

The Telegraph

calcutta, india

Issue Date: Friday , February 22 , 2008

ESCAPE FROM THE ORDINARY



A still from Aparna Sen's forthcoming film, *The Japanese Wife*

The Japanese Wife

By Kunal Basu, HarperCollins, Rs 395

The Japanese Wife is not a novel. It is a collection of 12 short stories. Reading it, one is filled with a sense of pity that contemporary English writers have altogether forsaken the genre of the short story. This is also somewhat ironic, given the diminishing attention span of the modern man and his preference for shorter, compact versions of nearly everything. But a short story is also arguably more difficult to pull off than a novel. A bad novel may still have its moments, but a failed short story rarely has anything to redeem it.

Kunal Basu has not only thrown away the safety net of the novel, but in his short stories, he has also taken the risk of choosing ordinariness over grandeur, the slow train of reflection and memory over the frenetic pace of events. The story from which the books gets its name serves as a perfect example. The utter humdrumness of Snehamoy Chakrabarti's life as the mathematics teacher at Shonai's secondary school seems to be mocked by the wild mood swings of the river Matla. But for the rest of the village, the fact that he has a Japanese wife — married though they are through letters, without ever setting eyes on each other — is Snehamoy's ticket to escape his daily drudgery.

For Bimal Ray, the protagonist of "The Accountant", work-day evenings revolve around watching his wife fold clothes into a neat pile, followed by dinner, washing up and making the bed. He finds his escape all of a sudden in Mughal India, when he feels he has turned into Chota Mimar, the young Persian architect of the Taj Mahal.

There are escapes, there are promises of escape, and there are illusions of escape. Bimal Ray steals away from work to go to the National Archives and "correct" the plans of the Taj. But to the keepers of the archive, he is guilty of falsifying the official records of a national treasure. In "Snakecharmer", the first visit to India of Jacob Tsur, an Israeli-American professor, is actually a secret mission, a personal one — to seek release from the meaninglessness of life after the death of his Palestinian wife. India takes him by desert storm, whirls him around in his memories of love, pain and loss, and pushes him to the brink, only to let the gypsy girl from Janpath pull him away before he can reach his goal. Anna Pavlova, a prostitute from Bryansk, Russia, "Miss Annie" to fellow performers and the rapt audience at Venus, the Calcutta nightclub, finds in the city the true meaning of her past life. Watching the successful execution of the blast that she plans with three Calcutta Bolsheviks, she feels at one with the great Soviet ideal of Revolution.

Communism of the Soviet brand is most poignantly evoked in "Lenin's Café". The narrator meets his dead father, an old-world Bengal communist, in a Zürich square. They walk over to Odeon, a café where the communist pantheon — Lenin, Axelrod, Plekhanov, Martov, Vera Zasluch, Gorky, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg — is attending a meeting of the *Iskra*, the clandestine Bolshevik journal. The son witnesses "the perfect chasm between a dream and its consummation" on that sunny day of 1916 — a chasm that holds as true for Soviet communism as for his father's ideas of importing it to Bengal and India.

The communist dream and its consummation are at odds again in China of 1989. In "Lotus Dragon", newly-married Delhi academics, Rudra Narayan and Supriya Sircar, travel to Beijing. The students' agitation and State action in Tiananmen Square are experiences negotiated through literature and debate, and a shy Chinese student who calls himself Byron. But political turmoil gives way to personal loss, to the knowledge that one half of the honeymooning couple is on the last leg of her life. The momentousness of the occasion witnessed in "Lenin's Café" fades away similarly in the face of the son's final confrontation with, and understanding of, his father.

Surprise is a tool vital to the storyteller's craft. Basu uses this element in several of his stories, carefully restraining, rather than heightening, its effect. Be it in the arrival of Miyage in "The Japanese Wife", or in the "perfectly shaped almond eyes" of the little son of Mary, the governess of an Indian couple in "Long Live Imelda Marcos", in the genial Father Tito taking upon himself the blame of impregnating the Hindu girl against the communal simmer of Kidderpore's docks ("Father Tito's Onion Rings"), or in Anwar the poacher offering the burning stalk to his wife to light the pyre of the forest officer, Nawal Kishore Singh ("Tiger! Tiger!") — the surprise comes inextricably linked with the realization that, in each case, life will soon go back to its ordinary ways. The events (and actors) will remain in the cycles of individual memory, to be revisited as occasions when the unexpected and extraordinary had crossed the path of mundane existence.

The writer is also obviously playing with the idea of a shrinking world. A Russian prostitute and a Yugoslav padre make Calcutta their home, an American researcher chooses a Sunderban poacher as her subject, and another American comes to immerse her husband's ashes in the Ganga. And Indians feel equally at home in Beijing or Manila, Yogyakarta or Zürich. The Matla and Nakanokuchi flow in perfect synchrony. Two images which capture the world in a comfortable huddle are of the

"Japani" wife sending kites to her husband in the Sunderbans, and of a Delhi journalist following a letter to the editor to find an African girl's long-lost Indian grandfather in coastal Pondicherry ("The Pearlfisher"). But the comfort vanishes when tradition clashes with modernity. Johann Bosco Novi, the puppeteer from Indonesia whose speciality is the Ramayana ("The Last Dalang"), inhabits a world where "it was a contest between football and Ramayana, and one didn't have to be smart to know which side was winning".

Conjugality is another recurrent theme, though nowhere can it be associated with simple bliss. But that is why Anwar's discovery of his wife's relationship with the dead forest officer constitutes a denouement of rare intensity in "Tiger! Tiger!". The flowering of Evelyn's love for Yoginder even as she carries her husband's mortal remains (in "Grateful Ganga") appears almost frivolous in contrast. But this is the story which fails to pass the litmus test — the characters are as unconvincing as the circumstances in which they find themselves (not to mention the mistakes in the lyrics of popular Hindi film songs).

Kunal Basu deserves to be thanked for bringing short stories back into reckoning. Some of the research done before writing *The Miniaturist* has evidently gone into "The Accountant". However, the stories wear the author's erudition lightly, while they go about reaffirming our faith in everyday miracles.

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