**Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)**
**Vol.2/ NO.2/Autumn 2012**

# Cultural Polyvalence in Kunal Basu's "The Japanese Wife" – A Decolonial Reading

S. Cinthana

---

Post-colonial literatures counteract the colonial discourse by dismantling the tradition of English literary theory and criticism. The contemporary purview of Indian Writing in English harps on a similar strain warranting an analysis on myriad planes. Indian English Short Story, in particular is scaling new heights offering a wider scope for a critical acclaim that accommodates non-literary disciplines as well. Among the commendable short story writers in India, the latest one to have shot to an international limelight is Kunal Basu, with his recent publication of *The Japanese Wife*.

Kunal Basu was born in India and is at present teaching at Oxford University. He is the author of three acclaimed novels – *The Opium Clerk*, *The Miniaturist* and *Racists*. *The Japanese Wife* is his latest publication, comprising twelve short stories. The stories are as the blurb reads, "Chronicles of memory and dreams born at the cross-roads of civilization." The title story "The Japanese Wife" epitomizes a love that transcends physical and cultural boundaries.

This paper celebrates the fluidity of cultural identity in the globalized post-modern era with reference to Basu's "The Japanese Wife". The story depicts an unusual love between an Indian man and a Japanese woman resulting in a cross-cultural phenomenon. The protagonists –



URL of the Issue: http://pintersociety.com/vol-2-issue-2autumn-2012/

URL of the article: http://pintersociety.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/S-Cinthana-3.pdf

Snehamoy Chakrabarti and Miyage do not see each other, yet love each other intensely, by courtesy of the letters and gifts they exchange.

Snehamoy of Shonai Island, during his stay at Calcutta on account of his higher education, develops a penfriend relationship with a Japanese girl, Miyage. The 'shy beginning' turns into 'courtship' and evolves into 'proposal'. The mutual love between the two metamorphoses their penfriendship into penmarriage.

The secret marriage becomes well known in the village when he assumes the post of the Mathematics teacher at Shonai's Secondary School. The aunt, his foster-parent initiates the prospect of their meeting. But it matters little for both the husband and wife and they just continue their married life for twenty years without ever meeting once. According to them, "Their meeting, […] had always seemed as an extra, nice to have but not essential." (Basu 8). Their relationship strengthens through letters and he has Miyage as securely as any man does his willfully wedded wife. During the times of Miyage's illness, he desperately feels like visiting her. But, as it does not materialize he remains in constant communion with her through letters. He advises her, from homeopathy, every step of the way until she is fully cured.

The platonic love is interrupted by the arrival of a young widow – Snehamoy's once-would-be bride with her son at his house. The similarity in their loneliness develops a bond between them and in one of the most impulsive moments; he is not able to resist an intercourse with the widow. He confesses his guilt to Miyage, though he knows for sure that she will not reply any more. He reads the will she had sent him to be read when she is no more. He blames himself when he ponders, "What good is a man who isn't loyal?" (Basu 16). Soon he meets with his untimely death due to the spread of killer mosquitoes in the village. Consequently, Miyage steps the Indian soil as an Indian wife accepting the Indian widowhood.

The purpose of this article is to study the on-going historical activity in the millennium called decolonization. Observations have been made by the post-colonial theorists on the ever-changing system of existence in the world of decolonization.

Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory* identifies three phases of post-colonial criticism. The first phase is the 'adopt phase' in which the writers and critics follow the European form and norms to describe their experience. The second phase is the 'adapt phase'

ian which they suitably modify the form and norms to their own specifications. During the third stage, called the 'adept phase' the colonial mind becomes independent, creative and really cross-cultural in expressing its experience. Basu is identified to be in the 'adept phase', decolonized in his approach creating a cross-cultural experience between the colonised Indian and the imperialistic Japanese.

The status of Japan in the global scenario needs to be studied to understand the decolonized reading of the text. The accident of geography has placed both India and Japan in the Orient. Nevertheless, Japan is undoubtedly recognised as the first genuinely westernised nation in Asia. "Western influence has changed the face of Japan and the accoutrements of Japanese life" proclaims Richard Halloran in his book *Japan: Images and Realities* (XV). The western powers themselves acknowledge the entry of Japan into the circle of major world powers. There are enough evidences that parade before the world, the panorama of a modern Japan, technically, socially and spiritually akin to the west. So, a survey of its cultural inclination needs no inquiry. It is potentially a major power equal to or surpassing those in Western Europe. Halloran adjudges rightly in his comment, "Should it choose to exercise that power, it can have an influence in Asia second only to that of the American and Russian superpowers". (xxii)

Unlike other Asian countries, the Japanese invincibility had grown up. Japan's imperialistic tendency is clear when the historian Radhey Shyam Chaurasia says in his *History of Japan*, "Since ancient and prehistoric times the Japanese islands had not been invaded successfully, and on several occasions the Japanese themselves had invaded the Asian continent." (27) Due to the western impact, Japan developed capitalism, militarism and imperialism. Chaurasia quotes Solema's declaration in 1924 to vindicate Japan's adoption of



militaristic and imperialist method thus: "Capitalism in our country without having passed through the stage of liberalism is becoming militaristic and is endowed with the flavour of autocracy" (28). Though Japan follows an independent policy of establishing cordial relation with Asian countries, Japan has allied herself with the USA and is now the second greatest Industrial power and the second richest country in the world after the United States. As a leader

in technology, it has become an increasing economic power raised to the status of the 'Metropolis'.

Therefore, Japan's economic supremacy over a developing nation like India is explicit. While Japan exercises a power, which is a combination of imperialism and capitalism in one, India is undergoing the ordeal of the aftermath of colonisation. Historically Japan is the masculine pole – developed, capitalistic, and powerful and India is its feminine opposition – developing, industrially and economically weak.

The geopolitical divisions infer the relative status of Japan and India as the one of a imperial power and a subjugated subaltern. However, Basu has portrayed a reversal of dominance – a decolonised relationship between the two countries in "The Japanese Wife". "Decolonising the mind, changing the mind-set, and moving towards a mind shift are some of the terms that have given a new turn to studies in the area of colonialism and imperialism" (N. Krishnaswamy, et. al. 93). In the story, the Japanese woman, Miyage takes up the subjective position of a wife in an Indian Hindu family. Her regular letters and gifts bear testimony to her ardent attachment to the family. Her gifts are in a way the dowry that is demanded of a Hindu bride. The kites that arrive at Shonai in a balsa box is literally a "timid visitor" (Basu 4) received like a returning bride. The aunt lets "the younger women welcome it indoors" (Basu 3), a ceremonious practice at a Hindu house.

Miyage, though not physically present at Shonai, takes charge of the house as a dutiful daughter-in-law. "With the assured status of a Bou, she scolded him for neglecting his aunt – not taking her to see a doctor for her recurring malaria" (Basu 8). The culmination of her voluntary acceptance of Indian wifehood is revealed when she does not make a hue of Snehamoy's "single-most impulsive act" (Basu 15) with the widow, his once-would-be bride. After much hesitation, Snehamoy confesses himself fearing that it would end up their twenty years of married life. But to the contrary, as any docile Indian wife, she accepts him with all his frailties. Ultimately, after his death, she grooms herself in white, just as a Hindu widow and reaches Shonai with her head shaven. She observes all the religious practices of a customary Hindu widow and comes to her husband's place to continue her service as a Bou to the aunt. While she willingly occupies the capacity of a subordinated Indian wife it is worth noting the cliché employed by the people of Shonai to refer to Snehamoy – "Mastermoshai – teacher, a master in solving the unsolvable"

(Basu 4). It becomes clear that the author has presented a capsized status to the Indian and the Japanese against the historical reality.

Basu highlights the decolonising undertones in the kite-flying episode as well. Snehamoy, together with the boy make all sorts of preparations to fly the kites sent by Miyage during the celebration for Biswakarma – the God of machines. They apply the abrasive containing glass granules on the strings and tie it to the Japanese kites. Rival groups of boys form teams to participate in the impending kite-fight. They prepare themselves with the Indian kites sponsored by a shopkeeper. According to Basu the Indian kites are donated by the shopkeeper to "anyone willing to brave the foreign invasion" (10). Symbolically the grand contest is a reference to the tug between the two nations. The Japanese kites range from the 'giant Baromon' to jaunty Tsugaru', 'Kabuki faces' – bald men and delicate ladies. There are also humming and whistling kites buzzing like dragonflies and gnats. The crowd roar with applause and one among them cry, "There goes mastermoshai's wife […]" (Basu 10) on looking at a kite with the face of a Japanese lady whose hair is tied up in a fancy bun.

The carnival perch up when a blue Nagasaki fighter – simple in appearance but agile contends with the red Indian fighter – the one with a long tail. "For a brief moment, the Indian and the Japanese eyed each other from respective corners of the horizon" (Basu 11). Then they zip in towards each other like combat planes. The Nagasaki tries to set a trap for the local kite. But the local Indian wriggles out of the trap easily and wisely like a warrior. "Then in a majestic move, it reversed its course and rose, cutting through the line of its enemy in one clean sweep" (Basu 11) and defeats the Japanese. The Nagasaki falls down on the waves of the river Malta and finally plunges into the river. This grand finale is a symbolic representation of the encounter



between India and Japan, out of which India emerges a victor. That is, India accomplishes a cultural supremacy over Japan, the economic power of the world. It is very true when Bertens remarks in his *Literary Theory* that the post-colonial criticism engages in "a reassessment of the traditional relationship between the metropolis and its colonial subjects and in the radical deconstruction […] of the imperialist perspective" (202).

In the context of changing equations and relations, "The Japanese Wife" proves to be a fascinating social laboratory evincing a study of the effect of one culture on another. Culture is the totality of habits, customs, tradition and artifacts in a particular institution of a human group. India has a rich cultural heritage derived from the philosophic outlook of Hindu Nationalism, bound together by the most sacred and enduring bonds of a common Mother India. Snehamoy, though a Bengali, is an entity in the heterogeneous culture stringed to the umbilical cord of Mother India. Amartya Sen in *The Argumentative Indian* celebrates the differences, the dizzying contrasts in Indian culture and he says, "In our heterogeneity and in our openness lies our pride, not our disgrace" (138).

The cultural scenario of the post-independent India is being enriched with new vitality and vigour that it has begun to assimilate very many cultures into the mainstream of the nation. The resultant is the cultural polyvalence in India. At present, in the early twenty first century, colonies have largely disappeared but neo-colonial relations abound, that is the interaction between the cultural identities of the metropolis and the once colonised abounds. One of the main issues dealt with in this story is the cultural influence of India over Japan.

Post-colonial criticism creates necessary models to investigate the new phenomena of cultural polyvalence. One among the prominent post-colonial theorists is Homi Bhabha. The process of cultural interaction between the coloniser and the colonised is central to his work. According to him the coloniser too cannot escape a complex and paradoxical relationship with the colonised. Drawing on Lacan's views of the way identity is constructed, Bhabha offers analysis in which the identity of the coloniser cannot be separated from that of the colonised. The coloniser's identity is not a fixed entity but is partly reconstructed through interaction with the colonised. This happens by what Bhabha calls 'mimicry' – "the always slightly alien and distorted way in which the colonized, either out of choice or under duress, will repeat the colonizer's ways and discourse" (Bertens 208). In mimicry the coloniser sees himself in a mirror that slightly but effectively distorts his image and subtly "others" his own identity.

Taking for granted that, Japan stands for the coloniser and India for the colonised, the play of mimicry can be illustrated in the story. Though powerful, Japan's identity is not stable. Miyage, the representative of Japan undergoes the process of 'mimicry', that is, a stereotyping of the customs and practices of Indian tradition is effected in her which effectively shifts her identity

from Japanese into an Indian woman. This shifting of identity is 'polyvalent'. Krishnaswamy says that, "Hybridity and cultural polyvalency is characteristic of our contemporary life in general […]" (92). Hans Bertens is of the view 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." (199) Miyage's widowhood entails her genuine interest in the Indian culture.

Another influential contribution of Bhabha to post-colonial theory is his notion of hybridity. He argues that the cultural interaction of the coloniser and the colonised leads to a fusion of cultural forms. The love between Snehamoy and Miyage serves as the vantage point that follows a transnational cultural exchange between the two Asian countries. The gifts that Miyage send, her very name signifying 'gift', bear the cultural imprint of Japan. The geisha doll, the painting of a rising sun over a flaming volcano, Hokusai prints, mountain cherries, scarves, cards and letters and kites travel all the way from Japan to India. Finally, Miyage herself lands on the shore at the harbour in Canning. In this context Bhabha's reference to the image of harbour in his "The Location of Culture". He refers to Alan Sekula's photographic project on harbours: "the harbor is the site in which material goods appear in bulk, in the very flux of exchange" (939). In turn, Snehamoy sends many letters communicating his day-to-day affairs. He also receives a diagnosis of Miyage's illness from the village homeopath and advises her with medicines as prescribed in homeopathy. Thus, the cross-culturally hatched love has promoted a ray of globalization, exemplary in its nature. Ziya Us Salam, in his article "An Unusual Love Story" published in the Hindu Magazine, extols the platonic love depicted in "The Japanese Wife" and also speaks in approbation over the filming of this story by Padmashri Aparna Sen. Salam is in all praise for this endeavour when he exclaims, "So is "The Japanese Wife" also likely to reflect that global ethos on the big screen that would make it identifiable to a man in any part of the world?"(2) "The Japanese Wife" serves as a sample for the whole gamut of Indian Writing in English in dealing with the universal conditions of men against the postcolonial landscape. Bijay Kumar Das' inference on Indian Writing in English will provide an appropriate conclusion for this study. He says, "Indian English Literature has transcended the local and transformed it into global. And that is, the hallmark of good literature." (4)

## Works Cited

Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, New York: MUP, 2002.

Basu, Kunal, *The Japanese Wife*, New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008.

Bertens, Hans, *Literary Theory: The Basics*, London: Routledge, 2001.

Bhabha, Homi, "The Location of Culture*", Literary Theory: An Anthology* 2nd Ed., Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), Australia: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1998.

Chaurasia, Radhey Shyam, *History of Japan*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2003.

Das, Bijay Kumar, *Post modern Indian English Literature*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2006.

Halloran, Richard, *Japan: Images and Realities*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.

Krishnaswamy, N. et. al., *Contemporary Literary Theory*, New Delhi: Macmillan, 2001.

Salam, Ziya Us. "An Unusual Love Story", Magazine, *The Hindu*, Feb. 24, 2008.

Sen, Amartya. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 2005.

**About the Author**- S. Cinthana, Assistant Professor of English, V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women, Virudhunagar

E-mail-asst.prof.cins@gmail.com