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Cross-Cultural Equations and Relations in Kunal Basu's *The Japanese Wife*

Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury

Vice Principal
Garden City College
Bangalore

Abstract:

In this globalized post-modern era, cross-cultural relationships interest postcolonial theorists and practitioners to understand the wide possibilities of cultural discourses. Kunal Basu's *The Japanese Wife* is one such book which portrays interactions between protagonists of different cultural backgrounds. It is a collection of twelve short stories which bring out unexpected relationships of people meeting at the crossroads of life. The collection showcases Basu's ability to create the extraordinary out of the common everyday experience. This paper is an attempt to study the various intricacies of the relationship and cultural exchanges that take place between the protagonists of Basu's title story "The Japanese Wife" in connection to postcolonial theories laid down by influential theorists like Homi Bhaba.

Keywords: Culture, postcolonial, hybridity, cross-cultural, divergent, relationship, marriage, colonial

Exploration of cultural exchanges and relationships has been a common phenomenon in many postcolonial literatures. The interactions of people from different backgrounds form a part and parcel of many contemporary narratives. In this globalized post-modern era, cross-cultural relationships interest postcolonial theorists and practitioners to understand the wide possibilities of cultural discourses. Kunal Basu's *The Japanese Wife* is one such book which portrays interactions between protagonists of different cultural backgrounds. It is a collection of twelve short stories which bring out unexpected relationships of people meeting at the crossroads of life. The collection showcases Basu's ability to create the extraordinary out of the common everyday experience. The stories also project the author's wide knowledge of the culture and customs of many places. Almost all the stories in the collection present a unique situation where cultural exchanges take place between divergent people. This paper aims to study the various intricacies of the relationship and cultural exchanges that take place between the protagonists of Basu's title story "The Japanese Wife" in connection to postcolonial theories laid down by influential theorists like Homi Bhaba. The extraordinariness of the cross-cultural relationship presented by Basu in this story led the noted Indian film-maker, Padmashri Aparna Sen, to make a movie based on it. Commenting on the plot, Sen said, "It's an improbable and hauntingly beautiful love story, almost surreal in its innocence. And I immediately knew that this was the film I had to make." (*The Japanese Wife*, cover page) The improbability of the story comes from Basu's choice of drawing two individuals from two corners of the world, geographically and culturally separate, who come together for a bonding of lifetime, in the most unique way possible.

"The Japanese Wife" depicts the relationship of Snehamoy Chakrabarti, "a teacher at Shonai's secondary school" (*The Japanese Wife*, 4) and a Japanese woman, Miyage. Being pen-friends, Snehamoy and Miyage share their joys and sorrows, worries and anxieties and very soon the

pen-friendship develop to “pen-marriage” (*The Japanese Wife*, 6). Unhindered by the great distance and cultural differences between them, Snehamoy and Miyage are bound for life, leading a normal everyday relationship between married couples. Twenty years elapse and the passage of time has only made their bonding stronger. The marriage, no longer a secret, is known to all villagers and even outsiders “on reaching their island would ask to be shown the house of a certain Mastermohai – the one with the Japanese wife.” (*The Japanese Wife*, 4) Even though urged by his aunt, Snehamoy never found it necessary to visit Japan to meet his wife. The relationship between the couple is portrayed by Basu as self-satisfying to such an extent that as much deep their love and commitment for each other was, the prospect of meeting had never occurred to both of them. Snehamoy’s aunt, his foster-parent, has also over time started regarding Miyage as her daughter-in-law and the unusual marriage between the two is not only a known fact but also sanctioned by the society.

The unusuality of the relationship is heightened by the coming together of two people from completely different cultural backgrounds. India’s colonial history, cultural values and customs differ from Japan, a super power nation. The bonding of Snehamoy and Miyage, thus, seem extraordinary, given the remoteness of the cultural practices and customs of the two countries. Notwithstanding the long distance between them, their relationship flourishes as the couple take on the normal course of husband and wife. Ignoring the differences in cultural practices, Snehamoy and Miyage become steadfast in their avowal of marital relationship, not brought forth by any religious and cultural rites and practices, but by the nod of their hearts. Basu’s treatment of the theme of marriage so conducted brings out the relative importance of cultural practices and the determination of couples in a married relationship. Snehamoy and Miyage may belong to two different cultural zones, but nevertheless are able to bond and find similarities in their situations. Basu’s portrayal of the commonality in terms of the rivers, drawn by his protagonists, highlight their cross-cultural bonding where nature serves to unite two people who are otherwise distanced geographically and culturally. As the pen-friends bond over the letters, unearthing each other’s lives, Miyage’s mention of the river Nakanokuchi erased all awkwardness of corresponding with a stranger from Snehamoy’s mind. Nature helps Miyage transform into one of his kith and kin, leaving Snehamoy in complete ease as he in turn tells her “... of his anger towards Matla – for flooding their village and devouring his parents; of its treacherous churns; the stink of floating carcasses. He wrote of its months of contentment following the monsoon – all swollen and calm – reflecting the bamboo groves like ageing spears; of his passion for gazing at idle boats dotting the mudflats and the yearly pageantry of fishermen celebrating the gift of the river. He confided his strange excitement, lying on the banks and listening to the lapping waves, as if they were the endearments of his long lost mother.” (*The Japanese Wife*, 5) Cultural differences, thus, are sidelined by the bonding that nature can bring about.

Basu’s deft portrayal of the adaptations of his protagonists to each other’s culture is important to understand their cross-cultural negotiation and relationship. Snehamoy, like a true husband, “knew he had Miyage as securely as any man did his willfully wedded wife, even if she didn’t sit by his side on the banks of the Matla.” (*The Japanese Wife*, 8) In their twenty married years, he had never felt the physical distance come between them. Snehamoy’s steadfast determination in the relationship draws our attention to the cultural values imbibed in a ‘Japanese family’ which is believed to be a “bond of relationship inherent in the maintenance and continuance of the family

as an institution.” (Wikipedia) Steve Wright, while sharing his experiences of Japanese marriages, comments:

“Japanese are taught to accommodate rather than confront from an early age, and the most successful marriages I've seen here are the ones where the husband and wife have settled in on a daily pattern where neither one ever gets in the other's face.... A successful marriage in Japan has two partners who are attentive to their significant others. Most Japanese would much rather that you *showed* them how you felt than *told* them. Holding the door, handing an umbrella, offering your seat on a train or bus, reaching for a packet of tissues when someone else sneezes—these little signs of attention you pay to someone else carry much more weight than anything you could ever say in Japan.”

True to Wright's observation, Snehamoy accommodates to his cross-cultural marriage to a Japanese woman, and as unusual as the marriage may be, is steadfast in his role as a husband. His days pass in composing letters to his wife and reading hers in return. Their married life is no different from the commonplace, ordinary ones, as Snehamoy gets “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. In his personal portrait gallery – one that lay in a weathered file at his bedside – she smiled in a series of gently ageing faces. He greyed with her, advised her on her health....They fought over periods of silence, blaming each other, then blaming the lot of postmen.” (*The Japanese Wife*, 7, 8) Just as nature, deaths too bind them together. Being an orphan, Snehamoy understands perfectly his wife's grief at having lost her mother, and consoles her to come out of her depression.

Basu's portrayal of Snehamoy's confusion at the advent of the widow and her child to his home takes us deep in his psyche where even accommodating the girl who was chosen to be his bride at one point of time in his home is close to bordering on dishonesty to his wife. He spends a much discomforting day thinking on how to break the news to his wife, but never hesitates to disclose the truth to her. As he gradually gets used to the presence of the widow in his home, Snehamoy still maintains his distance, treating her more like a younger sister, even though his aunt is filled with the hope of his life being settled. The widow gets sanction to tidy up his room, cook and clean for him, but Miyage's place in his heart remains untouched. Snehamoy is torn with guilt when in an impulsive moment he loses control and gets intimate with the widow. He drafts and re-drafts his letter of confession to his wife, fearing that she would “end their marriage just as easily as she had started it – silence replacing the strokes of her pen.” (*The Japanese Wife*, 15) Nevertheless, he is honest enough to confess his deviation and send the letter to her reasoning within himself “what good is a man who isn't loyal?” (*The Japanese Wife*, 16)

Basu's portrayal of Miyage's adoption of the Indian culture is stronger than that of her husband. While Snehamoy performs his duties as an ideal husband, Miyage truly adapts to her husband's cultural mores and traditions. Like a true Indian wife, Miyage devotes herself completely to the well-being of Snehamoy's family. Her concerns centre around her husband's future and her letters “prompted him to mind his savings and the loans he was eligible for but never took. During monsoons, she'd remind him to wear socks over his slippers to avoid the bloodsucking leech.” (*The Japanese Wife*, 8) Her duties were not limited only to her husband and “(w)ith the assured status of a Bou, she scolded him for neglecting his aunt – not taking her to see a doctor

for her recurring malaria.” (*The Japanese Wife*, 8) Over time, Miyage’s status in Snehamoy’s home, not only his heart, also gets established as a daughter in law. Her frequent gifts sent to Snehamoy all the way from Japan act as a form of dowry or rather the gifts that married women bring to their in-laws’ house. For twenty long years, a variety of gifts wrapped up in Miyage’s love has been reaching Snehamoy’s house – “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.” (*The Japanese Wife*, 4) The gifts sent by Miyage, distinct in their Japanese nature, portray the cross-cultural equations in the relationship of Snehamoy and Miyage. Miyage’s status is gradually secured as Snehamoy’s wife in his home. In her absence, Snehamoy’s aunt treat Miyage’s gifts equivalent to her daughter-in-law. When Miyage’s latest gift, the kites, arrive in a “trim balsa wood box” (*The Japanese Wife*, 3) Snehamoy’s aunt “received the box like a returning bride. Waiting with neighbours in front of their yellow-and-white home, the only one in cement and brick, she let the younger women welcome it indoors – to his room. There, it sat all afternoon in the cone of a shadow, listening to the purr of mating cats, in the company of an unmade bed and a dresser full of knick-knacks, facing a painting of a rising sun over a flaming volcano.” (*The Japanese Wife*, 3) Miyage’s acceptance of the true status of Indian wifehood, ready for compromises, is visible in her calmness at Snehamoy’s confession of his impulsive act with the widow. Even though Snehamoy is in great anxiety that his wife would end their twenty-year long relationship after his confession, Miyage as a true docile and understanding Indian wife, accepts and pardons his frailty. Basu’s portrayal of these cultural exchanges between Japan and India highlight the nature of the relationship between his protagonists. Both Snehamoy and Miyage adopts the cultural practices of each other’s countries to such an extent that the seeming barriers between them vanish.

Basu’s portrayal of the cross-cultural exchanges between Snehamoy and Miyage take us back to Homi Bhaba’s important postcolonial theory of hybridity. Bhaba’s idea that the cultural interaction between the colonizer and the colonized leads to a fusion of cultural forms can be applied to Basu’s story as well. Japan as a super-power nation and India with its colonial history may be considered to come within the ambit of Bhaba’s theory. The cross-cultural relationship between Miyage and Snehamoy then truly portrays Bhaba’s notion of hybridity. Miyage’s gifts sent to Snehamoy, her wifely duties and concern and her adaptation of Indian culture wipe away her essential foreign status and transform her to the status of an Indian wife. Snehamoy too plays the part of a true husband by showing care and concern for his wife, never letting distance come between them. The letters become their medium of communication, erasing the vast barrier of distance between the husband and wife who had never even seen each other. Basu’s portrayal of the intermingling of two cultures is at its best in Snehamoy’s receiving a diagnosis of Miyage’s illness from the village doctor and advising her to take the help of homeopathic medicines. Basu’s protagonists are completely at ease with the differences in their culture and customs and in fact are ready to adapt to each other’s practices as a part of their devotion to the other. Commenting on such cross-cultural equations, Hans Bertens is of the opinion that “to take another culture seriously means to accept it on its own terms to accept the distinctive ways in which it differs from our own culture.” Basu’s portrayal of Miyage’s arrival to Shonai island at the news of her husband’s death “head shaven, wearing the white of a Hindu widow” (*The Japanese Wife*, 16) showcases Bertens’ idea of the true meaning of acceptance of another culture.

An important projection of the cross-cultural equations in Basu's story is depicted in the kite-flying episode. Miyage sends a box of kites to Snehamoy as a token of her love. Snehamoy, along with the widow's son, makes preparation for showcasing their kites during the festival of the god, Biswakarma. All sorts of preparations are made for the kite-flying day drawing Snehamoy closer to the boy. The entire village becomes a part of the kite-fight with rival groups being boosted by a village shopkeeper "offering his Indian kites free to anyone willing to brave the foreign invasion." (*The Japanese Wife*, 10) As the kite-fight progresses, it seems no longer a playful activity but a real war between the two nations. Miyage's kites – "a giant Baroman", the "jaunt Tsugaru", the "Kabuki faces" – seem to bring alive Japanese culture alive in the Shonai island. (*The Japanese Wife*, 10) As one of the Japanese kites – one with the picture of a Japanese lady in hair tied up in fancy bun – drooped down, the onlookers screamed "there goes Mastermohai's wife...!" (*The Japanese Wife*, 10) identifying the Japanese kites to Snehamoy's wife and the cultural background she belongs to. The fight between the last of the Japanese lot – "a Nagasaki fighter" (*The Japanese Wife*, 10) and a local one is nothing short of a real war waged between the two nations where "...the Indian and the Japanese eyed each other from respective corners of the horizon" (*The Japanese Wife*, 11), leading ultimately to the Indian one winning over the Japanese one. The kite-flying episode in the story takes the readers to one of the most meaningful portrayal of cross-cultural equations by the author.

Basu's "The Japanese Wife" is not a mere moving love story but more importantly a portrayal of two individuals coming together from different cultural backgrounds. The cross-cultural equations in their relationship provide ample justification to postcolonial theories of hybridity and the fluidity of cultural identity in the post-modern era.

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