in college, eyes at home. Women's too, disapprovingly.

But in his eyes there's the promise of something else.

this is a very brief, sparely written novel that nonetheless packs a pretty powerful punch. part of it is very familiar - a twenty-year-old girl's sexual awakening that becomes all-consuming, a little dangerous, ends badly, and sets her on a self-destructive path of personal freedom, studded with casual sex and drug use.

the hook is that this takes place in new delhi in the early 2000's, where to be a woman is to be sheltered - prepared and preserved for marriage, and where violence against women is a frequent occurrence:

Under the cover of celebration a fistful of colour can smash against bone. Swarm upon a girl in an alleyway.

I'm remembering Holi in Delhi now. In the first year, a stubborn refusal to go outside as the men drink bhang and whip each other into a frenzy. The way trouble can start real fast. Semen dyed a dozen ways. All under the cover of colour. In the marketplace, hunting for prey, the spurned lover, the jilted heart. All under the cover of fun.

and a woman on her own is subjected to scrutiny and speculation:

But parking does attract attention. It has its own problems. What is she doing there? What does she want? Is she a whore? Is she waiting for a man? At traffic lights, in the middle of a jam. Stuck behind cages of chicken stacked in the backs of tempos, waiting to be killed. They do notice me, these eyes, discovering I'm all alone in this city of meat and men.

and where a little girl is given good advice about self-protection, but in a way that villainizes sexuality:

She liked to bathe me in the old days, took great care with it, and one day she sat me down on the cold metal stool, opened my legs, and pointed between them, then said, If a man ever tries to touch you there, an uncle or a servant or a cousin, anyone at all, you fight him off and you scream. You run. You don't let anybody touch you down there. That is the worst place in the world.

this is not a climate where sexual experimentation is permitted, or even wise. and yet idha (named only once, and may or may not be her given name) has a restless spirit, and is unsatisfied with her prospects as a woman.

But the history of women is the history of migration. Men hold the line and they remain. They go to war, they go for work, they travel over the land, but they remain. Their name remains, their land remains, their pride and honour remain. You can trace their line back into the dark, you can lean against their foundations and take shelter within. How to trace the line of women, to take shelter there? How to find from where we came? Every generation stripped away. Passed to another household. Gone the line, gone the name. It never belonged to us anyway. The earth does not belong to us anyway. We vanish, we do not remain.

she has grown into a loner. her mother is dead, her father absconded to singapore and she lives with her aunty, who is doing her best to keep her in a protective bubble until she can be married off to one of the suitors she has arranged.

but idha has other plans.

Twenty and untouched. It's a sin. For twenty years I've been waiting for this one thing.

she meets an unnamed man in a cafe, slightly older, dark and ugly, who is nonetheless compelling, charismatic. she is drawn to him because of his feral ugliness, his experiences in the world, the power of his attractive instability. her discontent crashes against his lust for her beauty, and the two begin a passionate affair, where she surrenders herself to him willingly, allows herself to be as he sees her, *a lump of wet clay*, but is only really playacting at being submissive. she remains clear-eyed throughout their relationship, despite how it appears from the outside.

He talks it to me, he fucks me slowly with his words, takes his pain out on me from the city he's consumed, merging limbs and lips, doing it to me again and again. I beg him. He wraps his hands around my throat and sinks inside. He wants to be with me everywhere, wants to follow me through the streets. I'd walk for him and he'd obliterate me, take everything but my eyes. I'd cover myself, in devotion, and know that I was owned.

in the end, she is the one who has the last word - the narrative is told ten years after the affair, jumping around in time and tense, from first to third person, long after "he" has died. (it's the first sentence, so is in no way a spoiler, people) and through all the debasement that follows her through her life, there is a sort of heroism to her path, a joyful embracing of shiva in his aspect of destroyer. hers is a willing surrender to experience, and not something that has been arranged for her.

i have a crappy track record with these kinds of sexual initiation books. the gleeful sexual abandonment arcs never really resonate with me because i have never felt constrained, and reading about the act of intercourse is pretty boring. but this story, her situation, seems to be staying with me more than i expected. and while there are parts that are kind of draggy, the parts that are really strong make up for it, particularly in her descriptions of the city:

Now Dirty Delhi. Ice cream in metal carts. Grapefruit, watermelon, cut open, surrounded by flies, packed in ice packed full of amoebic dysentery, held in the hands of boys with stunted nails at bus stops, holding them up to the window for a grubby note of exchange. Chunks of melting ice and the rind of fruit eaten by cows, dogs, rats, monkeys, rats the size of dogs. Exhaust fumes from the buses and the autos and the cars. From Indrapastha Power Station. Battered nimbu-pani carts, books on sale at the stop lights: Mein Kampf, Harry Potter, Who Moved My Cheese? Hijras with stubble flashing their comely eyes on the Ring Road near Raj Ghat, crows above the latticed balconies of Daryaganj, where they sell books on the pavements on Sundays and battered magazines, where they make juice in bright displays. Delhi, yes. Black bilgewater from every orifice.

so, yeah, it's a tiny little book that is occasionally unfocused, but for all that, and despite it not being my usual kind of thing, i'm finding myself thinking about it more favorably in retrospect than i was while reading it. we call this "gerry syndrome." so i would definitely recommend it to people interested in strong character voices, female sexuality, and world literature. it's a 3.5 star that is still rising in my estimation the more i think about it.

a creeper 4, if you will.

come to my blog!

Chaitra says

It started off wonderfully, much to my surprise. I'm not much of a fan, when it comes to coming of age in a haze of drugs and sex. Ill advised, and sure to end badly. For a person who's always had a head obsessively over her shoulders, this type of protagonist is especially hard to relate to. But, this novel was an exception. I believed this young college girl when she said that she felt the lure of something untamed, something animal. The writing was hypnotic, and painted a wonderful, if bleak and dirty, picture of turn of millennium New Delhi.

Or, it was, until I took my first break about 70 pages into the book. I was excited to pick it back up, but it seemed to me that once the rhythm was broken, it was hard to get back into it. I was still invested in it to follow Idha on her path to self-destruction, but I could no longer quite care for her relationship with the man. This probably has something to do with my prudish hangups, because at 70 pages, it was only just starting to become a sex and drug odyssey.

Regardless of the lack of power the subject packs for me, I still liked the writing. The portrait of the country is one of the better ones I've encountered in a while, something that touches on contemporary India, without it boiling down to an immigrant story. If Deepti Kapoor wrote about something else, I would love to read it. Actually, I'll read a second novel by her, regardless of the subject.

Blair says

Vibrant, dark and passionate, Deepti Kapoor's short debut novel - which feels like a memoir - is a meditation on the life of a young, educated woman in modern India, and a raw account of a forbidden and ultimately destructive relationship. The narrator is apparently named Idha, but this is only referenced once, on the first page, and there is some ambiguity as to whether it is even her real name: 'I give myself a name, I wear it out... A charm that protects me.' Idha means 'insight' - maybe the name is a deliberate choice on the part of the narrator. Idha's lover, too, is never named, adding to the sense that this is a semi-autobiographical story. The setting is Delhi in the early twenty-first century, and the lover, though nameless, gives the book its title: he was a man who, the narrator tells us at the very beginning, died when she was twenty-one, and was described in a police soundbite as 'known to us... he was a bad character'.

The narrator tells her story from a 'present' perspective which appears to be about ten years since the central events the book describes. The main action takes place when Idha is twenty years old, a student at college, and lives with her aunt, who constantly pushes her into meetings with bland potential husbands. She has a certain amount of freedom - she is getting a good education, is from a middle-class family, has her own car, and often wanders (or drives) the city alone. Still, she feels constantly aware of the limits of her life - of being a woman - and bored by what is expected of her, although she doesn't seem to know what it is she wants instead until she meets her lover. When she encounters this charismatic but ugly man in a café, it is his very ugliness that attracts and excites her. The two of them enter into the sort of affair that feels doomed from the start, volatile and all-consuming. In this second life, always kept secret from Idha's family, he drags her into the underbelly of the city, replete with sex, crime, illegal raves, drugs. There is some violence and emotional manipulation on his part, but unusually, it rarely seems that Idha is not in control, and you sense that he is just as confused and frustrated as she is.

The narrative style isn't entirely conventional: Kapoor switches between present and past tense, between first

and third person, and at many points there is a sudden jump from one point in the narrator's past to another. As names are rarely used, it's not always clear which 'him' she's talking about, or whether 'she' refers to another woman, or to herself. As a result there are passages that require more than one reading to be properly understood and absorbed, and although this is a short and fast-moving book, it is sometimes a tough read, in more ways than one. Although Idha's lover obsesses her, her life worsens rather than improves after he disappears, and the story becomes ever-more bleak.

This is the sort of novel I would have liked to see on the Booker longlist. It's certainly 'readable', but it is also emotionally complex, and very specific to its setting. By which I don't just mean Delhi - although Kapoor's beautiful/brutal portrayal of the city is one of the highlights of her narrative - but the particular situation of being a young, unmarried, middle-class, college-educated, Hindu woman in India in the 2000s. It's like living a little slice of another person's life - another thing that makes it feel very memoir-esque. *A Bad Character* burns out quickly, but it burns bright, and as a result it is very memorable. Just like the affair itself, in fact.

Shannon says

Abandoned by her father and orphaned by her mother's death, the twenty year-old narrator of *A Bad Character* feels stifled by both New Dehli and her aunt's relentless search for her husband. When she meets an older, mysterious man in a cafe, he pulls her into a life and an affair she never expected.

There is much to love about Deepti Kapoor's debut: the gorgeous prose that seamlessly meanders back and forth in time, the unique look at New Dehli from a shifting perspective and the irresistible pull of self-discovery. In the small space of a near-novella, Kapoor is able to dip into her character's past while also exploring the newness of the present. Yet, the novel's intense character study fizzles too soon, allowing the end of the short book to fall flat in a way that distracts from its overall impact.

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Carolinemawer says

Lots of this book is gorgeous! What a lovely conceit - to show our heroine round Delhi, with the reader in tow. What sensuous writing! I thought I might get fed up of all the adjectives and evokings, but I didn't. And Delhi is now a lot more real to me than after any of the other Delhi-books I have read.

As the book drifted on, I did start to wonder where the author was going to go with it. And I wasn't at all as pleased by the drug stuff, or by the inconclusive ending as by the initial parts.
