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'I am tired of reality'

By *RESHMI SENGUPTA*

5-6 minutes



Aparna with Raima and Rahul on the sets of *The Japanese Wife*

The Japanese Wife held centre stage on the concluding morning of the five-day Jaipur Literature Festival as author Kunal Basu discussed his short story and director **Aparna Sen** dissected her film. **t2** caught up with Sen on the sidelines...

What attracted you to Kunal Basu's story?

The story had a bizarreness about it which I liked very much. There was also a scope for wonderful visuals. We shot in the Sunderbans and in Japan, though only for five days. I was actually very tempted to make a film on one of Kunal's other stories called *Grateful Ganga* but when he narrated *The Japanese Wife* I fell in love with it.

I was struck by its innocence and its humour. The entire story is

infused with humour. For instance, Snehamoy's (Rahul Bose) Japanese wife Miyage (Chigusa Takaku) sends a pair of chopsticks to him and insists that he boils his drinking water. And Snehamoy actually makes his aunt (Moushumi Chatterjee) do that!

Have you stuck to the story?

I just did a cut and paste from Kunal's story. But I have also added a lot of things that are not there. Kunal hasn't fleshed out all the characters properly as it is a short story but there are hints. So you think and wonder what this character may have done.

But often it is easier said than done. For instance, Kunal writes about Japanese kites flying in the sky. Miyage sends a box of Japanese kites to Snehamoy on their 15th marriage anniversary but where were we to get Japanese kites from? We visited several shops in Calcutta and then spent a fortune carting them from Japan to India. Then we had a tough time finding people to fly them. But I think it's one of the best scenes.

But does the story of *The Japanese Wife* sound convincing to you?

See, it's not a run-of-the mill love story. In many ways, it's a fairy tale; it's like a fable. And I am tired of reality. I have shown fantasy elements in my other films. Like in *Yugant*, when the sea suddenly catches fire...

Is it contemporary Sunderbans that you show in the film?

It is very much contemporary. Sunderbans hasn't changed much.

What was the most challenging part of adapting Basu's story into a screenplay?

The problem for me was that Miyage is a very shadowy presence in

the story. At one point I felt all my loyalties were with Sandhya (Raima Sen), the widow who comes to live with Snehamoy and his aunt. She was palpable. So I always had to think of ways to bring Miyage back in the script. Something shocking happens whenever she returns so that people notice her.

The other thing is that Kunal's story had a starkness which was very Japanese in character. It was without any embellishments. So adapting that to the Indian context was very tough.

Didn't you feel Rahul Bose was too urbane to play a rural schoolteacher?

But look at him! *(Holds up the book cover showing Rahul as an aged Snehamoy)*. We did workshops before the shoot. There's a lot of mutual faith between Rahul and me. Rahul trusts me completely.

What about Raima and Moushumi...

Raima again is someone who surrenders completely to the director. And Moushumi sparkles in the film. Her character has a lot of comic shades.

How did you go about directing Chigusa Takaku?

I had to explain to her through an interpreter. In the story, Miyage finds it difficult to pronounce Snehamoy's name. And while shooting, my Japanese girl (Chigusa) couldn't pronounce Snehamoy either. She would say 'Senomoy' and I kept that *(laughs)*.

Is it ready for release?

We have finished editing and are now into mixing. The film will probably go for the festivals first; so it will release in August or in the Pujas may be.

Which has been your most satisfying work till now?

The Japanese Wife. I think because a lot of things went right with it. But at times I would get really mad. We would be waiting for the sun and there would be no sun.... And I am also very satisfied because of my cinematographer, Anay Goswami, a young chap who has done brilliant work. *36 Chowringhee Lane* was also very satisfying.

Are you planning to do *Goynar Baksho* this year?

I don't know, let's see. Every year I plan to do *Goynar Baksho* and then it doesn't happen. But I have stopped running after my films; it will happen when it has to happen.

What about casting Konkona? She is so busy in Bollywood...

Yes she is, but she always tells me 'Ma whenever you do the film I will keep my dates free'. So that's not a problem.