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## Books: Unlikely love

4-5 minutes

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**The gorgeous East is refracted through a western sensibility in the imagined spaces of Basu's stories.**

**The Japanese Wife and Other Stories**

**by Kunal Basu**

**HarperCollins**

**Price: Rs 395**

**Pages: 204**

Kunal Basu's collection of short stories rides on the delicate, poised back of *The Japanese Wife* and has already taken another life form as a film by Aparna Sen. It suggests an intermingling of a typically Japanese sense of aesthetics—a Kurosawa-like preoccupation with exquisite moments of visual beauty contemplated in moments of silent rapture—and a similar Bengali one that mythologises the Tragic. It tells of a tender marriage blanc between a Bengali school teacher named Snehamoy and his pen-friend, a Japanese woman named Miyage, who seals their alliance with a regular dispatch of gifts.

The opening paragraph that describes the journey of a package of kites from Miyage to Snehamoy, from Japan to the small Indian village down the river, is a poetic montage that transcends the

differences between their two worlds. It is worthy of a Tagore in its understanding of the rituals that bind the human heart. At the same time, it is as buoyant as a kite floating loose in the wind.

There is also a marvellous set piece about a battle of kites, where the Japanese kites are challenged by the local kite-fliers in a duel with their own home-made kites. Just as in a later story about poachers in the forests of the Sunderbans, (“Tiger! Tiger!”), who set the forest ablaze during a confrontation between the various protagonists, forcing the birds, reptiles, monkeys and other mammals to flee through the dark, Basu ignites the scene with great imaginative power. It precipitates the crisis that lurks like the proverbial flaw in each one of his characters as they reach a crossroad in their lives.

Kunal Basu

Kunal Basu

Basu, who teaches at Oxford, writes with a lapidary skill. At the same time, he flings each one of his characters into an acid bath of issues that engulf them with a suddenness that is as awkward as it is disconcerting. At such times, he appears like the tour guide who is no longer willing to entertain his clients and instead, harangues them. The gorgeous East is refracted through the eyes of a western literary sensibility even while it covers a wide swath of territory, both geographical and political.

The tour guide, who elbows his way through the student revolution at Tiananmen Square in the story “Lotus-Dragon” with a pair of Indian academics, takes on many forms. He becomes Mary, the Filipina maid from Hong Kong, who falls in love with a Gujarati Muslim just before the riots take place back home when he goes

back to his mother; or more prosaically, the Punjabi host who meets a recently widowed American woman when she brings her dead pop singer husband's ashes to be immersed at Hardwar (no prizes for guessing that it could be Jerry Garcia of Grateful Dead). He can become the dark-skinned granddaughter of a Tamilian from French colonial Pondicherry, who is left behind in the central African country of Chad and longs for news of Mouttou Sittaramane, who memorialises him in "The Pearlfisher"; or the last puppeteer who performs the Ramayana in Djogjakarta and is also the last in a line of Chinese entrepreneurs who have made their lives there.

The gentle and, at times, not-sogentle acceptance of fate as a preordained way of life is natural to the south Asian landscape, as the annual flooding of her rivers is what lingers in the mind. Or for that matter, despite all the chatter about Lenin and Marx that pervades the intellectual landscape of his stories, Basu's women are mother goddesses waiting, like the land itself, to be made fertile by the men who haunt them. Basu, who has written a couple of highly acclaimed novels, is also described as a writer of poetry and screenplays. It may be that these stories will do better as short films, or docu-dramas, when the viewer's attention can be led along at full clip, without stopping to ask whether it is all becoming a little too contrived to be satisfying. He provides a good ride, but his endings are too bumpy.

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