

Celluloid in print

The author of *The Opium Clerk* and *The Japanese Wife* on his new collection *Filmi Stories*, a book inspired by film

Shilajit Mitra

shilajit.mitra@thehindu.co.in

Kunal Basu's new short story collection is titled *Filmi Stories*. Beyond a literary excursion, it resembles, in packaging and pace, a movie anthology – eight tales spurred along by drama.

Indeed, much in Basu's fiction has gestured towards the cinematic. He has written visually evocative historical fiction (*The Opium Clerk*, *The Miniaturist*, *The Yellow Emperor's Cure*) and in 2010, *The Japanese Wife*, the title story of his previous collection, was adapted into a film by Aparna Sen. But *Filmi Stories* (published by Vintage Books - Penguin Random House) eschews the art house sensibilities of Basu's earlier work, approaching a more mainstream – shall we say Hindi cinema? – idiom.

Basu, 67, grew up in an upper-crust household in Kolkata – directors like Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray frequented his home. As a child, Basu was cast by Sen

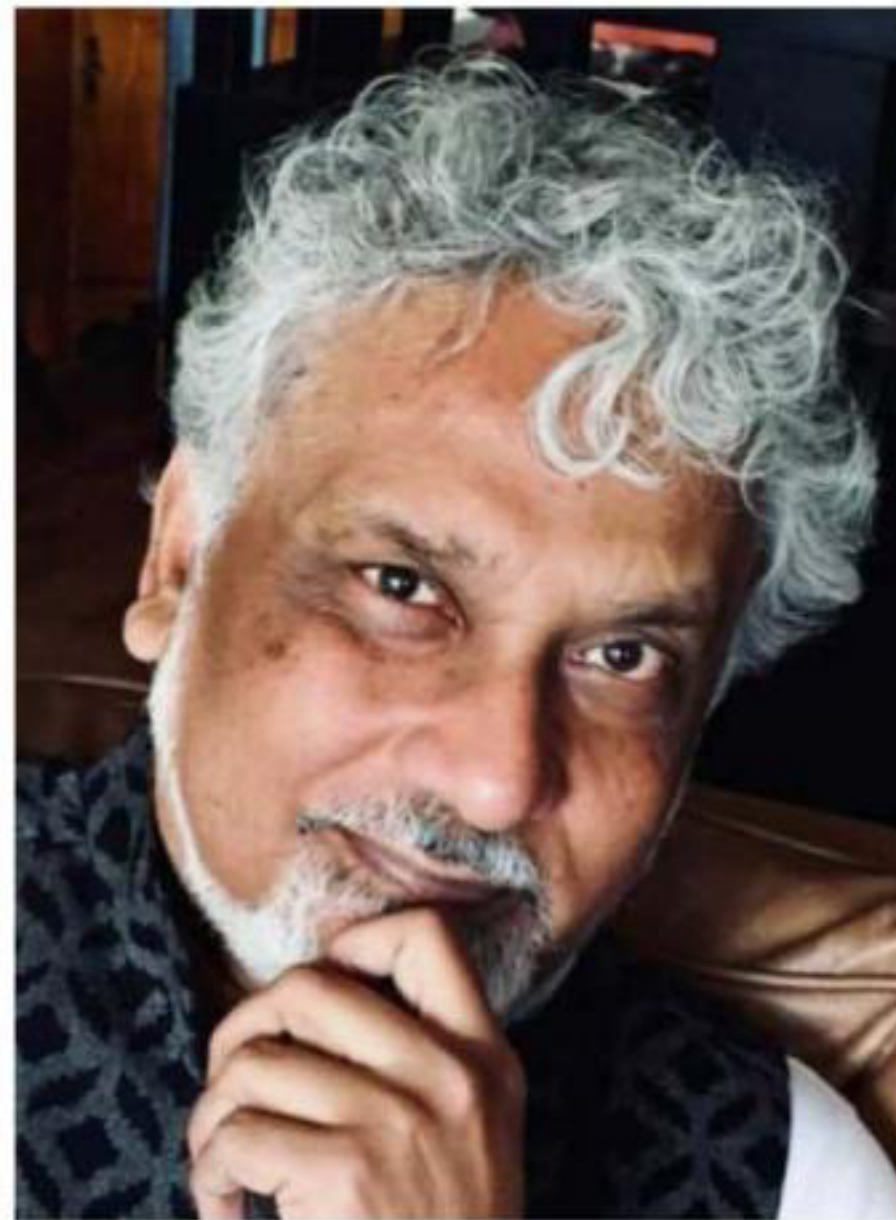
in his films *Punascha* (1961) and *Abaseshe* (1962). He was fired up in his youth by the radical cinema of the 1970s. A part of Jadavpur University's Film Society, Basu contributed pieces on Ray and DW Griffith to an in-house magazine called *Kotha Golpo Chobi*. The Hindi cinema bug bit him late, during his years living abroad (he teaches Management at Oxford University, England).

Excerpts from an interview.

Question: In the preface to *Filmi Stories*, you write, "I have always considered film and fiction to be ungainly cousins, each trying its best to cover up the imperfection of the other." Can you expand?
Answer: In most literary fiction, we are provided a substantial amount of the inner world of a character, and the author is telling rather than showing.

Whereas in cinema, there is not a lot of opportunity to reflect an inner world unless it is accompanied by external action or behaviour.

I'll give an example.



When I watch *Charulata* (1964), which is one of my favourite Satyajit Ray films, I am constantly reminded of Rabindranath Tagore's source novel *Nastanirh* (*The Broken Nest*), and vice versa. It's because what Tagore tells us in his prose, Ray managed to show through his images.

Q: How did you transition from a serious cinephile obsessed with Godard to a lover of Hindi movies?

A: From the bubbling cultural cauldron of Jadavpur University in the 1970s I landed in the US to pursue my Master's. On

weekends, I would hang with other Indian students who would cook chicken curry and watch Hindi films on VCR tapes.

The hard crust of intellectualism melted away as I was exposed to the fun part of cinema. Shashi Kapoor and Rajesh Khanna became my early idols. Raakhee became a heartthrob. *Sharmilee* and *Daag* were two films I loved.

I watched *Sholay* much, much later, on the urging of my wife who had seen it 15 times by then. I loved the song picturisations and Salim-Javed's

(Clockwise from left) Kunal Basu; a scene from *Siddhartha*; and young Kunal Basu in Mrinal Sen's *Punascha*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

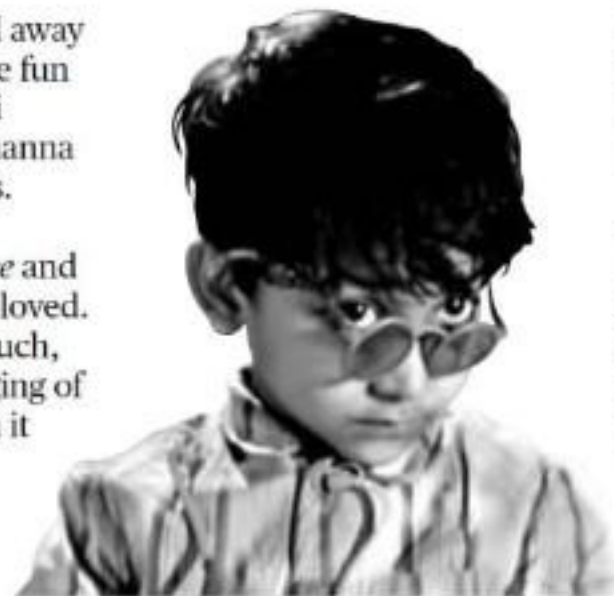


dramatic, danger-laced writing.

Q: There is tasteful, suggestive sensuality in the Hindi films from that era..

A: Absolutely. In a strange way, a very moralistic India that made those films evoked sensuality perhaps in a more exciting way than contemporary cinema that reduces sensuality to mere sexual acts.

The story *Grateful Ganga* in my *The Japanese Wife* collection is a tribute to the sensuality of Hindi film lyrics. It has a scene where the American woman asks



her Indian friend and host to translate 'Piya Tu Ab To Aaja'. How do you translate a line like, *Tan Ki Jwala Thandi Ho Jaa Aise Gale Laga Jaa?*

Q: There hasn't been an adaptation of your work since *The Japanese Wife*. Was Bollywood interested?

A: A major Bollywood producer was once in London and I was asked to meet with him. He had a posh place and excruciatingly bad taste in decorating it. Even as I was narrating my story, he started to change it fundamentally. He suggested a double role for the women characters. He wanted a location change too. I could see, right before my eyes, a very different film emerging.

On a serious note, a couple of years before, a number of my books got optioned. But nothing concrete has materialised. I've realised in India there's no formal process in place to take books to celluloid.

There are no real film agents. But conversations are going on.