

**AUTHOR INTERVIEW**

# Kunal Basu: My excitement about writing is to lead multiple lives

Fifteen years after 'The Japanese Wife' comes another collection, 'Filmi Stories', for Basu's readers to have an audio-visual experience

NAYANTARA MAZUMDER | PUBLISHED 12.05.23, 02:53 PM



Author Kunal Basu at his residence in south Kolkata. On the wall behind him is a gouache artwork done by the author himself  
*Nayantara Mazumder*

It's been 15 years since Kunal Basu wrote his last collection of stories, *The Japanese Wife*, the eponymous story of which was brought to life on screen by Aparna Sen in 2010. Since then, he has cemented his position in the literary firmament as one of the most prolific and insightful novelists of our times. The pandemic, however, made him change course a little; in a bid to "drive out the despair that was filling up like smoke in a chimney stack", Basu decided to write stories again – tales for which inspiration struck him in the most unexpected of ways.

Thus was born *Filmi Stories*, a collection of 'not-so-short' stories that run through multiple lives and

traverse the length and breadth of the author’s imagination. As the writer of novels such as *The Opium Clerk* (2001), *The Miniaturist* (2003), *The Yellow Emperor’s Cure* (2011), *Kalkatta* (2015) and *Sarajini’s Mother* (2020) sat down with **My Kolkata** in his beautiful south Kolkata home, the conversation spanned universes too – from Basu’s ‘failed’ attempts at being an artist to the grounding feeling of listening to *pujo’r arati* from an adjoining building; from the impeccable writing of the TV series *Chernobyl* to, of course, the tactile writing in *Filmi Stories*.

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**My Kolkata: It’s been over a decade since you wrote a collection of stories. What drew you to it again? I ask because reading *Filmi Stories* gives one the sense that you had these strands and fragments of inspiration somewhere within you already, and they were just looking for an opportune moment to rear their heads. Is that how it happened, and is that why these are separate stories?**

**Kunal Basu:** So these are not, strictly speaking, short stories. They are eight long-ish stories. After *The Japanese Wife* came out in India in 2008 and was considered to be a publishing success, my editor and agents were suggesting I write another collection of short stories. I didn’t, because I was taken with writing novels.

But it is impossible for me to be *without* a book at any point. After I finished *In An Ideal World* (2022), my last published novel, it went through the publication process. This usually takes 8-9 months, sometimes even a year. So once it was off my desk, I was fretting and fuming. The pandemic was on, none of us could go out, and my wife, Susmita, and I could not go back to the United Kingdom, where we live. So I needed to think about what I might try next.



**LIFESTYLE**

An exclusive excerpt from ‘In An Ideal World’ by Kunal Basu



**PEOPLE**

This novel was written in anguish: Kunal Basu

Now, I constantly think of stories; those that I think might have some possibility, I scribble a few notes on. Eventually I would forget about them, but these notes would be somewhere. So during the pandemic, I thought to myself, let me go hunting inside my head to see if I can think of some stories to write. They came out in many different ways – some of which completely surprised me.

**Can you give us an example?**

Take the story called *Patna*. It is a very surreal story, and the manner in which it came to me actually happened here, on that spot (*gestures to a spot on the sofa in his drawing room*). I was writing during the day; Susmita, who is a ceramics artist, was working in her studio on the balcony. After lunch, I decided to take a nap on the sofa. Susmita was reading a book; I lay down for about 5-10 minutes, then sat straight up and asked her, “*Ekta golpo shunbe?*” She said yes. I narrated the story of *Patna* to her from beginning to end!

I have no explanation for this. I do not know if the story came to me then, or if it had been formed in ways that I am not conscious of. But in that moment, it came pouring out of me. Not all stories and their genesis can be traced back to specific things; sometimes, they lie in the subconscious.

On the other hand, the genesis of the first story in the book, *OK TATA*, is something I can put my finger on. (*Points to an under-construction building visible from the drawing room window.*) The construction of that building started during the pandemic. Trucks carrying bricks and other materials used to come in at 4am, making a lot of noise. This would wake me up; as I am a late riser, I would curse them under my breath. I would go to the balcony, bleary-eyed at the crack of dawn, and look down at the truck drivers. These people would have travelled the length and breadth of India; they would be relieved at the end of the journey, so they would be singing, talking loudly and drinking tea.

That caught my interest; this is a world that I have not directly experienced. So I kept noticing them, and my mind started to spin a tale about a man called Jaggi, a driver, and his thirst for revenge which eventually turns out to be something else altogether. So that is how *OK TATA* started to take shape.



**If it had not been for the pandemic, do you think these stories would have been written in this form? Or might some of them have turned into novels?**

I don't think they would have been novels. When I think of a story, I make an intuitive judgement regarding its creative breadth. As far as the stories in the new book are concerned, there's a reason I called them *Filmi Stories*. They appear to me in flashes; I can see them and say, "This would be attractive to me to write." And I see them as stories, not as full-length novels.

**Why the name *Filmi Stories*? In the Prologue, you say, "There was something about them that made me think of these stories as films."**

Several years ago, I was at a literature fest in Australia. In one of my panel discussions, there was a

very successful American writer of OTT content. During the conversation, he said that novels will become obsolete soon. He went on to explain. Novels have a bunch of characters, relationships, a beginning, middle, and end, plots, subplots and diversions. If the novel is complex, he said, then it will be difficult to portray in a film. *Anna Karenina* in two hours? Very tough. In his lifetime, Gabriel Garcia Marquez was always reluctant to sell the film rights of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, because how on earth could one make a two-hour film on that book?

A television series, however, can do that, the American writer explained. Twelve episodes, one or multiple seasons, plots, subplots, characters, relationships, unspoken words, change of location... all of it is possible. So that will satisfy the curiosity that readers bring to a novel, and they won't read novels anymore. They will consume stories on OTT.

As a novelist, hearing this did not make me feel good! But it made me think. Here's what I thought: in dance dramas, you have dance and theatre coming together in an acceptable artistic format. In opera, a story and music come together. A lot of art today is performance art. This means that among the different siblings, there has been happy intermingling and coexistence. So is it possible for me to create literature that evokes the visual experience? And because my writing is imagery driven – I started my life wanting to be an artist! – why don't I write it in a way that the reader has a 3D, audio-visual experience where they can see, taste and smell the world around them?

My agent once told me, "I have never been to Kolkata, but when I was reading *Kalkatta* I felt like I could smell the city." I was trying to do that through words, which is why these stories are '*filmi*' to me: you read words, but your mind's eye sees a film. I'm trying to walk a different terrain and ask: can I now explicitly marry literature and visual imagery together?

### **Do you think this has the potential to endure?**

I don't know, honestly. I don't know how public taste will evolve. I have been an author for more than two decades; I still do not know what people like and don't like.

### **So you do not write for an audience?**

I cannot. I mean, for certain kinds of fiction, one can, I suppose. But I would be a spectacular failure if I wanted to write for an audience. All I'm trying to do is please myself, and if, in the process, it entertains somebody else, then I will be very grateful. But if I cannot entertain myself I don't have a chance in hell of entertaining anybody else!



**In *Filmi Stories*, you have managed to pull together various strands from vastly differing universes quite seamlessly – from Abhilash Shukla from Raipur who now has peacocks in his garden, to Manohar Lele who was a mountain guide but now runs a lucrative illegal business. How did you do**

it?

Unless I can see or feel myself in a world completely, I will not write that story. I believe in deep immersion, really being a part of a world, and seeing it through the eyes of the principal actors – not just their speech or physical contexts, but also their mindscapes. If I had been unable to enter the mind of a prison warden in *Jailbirds*, I would not have attempted to write that story.

My primary excitement about writing is to lead multiple lives. We all fantasise about this: what if I was this? What if I could do that? I am no exception. Fiction gives me the opportunity to lead multiple lives.

What might have contributed to this? I am really excited by other people's life stories. In any social setting, I'm the listener. I am fascinated by the lives of people, and not purely from a utilitarian perspective – it's because I am genuinely interested.

In my journey through several lives in the decades that I have lived, all these characters have been inside my mind. Experience in itself is not important; what you make of your experience is what is important. For me, as a fiction writer, experience is the foundation for my imagination to take hold.

One of the reasons fiction is taking a backseat in this hyper-informationalised world, is that there is a huge premium on information. The mind is very open and sensitive to receiving information. But imagination is something else; it is important for transcending one's reality. I need to be able to transcend my reality in order to write.

If your fiction is just memoir in disguise, then you can only write one novel. But if I have to have longevity as a writer, then I need to see myself in different worlds.

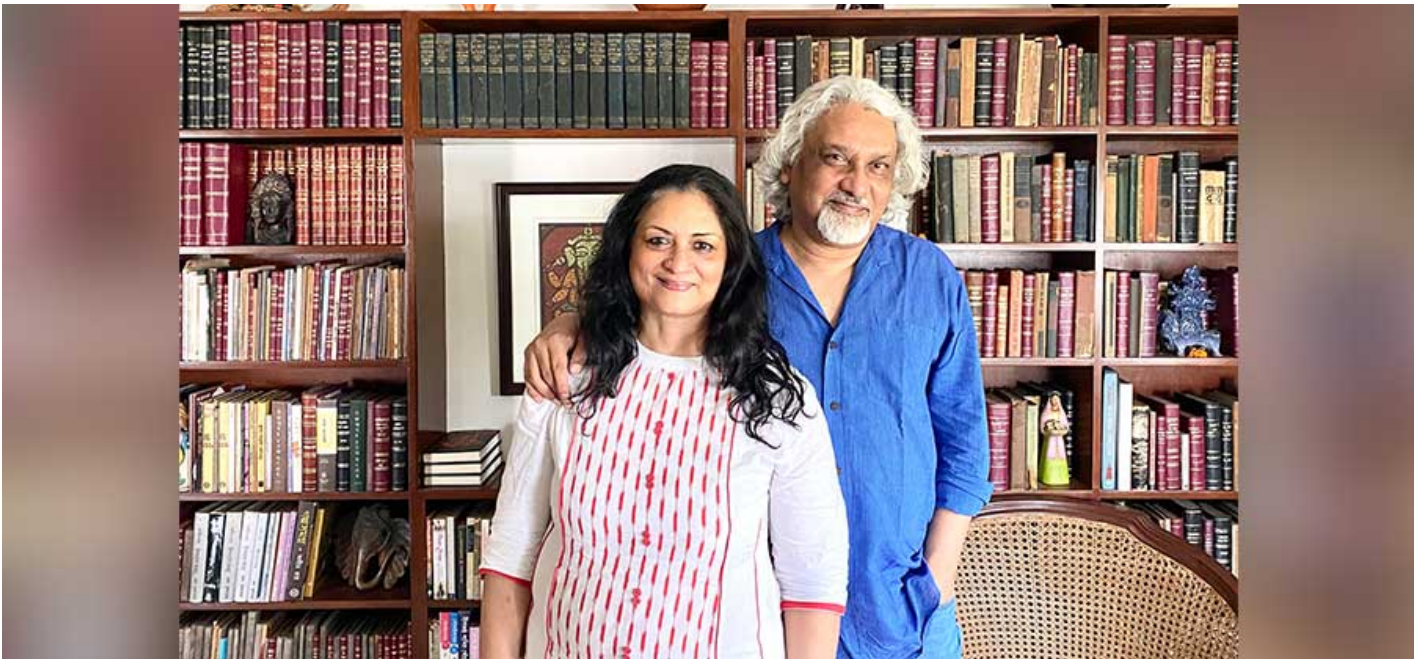


### **Is there a process in place for turning the stories in *Filmi Stories* into films?**

Unfortunately, there is no proper process in India whereby fiction gets translated to film. Everything is serendipity and happenstance. Perhaps somebody reads something and likes it. He says, “Oh! This would make a good film. Who is the author? Let’s get in touch.” There are no film agents in India, and literature agents are not invested much in cinema. Bollywood is a notoriously fickle and superficial place; I’m sure there are some wise heads there, and there are, of course, the likes of Vishal Bhardwaj. But I can’t think of a process in place. The book is just out; hopefully, some people who are in cinema will read it, and hopefully a few stories will be appealing. Then, it’s between them and my agent in the UK to figure it out.







Kunal Basu with his wife, Susmita Basu, a ceramics artist, in their book-filled south Kolkata residence

Nayantara Mazumder

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**Is there one story in the book that is particularly close to your heart? If so, why?**

I feel for some of the characters in some of the situations. But I would perhaps say that the story *Fake* comes to my mind. KK in *Fake* is someone I think about. He gets into a gallery, but as a fake artist. A lot of people are trying to make it in life; especially if you are in the arts, it is a horribly tough journey. I always tell people it is easier to be an accountant or a lawyer! It is, in fact, even easier to be an academic, which I was in my other life! Being an author or an artist is impossible: there are so many heartbreaks. In *Oxblood*, the main characters are criminals in the business of creating disguises; but life plays the ultimate game with them when a disguise begins to feel too comfortable.

**You've written a book called *Filmi Stories*. What do you enjoy watching?**

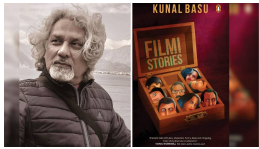
Oh, I love cinema! I have grown up around it. I was a child actor in Mrinal Sen's films; Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak were my parents' friends. Susmita and I watch a lot of world classics; MUBI, for instance, has some great films. OTT does have some quality content; you must have watched *Chernobyl*. What writing!

I used to write 8-9 hours a day, but these days, late in the evenings, I don't want to go back to my desk. So what does one do on the long, cold winter nights in Oxford? Susmita and I watch films; we love chatting and arguing about cinema a lot.

**This truly sounds like the kind of partnership that the people in my generation would aspire to: one of emotional and intellectual compatibility.**

Yes, that's true, and also the cultural compatibility. I am excited about her art, and she is, fortunately, excited about my writing! We have one daughter, who is also culturally inclined; she lives in New York City. This is what keeps the household happy and growing. You see, a book is not published everyday. What happens in the interim? In the interim life happens: you talk, chat, discuss, you do things together.

*'Filmi Stories' by Kunal Basu was published by Penguin Random House/Vintage in April 2023. Read more about it [here](#).*



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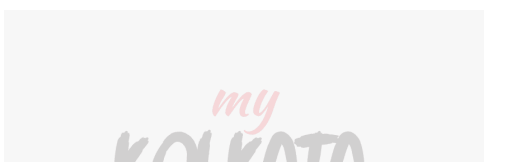
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