

## A bond between a Japanese and an Indian formed over letters: The Japanese Wife by Kunal Basu

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**Abstract-** Indo-Japanese relations have successfully completed 70 years. In this scenario, asking how literature has captured this relationship is significant. Some prominent works of modern Japanese fiction have explored the significance of India as a spiritual land, with answers to questions that the Japanese people seek in novels such as Fukai Kawa. When one talks about one-on-one interactions between people of the two nations, there are only very few works in Indian English fiction which explore this space. *The Japanese Wife* is a short story by Kunal Basu which is unique in exploring the bond that forms over letters between the Indian man Snehomoy and the Japanese lady Miyage. The story explores the improbable bond that the two form over letters, even without meeting each other in person, through the length of the story. How this is made possible and what this example of intercultural communication signifies are some of the questions that the paper attempts to explore answers to as it examines the unique intercultural communication that ensues between the two in the form of letters and gifts exchanged.

**Keywords** *The Japanese Wife*, Intercultural communication, letters, epistolary fiction, Kunal Basu

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## 1. Introduction

Mutual interactions between India and Japan have spanned centuries owing to religious, cultural, and philosophical influences that Buddhism exerted on Japanese culture and life, which is one of the major cultural exports from India to Japan. While Buddhism travelled from India and reached Japan through China and Korea, the cultural exchanges with time and especially in modern and contemporary times, have become multifaceted, as well as multi-directional, with access and interest in the culture of the 'other' being facilitated by the convenience of media and the internet. This has enabled people to casually explore or seriously study other countries and their cultures. Along with ease of travel and access to information, what has also burgeoned is travel between countries- in this case, India and Japan, besides an increase in opportunities to work with one another in both the locations and the opportunities for interaction created as a result. The multitude of opportunities where paths cross, and people across countries interact has provided a fertile ground for the exchange of ideas and, in the process, helped to provide a ground where one can formulate mutual perceptions of one another from close quarters through interpersonal interactions. How much of the people-to-people interactions by meeting in person have translated into works of literature, and how does literature capture this easy accessibility to the 'other', in the case of India and Japan?

When compared to premodern times, Japanese literature of the modern period (post-Meiji era from 1868~) has had prominent works of fiction with India woven into the theme of the works by mainstream authors of Modern Japanese literature- be it Akutagawa Ryunosuke, Tanizaki Junichiro, or Mishima Yukio; and in contemporary times- Endo Shusaku and Yuka Ishii. When compared to this, if one looks at fiction by Indian English authors in modern and contemporary times that portray Japan, then the number of works is far between. This could be attributed to the colonial past that India and Britain shared, which translated into a keener awareness and interest in exploring or writing about the other.

The paper takes forward the study of understanding the 'other' -in this case, Japan in Indian English writing while focusing on Indo-Japanese interactions. The paper focuses on analysing people-to-people interactions through a piece of contemporary Indian English fiction- *The Japanese Wife* (2008), a short story written by Kunal Basu. Of the prominent works of modern Japanese literature that portray India in them, Fukai Kawa by Endo Shusaku needs special mention as a large part of the novel unfolds in India, describing the river Ganges, the temples, Kalighat in Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta) as significant motifs. (Lakshmi, 2018).

The two countries have forged congenial relations in almost all spheres of life, be it political, economic, or cultural. Indo-Japanese diplomatic relations have spanned

70 years. This paper attempts to explore how literature has captured the people-to-people interactions in Indian English fiction writing.

### **Factors governing intercultural communication in the story**

Of the existing theories of intercultural communication, one of the prominent theories is the one proposed by Gudykunst (1995), which is anxiety, uncertainty management theory, or AUM, which records a variety of factors that govern intercultural communication with a stranger. The mutual perceptions that people of a nation hold about one another may provoke anxiety and cause uncertainty, according to Gudykunst (1995). “Factors such as self and self-concept, reactions and motivations to interact with strangers, self-categorization and stereotyping, and situational processes all may provoke feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, and successful intercultural communications requires managing these feelings just right- being mindful enough about tensions to drive engagement while not succumbing to fear or rigidity.” (Liu, p.540).

In *The Japanese Wife*, it is noteworthy how the two characters -Snehamoy from India and Miyage from Japan—communicate without the baggage of cultural stereotyping or cliches that may influence their mutual perceptions. Also, the physical distance between the two is overcome by their bond with each other as fellow humans.

Without the socio-cultural context of their respective countries in the stories, outside of their interactions over letters, the adherence to in-group or distancing themselves from outgroup as may be the tendency in interpersonal interactions (Turner et al., 1987), is also not seen or exhibited by the two main characters, even though there are a few instances of the Indian people in the village trying to pit the Japanese and Indian kites against one another.

One of the things that underlines the relationship between the two characters is how they define their identities with respect to each other. Mutual identities are respected, and rarely does one's ‘culture’ overpower that of another country or person. The mutual respect that the two individuals share is based on how they feel secure in their own identities, thereby making them open to interacting with the ‘other’ in a secure way. According to Ting Toomey (1993), “there is a dance of mutual accommodation associated with successful ICC, and a collision or failure to coordinate meanings or actions in the case of unsuccessful ICCs; there are powerful normative implications of the theory, as a secure identity is clearly the desired basis for successful ICC.” (Liu H James, 2013, p.3).

### **Outline of the story**

*The Japanese Wife* and the trials and tribulations that the two people undergo when forming an invaluable bond through their long-distance relationship is what the story narrates. The means of correspondence, i.e. letters between the two,

interspersed with gifts, makes the story an example of ‘epistolary fiction’, which takes the story's plot forward. Even as there is unfamiliarity with the other person's culture, a deep bond develops through exchanging gifts and letters. Letters as a medium acquaint two strangers as pen friends and then bind them in the marriage relationship. Letters within the story help to carve an intimate space for the relationship to blossom into a meaningful, albeit long-distance relationship. The letters exchanged between the Snehamoy and Miyage are such that they discuss the mundane details of life, health, and romance.

The book *The Japanese Wife* is a collection of twelve short stories about the “unexpected”, and the collection is described as “chronicles of memory and dreams born at the crossroads of civilisations” in the book's cover. The unexpectedness of the tryst and the rendezvous that ensues through letters is a story of pen friends – where the two main characters are an Indian man living in Sundarbans in India and a Japanese woman living in Japan, and their correspondence through letters which binds them in a relationship as husband and wife, a bond they sustain without meeting each other in person even once.

### **Letters in literature**

The dictionary meaning of ‘epistolography’ is defined as the art of writing epistles or letter writing. Letters incorporated in fiction are known as epistolary novels, and stories with letters may carry intimate correspondence between characters and take the story forward. Letters by themselves carry a directness which a short story may not have. In that sense, it creates a private space between the characters within the story.

In the story *The Japanese Wife*, letters assume the role of messengers and are the medium of communication between the two characters. As Anthony Aycock has also pointed out, letters have the quality of having a direct receiver to whom they are written. “While other genres have what Wolfgang Iser calls an implied reader, a letter has an actual reader-the addressee on the envelope.” (Aycock, 2013, p. 57).

When one talks of letters, there have been famous exchanges between the people of the two countries, India and Japan, in the realm of non-fiction. One such example is that of Japanese children writing to the Indian Prime Minister Nehru in response to which he sent Indira- an elephant, to Ueno Zoo in the post-war period. The incident is well-known how zookeepers of Ueno Zoo in Tokyo had to kill most of the wild animals residing in the zoo, fearing their escape and the danger that it would pose to people. Some eight hundred-plus letters were delivered to the then-prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, which eventually resulted in Ueno Zoo receiving an elephant from India as a gift in September 1949. The elephant was accompanied by a letter to the children of Japan in which he wrote- “I hope that when the children of India and the children of Japan will grow up, they will serve not only their great

countries but also the cause of peace and cooperation all over Asia and the world. So, you must look upon this elephant, Indira by name, as a messenger of affection and goodwill from the children of India. “(Time, 1949). Letters exchanged between Rabindranath Tagore and the Japanese poet Noguchi Yonejiro in 1938 on the theme of Imperialism and Japanese aggression also deserve mention here as famous exchanges. The two exchanged opposing ideas on war, nationalism and imperial aggression but shared a close personal bond exchanging ideas over letters. Other important epistolary exchanges include those between Okakura Tenshin and Priyamvada Devi, Tenshin's alleged love interest. (Makoto et al., 1997) These were examples of letters exchanged in real life and not in fiction, however, which is the focus of the current paper.

### **About the author and the book**

Kunal Basu, the author of the only short story collection to which *The Japanese Wife* belongs, is a bilingual author who has written in both English and Bengali, besides being a practising academician. His novels *The Opium Clerk*, *The Miniaturist*, and *Racists* are especially well-known works. He has written ten books in English and four in Bengali. Of these, there is also a book on photography and historical fiction. He has also acted in films and on stage. In short, his repertoire of work covers different genres and a wide range of themes.

The two main characters in the story *The Japanese Wife* are Snehamoy Chakrabarti and Miyage. Snehamoy Chakrabarti is a maths teacher at a school, and Miyage is his love interest, who later becomes his wife. The two get acquainted with each other as pen friends and later get into the bond of marriage, a relationship which they sustain with letters for over twenty years, braving illness and distances, not to mention the cultural differences while sharing their emotions and concerns. Even though Snehamoy's choice of his Japanese wife is met with some resistance at first by his aunt, later, his aunt wants him to meet his wife and enquires about her, slowly getting used to the idea of a marriage where the two don't meet each other. Snehamoy's friends and acquaintances also slowly accept the marriage, even though they sometimes make fun of him by giving him pen names such as 'Japani'. Letters act as instruments that help to initiate and transform relationships from strangers to pen friends to husband and wife. Sadly, a letter is also responsible for conveying the news of Snehamoy's untimely demise to his wife Miyage in Japan, finally making her come to Shonai in India to her husband's house as his widow.

### **From 'representing' the other to communicating with the 'other'**

As discussed above, the representation of India in Modern Japanese literature in fiction has been seen in some works such as *Fukai Kawa*, *Hojo no Umi*, and *Hyakunen Doro*, which are representative works of modern Japanese fiction. As for Indian fiction, the prominent 'other' for Indian fiction writers has traditionally been

the West and portrayals of British people due to India's colonial experience. When one talks of Japan in Indian English fiction, one hardly finds any mention. India's association with spirituality has been well established in works such as Fukai Kawa, where seekers of faith and seekers of answers to questions bothering them have been portrayed. However, close personal interactions between the people of the two countries in the fiction of the two countries is an area that the story explores. In other words, it not only talks about the 'representation' of ideas, people or places of the other country or culture from the perspective of a seeker or tourist but as someone who interacts with people and associates with them personally by direct communication. This space has the potential for exploration and understanding of the people-to-people bonds that exist in fiction.

A dialogue between two individuals married to one another is perhaps a very mundane and expected correspondence. The paper explores the work as one that offers the opportunity to explore communication through letters between people of two cultures and their own perceptions of one another. What aspects of their own identity do they portray, and which facets of the other culture do they adopt in the process? How many preconceived notions the two characters in the story hold, how much of the 'other' they explore and accept, and how they define their own identity in the process are questions the paper attempts to analyse.

While the two get interested in one another because of having chanced upon a magazine that was instrumental in making them pen friends, it is significant that they try to communicate and reach out to one another as fellow humans and not as people who are defined by their countries or cultures. At least outside of the Japanese things that Miyage gifts Snehomoy, their interactions are largely devoid of cultural pointers. While this may be because the letters given space in the story only discuss their lives, their national identity does not seem to be the primary governing factor for their communication.

### **Letters and presents as messengers**

In the story, letters and presents exchanged between the two people symbolise them in the absence of the two people meeting. For instance, 'Kites with alien markings', a box which was received like a 'returning bride', represents the other when the person herself-Miyage is not present.

"There it sat all afternoon..., listening in the corner of a shadow, ...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." (Basu, 2009, p. 3)

The description of the box of kites in the painting is done in a way that seems to represent Miyage, the lady who sent it. Even Snehomoy, to whom Miyage had sent the box, receives it like a person, as the description below indicates,

"Once inside, he stood facing the box propped up by his bed like a timid visitor,

then started unwrapping the canvas-brown cover just as impatiently as he had opened his wife's first letter from Japan, twenty years ago..." (p. 4)

Snehamoy had opened various mails in the twenty years of his association with Miyage, his wife. The mail included book boxes, Hokusai prints, sacks of mountain cherries, scarves, cards and letters, fragrant with perfumes from Japan. Gifts from Japan were special, as were the personalised letters that Snehamoy received from Miyagi. Letters and Japanese gifts seem to symbolise the people they are sent by. For Snehamoy, the letters and the gifts, such as the exquisite kites wrapped in beautiful Japanese paper, symbolised his wife's love towards him.

The gifts and letters exchanged between the two proved their love for each other after they had entered a secret marriage.

"A secret marriage, that was now open, as normal as letters, as ordinary as his aunt's daily stories about her beloved Bou- the daughter-in-law. Ordinary, except the arrival of kites." (p. 4)

The relationship between the two evolves with the letters they write to each other and the gifts they exchange. It is noteworthy that the Japanese lady's name as she writes her first letter to Snehamoy reads, "Dear Snehamoy, I was waiting for your letter. Yes, I shall be your penfriend. The meaning of my name is 'gift'. (p.5)

### **Evolution of the relationship from pen friends to spouse**

The saga of letters between Snehamoy and Miyage spanned over twenty years. However, the first letter the two exchanged is "the most charming, the unexpected, his first brush with the other kind, native of foreign..." (p.5). The first letter that Miyage wrote to Snehamoy was something that he found "brief but revealing." (p.5)

The communication, even as it was long-distance through letters, made his friends interested in his relationship with the Japanese bride. It made them curious to know if he would marry the village belle or the Japanese.

"For the next few months, he wrote brief letters to his penfriend, spending more time revising his English than the calculus that came naturally. Having made the first move, discovering her address in a magazine, he felt shy, unlike his city friends all too willing to show off..." (p. 5)

The shy, coy maths teacher Snehamoy uses the letters he writes to Miyage to share his life with her, talking about his life at the college where he taught, his aunt with whom he lived, and the river Matla- an intrinsic part of his life.

Rivers- Matla for Snehamoy and Nakanouchi for Miyage flowed the words in their letters with them. The binding force of how human experiences and nature bind two geographically distant regions -rivers is noteworthy. The Matla for Snehamoy was a river that was as living as a fellow human, for it flooded the village, consumed his

parents, and was calm and full after monsoons. The Matla had perhaps witnessed Snehamoy's life as a family member- inseparable from his life and that of his kin.

The river had been a constant companion to Snehamoy, an extension of his family perhaps, whom he had consulted during times of crisis, such as Miyage's illness after her mother passed away. He had written at the riverbanks, and Matla had helped him realise the love for his wife.

The bond the two had was typical of spouses who fought over things and then made up. They took the presence of one another for granted, although from a distance, and they were secure in the knowledge of their professed relationship.

Meeting in person, for them, seemed like an extravagance and too expensive to indulge themselves in. Even Snehamoy's aunt's expectation of the bride coming to India waned with time, and there was a sense that she would come when she could. It is interesting to note how the prospect of not meeting each other did not occur as something unnatural to either of them. Snehamoy would come back to the gifts and letters that Miyage wrote him, and as a married man, he would come back to his wife. The letters and gifts were, in other words, symbolic of the other person whose absence did not dilute the bond.

Both husband and wife seem to have transcended the 'usual expectations' from one another as a spouse; meeting and staying together may seem only normal to others but seems to be outside the expectations for Snehamoy and Miyage. The apparent things did not occur to the two of them, who were perhaps naïve and pure. The usual tensions between two cultures in an international marriage with expectations from the groom and his family, of being labelled as henpecked when siding with his wife's country and culture, were things that Snehamoy overcame with ease even as he was pitted against his fellow village folks in a kite flying contest where he makes the Japanese kite soar with the other kites.

The one incident that brought the two closer to one another was the mention of female attention and a possible marriage proposal that Snehamoy received from his aunt's relative. Miyage's response to this unwarranted attention that Snehamoy received from another woman is what made her offer herself to him as a bride in marriage, with the request that he convey to his aunt as well how she would be a good wife.

Without meeting his wife, Snehamoy used his affinity with Japan to reach out to the little boy staying at his place. The absent wife also slowly assumed importance in his life, and in the absence of attention and concern from his aunt about Miyage's health, he kept the news from the letters to himself.

Finally, the news of Snehamoy's death was shared with Miyage through a letter from the school headmaster, who informed his wife. A letter in response to which Miyage finally responded by coming to his village dressed as a widow in white. The

visit that did not materialise occurred towards the end of the novel in this way, when Snehamoy succumbs to ill health, which was informed to his widow Miyage through a letter again.

### **Conclusion**

The unusual bond between Snehamoy and his wife Miyage materialised over intimate letters exchanged between them over time, full of emotion, love, and care for the other. The fact that a direct meeting between the two does not materialise again makes the space of one-on-one interactions between people of the two nations elusive. However, the cavity of an in-person meeting between the two is somewhat filled with the letters the two write each other and the gifts exchanged between the two. The letters and gifts symbolise not so much a nation- Japan or India, but the people and their emotions.

The bond that transcends expected norms of society or even marriage and the roles that they are expected to play in society is surpassed by both Snehamoy and Miyage establishing their own rules of how they would want their relationship to grow, and it stands the test of time. One cannot help wondering, however, how a direct in-person interaction between the two may have revealed other facets of their characters and their mutual perceptions of each other and their respective cultures and countries.

The story discussed in the current paper is an example of how intercultural communication between an Indian and Japanese person can possibly be interpreted as an interaction between individuals whose representation or portrayal in the said story is not necessarily governed by ethnocentric definitions of their respective cultures, but by how they perceive the other person or individual. The need to reach out to the 'other' and interact with them is driven to portray or represent them and communicate with the other- a space which has remained largely unexplored in the context of fictional writing in India or Japan. *The Japanese wife* treads a path that is untrodden mainly and brings Snehamoy and Miyage closer in a bond even without a physical meeting but puts them in direct communication through letters to help them build a meaningful relationship of marriage, which is also accepted by the kin is significant. This is because earlier portrayals of Indians in Japanese fiction of the modern period, as discussed in the introductory part of the paper while addressing issues of spirituality, faith and religion associated with India, have not portrayed relationships between people. Unlike the many relationships Western people may have forged with Indians in Indian English literature, Snehamoy and Miyage's bond of being wedded to each other is unique because of the uniqueness of the bond, which is not just formed on a whim but sustained over twenty years. What is, however, found wanting is the two meeting in person, which could have provided more avenues for exploring their relationship and helped bring forth other aspects

of their intercultural bond. The paper has tapped into an area of exploring Indo-Japanese interpersonal interaction in fictional writing. Letters are instrumental in making Snehamoy and Miyage in *The Japanese Wife* transcend language, geography or culture to embrace the innate need to connect with another person. The story adds to the repertoire of letters, albeit fictive, exchanged between people of the two countries, revealing new possibilities of the human-to-human bond formed between the Indian husband and his Japanese wife while promising more such wonderful, improbable relationships between people of India and Japan.

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