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Characters that leave a mark

Review by JANET TAY

THE JAPANESE WIFE

By Kunal Basu

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THEY say “don’t judge a book by its cover”, but, really, this cover is so elegant, it just begs you to pick the book up: the yellow textured cover features stills from the beautiful movie adaptation on the front and back.

The actors display all the touching wistfulness that the title story in this collection of short stories by Kunal Basu exudes. It is no wonder *The Japanese Wife* was made into a movie by well-known Indian director Aparna Sen, who “fell in love with the story”, describing it as “a haunting and improbable love story about a schoolteacher in the Sundarbans (in India) who becomes pen pals with an equally shy Japanese girl”.

This is a tale of love that is both traditional and unconventional at once: in an age when marriage no longer lasts for decades, two pen pals build and sustain a 20-year relationship on “book boxes smelling of sweet glue, cartons marked ‘fragile’ holding Hokusai prints, a silk sack filled with mountain cherries, scarves rolled tight like children’s pillows in thick parchment wraps, cards and letters exuding perfume, and rustling sheaves of *washi* (handmade Japanese paper)”.

Snehamoy lives in India and Miyage lives in Japan, and they exchange marriage vows in letters. They are perfectly content with their strange arrangement, until the arrival of a woman who had been betrothed to and then rejected by Snehamoy decades ago. The woman had married someone else, had a son, and then had been widowed. She leaves her late husband’s home after finding life with the in-laws difficult, and Snehamoy’s aunt persuades him to take the woman and her son in, and to raise the boy as his own.

Basu weaves the tense thread of Snehamoy’s emotions well: he is caught between his loyalty to the wife he has never met and his guilt and sense of responsibility towards the girl he had refused 20 years ago even as his aunt tries to persuade him to do what is right. “You can’t shirk your duties, Sneha ? life means more than simply writing letters”.

An improbable love story, indeed, but the beauty of Basu’s storytelling makes believable this unlikely relationship that transcends distance. One cannot help but be moved by the ease with which Snehamoy pledges his faithfulness to Miyage despite their miles apart: “Like a married man, he had grown used to coming home to her, to her things – the gifts she sent him regularly; he waited for her letters as if he was waiting for her to return from her daily visit to the market.”

Perhaps the element of this tale that is most inviting is the fairytale-like plot, especially for the more sentimental and idealistic among us, those of us who do want to believe that love can traverse all the canyons in the world.

The second story in the collection, *Grateful Ganga*, is about a different kind of love affair. Evelyn, an American woman, has an affair with the married Yoginder who she meets on a flight to New Delhi; she's travelling to the River Ganges to scatter her late husband's ashes.

Here, Basu still manages to keep the pace of the collection consistent with the natural rhythm of song lyrics and the even tempo of the progression of Evelyn and Yoginder's mutual attraction and love for music.

The next three stories, *Lenin's Café*, *Lotus-Dragon*, and *Snakecharmer*, however, lack the lyrical quality of the title story, which is by far the strongest in the collection.

Although Basu's imagined peoples and moments and his ability to see and portray the unlikely in mundane situations are all evocative, the over-elaboration of facts can sometimes interrupt the pace, and force the reader to plod. Tedious information sometimes weighs down poetic descriptions.

Nevertheless, Basu's ability to create unique characters and fashion a good story cannot be denied. And there are so many vivid images in this collection of 12 stories: the forlorn Japanese wife with shaven head and silent grief; the Catholic Filipina maid who falls in love with a Gujerati Muslim man (in *Long Live Imelda Marcos*); the accountant dreaming of his past life as the architect of the Taj Mahal (in *The Accountant*); and the *dalang* (puppet master) performing his last puppet show (in *The Last Dalang*).

These characters delicately step back and forth in the time and space, and remain in the mind long after the last page has been turned.

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