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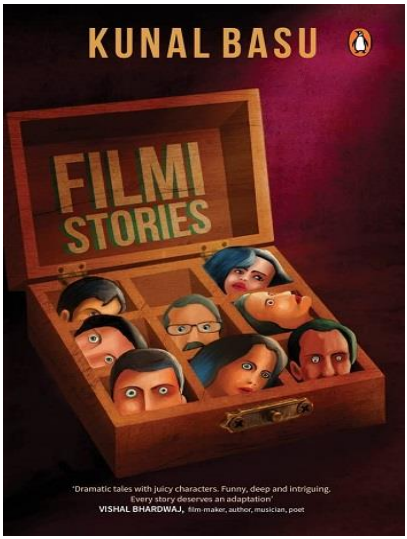
Book Review of Kunal Basu's *Filmi Stories: The Return of the Storyteller*

Ananya Dutta Gupta

At the launch of *Filmi Stories* recently, the author Kunal Basu explained how a random observation about "over-the-top" web series trumping novels had set him thinking about writing fiction "audio-visually". Eight stories later, this reader wonders whether the description does justice to his book. None of the intentionality suggested by the prompt is evident. What is palpable instead is the enduring power of the story.

In an essay titled "The Sense of an Ending: Closure and Disclosure in the Modern Short Story", Supriya Chaudhuri writes how the modern short story is caught between two contrary strains. In the one, such as in "tales" of yore, something is revealed in time, so that the moment of disclosure coincides with the closure of the plot. In the other kind of narrative, sliced out of time like a "snapshot", nothing essentially happens and consequently there is nothing to reveal save a "portrait of the instant". Even as Kunal Basu's story-telling in recent works has been characterised by vigour and vividness rather than incandescent interiority, even as these eight "filmi" stories are spatially anchored, hence audio-visual, and hence film-worthy, what prevails in them and what will ultimately help them prevail is the element of the "tale". Despite their contemporaneity, *Filmi Stories* is characterised by what Walter Benjamin in "The Storyteller" (1936) calls the genre's "great, simple outlines" (1).



That this reader should feel impelled to revisit the theory of the story in a bid to grasp the exact pulse of the book is itself an indication of its success. As E M Forster explains in *Aspects of the Novel*, the fundamental merit of the story underlying all fictional forms, lies in its ability, like the Scheherazade's, to hold the reader captive to curiosity, to the desire to know what happens next (47). It is a state of affairs where turning the page becomes a reflex action, not an act of will. That is what Basu's storytelling has achieved in this, his second collection of short stories since *The Japanese Wife* (2009). That earlier

collection, interestingly, could be said to offer a rich mix of crisply told tales and evocative snapshots.

The title – "filmi" – may have suggested itself to the author because of the eventfulness of the plots. Indeed, all of them have the makings of *masala* movies in the mainstream Bombay film industry mode. In this, too, this collection is starkly different from the immersive and at the same time unmistakably visual *Japanese Wife*, which lent itself to a most *cinematic* adaptation by Aparna Sen in 2010. A lady in the audience at the book launch had very perceptively brought up this critical distinction between the *cinematic* and the *filmy*. In fact, all the stories in *The Japanese Wife* collection are similarly imbued with a profound sense of place. To be cinematic, as we have noted, say, in Basu's *The Miniaturist* or Amitav Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies*, or in the recent Bengali film by Prasun Chatterjee called *Dostojee* (2021), is to have just that feel of a place, at once authentically local in detail and universal in appeal.

As Basu appears to have conceived of it, "filmi", with its tellingly Indian orthography, is about the story quotient rather than the kind of cinematic camerawork, panoramic or close up, that Aparna Sen reads into the hushed exquisiteness of Basu's "The Japanese Wife". Now, to borrow Supriya Chaudhuri's terms, "closure" and "disclosure", the story quotient is about the desire to reach a certain closure, and in the case of an average filmi story, the cinemagoer's satisfaction lies in the very expectedness of the disclosure accompanying it. Yet the thick, racy plots in Basu's *Filmi Stories* are far from predictable and their disclosures and closures are neither repetitive nor sensationalist. This reader's surmise is that Basu wanted to toy with the "filmi" potential of these stories, rather than conform to popular expectations around it. Walter Benjamin contends that "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories" (5). On the other hand, Vladimir Propp demonstrates how fairy tales tend to fall into

certain solid, repeatable plot structures. Yet repetition in Benjamin is a strategy of memorialisation and in Propp an underlying rationale to explain how stories work. In neither is repetition synonymous with the predictability of stories. To say that several of the fairy tales end happily says very little about the memorably distinct storyline in each of them. All classic stories are surely those that either break out of this mould or hide their mouldedness with flair and adroitness? Basu's title seems to be implicitly informed by these abiding questions around the philology of "filminess".

The eleven stories that come after "The Japanese Wife" in that eponymous collection are not acknowledged in the title. It is as though the whole book were riding pillion on the cinematic success of the title story. This is further attested by the blurb by Aparna Sen on the cover designed by Pinaki De featuring the two leading actors from the film. One understands it to be a publishers' rather "filmy" way of capitalising on the celluloid success. What it might *also* suggest is the author's willingness to let the other stories speak for themselves to the reader once they have taken the plunge and got past the show-stopper. By the time of the publication of this collection, Basu had already written three novels, *The Opium Clerk* (2001), *The Miniaturist* (2003) and *Racists* (2006) and it is possible that he was being wary about over-emphasising this shift from the novel to the short story. By contrast, both the title, *Filmi Stories*, and its slightly macabre cover by Pinaki De, featuring a solid wooden box with an open lid and cadaverous faces staring out of eight of its nine clearly defined compartments, underlines the stand-alone autonomy of each of the stories. Come to think of it, *OK Tata and Other Stories* would have sounded quite catchy, but the author is now more assured of his ability to transition from novels to "stories". He is not diffident about placing "Stories" as a defining component in the book's title.

The objective correlative for the "filmi" title must be sought also in the fact that at least two of these stories are set in Mumbai and around the tinsel magnetism this promised destination continues to command over the small town and its young dreamers. Indeed, if there is any recurrence at all in this otherwise remarkably fresh and unrepetitive collection of plots, it is in the author's keen gaze on the lives of protagonists in big cities trying to retrace their journeys back to the small towns of their origin. These journeys are not necessarily all actual and physical. Some of them are mediated by flashes of memory that insidiously affect their present and imperceptibly steer their future. Other triggers enter more primally, through strangely unbidden dreams and surreal encounters, before segueing the protagonist back into a conscious but not necessarily contrary reality.

It is perhaps not entirely unexpected that the seemingly frayed yet potent connect between the big city and the small town inevitably yields one or two plots that slide into the Freudian uncanny. For what the stories reveal is that the protagonists never really quit their homes of birth and early years. When the big city called them away, these homes slipped into the cracks of their consciousness and thus became the strangely familiar, unhomely home inside that Freud calls the "uncanny". Tellingly, Basu recounts how the uncanniest of these stories came to him in course of an afternoon siesta, and how he felt an urge to *tell* it, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, as soon as he woke up.

Walter Benjamin observes how the storyteller is characteristically a social person, a person who loves to "share" (3), unlike the novelist whose more probing, philosophical quest for "the meaning of life" through a form that is founded upon a certain expectation of amplitude demands isolation from the quotidian flow of life outside (3). None of the protagonists in *Filmi Stories* has any external overlap with Basu's at once imposingly statesman-like and

contemporary, if not jazzy Bengali world citizen stature so succinctly captured in Susmita Basu's photograph of the author on the book's dust jacket. Deep inside, though, like the successful businessman in one of the stories, Basu wants to keep alive the "struggler" artist inside him. This wistfulness for the struggler is profoundly Bengali and rooted in Bengal's prolonged, near-umbilical ties with Leftist rule and Nehruvian socialism.

On the surface, however, *Filmi Stories* presents an author determined to un-do traces of his Bengali and Calcuttan identity. Unlike his recent fiction, all of which, both in Bangla and English, are set in Bengal and/or among Bengalis, this collection sees Basu turning *poribrajok*, almost like a modern-day Gora. Here Basu is the son of India who has seen the world, desirous of traversing his own land, breathing the questions that have piled up in his mind during his protracted sojourn in the West into plots and people criss-crossing large swathes of Northern and Western all the way up to the so-called North-East. In that sense, this is a true coming home book, brimming over with the adrenalin rush of an author suddenly awake to the sickle of Time. By the author's own account, most of these stories came to him during the pandemic, when Time itself appeared to be under suspension. Hence, no doubt, this acute alertness to the passage of time.

As noted earlier, these tales have an epic quality to them. Basu's trajectory as a novelist reveals an imagination abluted in a sense of history. This is partly the cosmopolitan legacy of educated middle-class upbringing in Bengal, where cultural insularity is taboo, where a common pastime in childhood entails knowing names of far-way places and capitals. All his earlier classics, *The Miniaturist*, *Racists*, *The Opium Clerk* (2001), *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* (2011), are essentially historical novels interweaving a large continental canvas with the finer strands of interpersonal dynamics. This geographically inflected historiography, one in which the story

underlines its kinship with history even as it resists historical methodology, one in which also the sense of time in place and place in time are dominant, is what Basu shares with Rushdie, Seth and Ghosh.

Speaking of Indian writers in English, Basu's use of English in *Filmi Stories* has a curiously laid-back Indian flavour to it. The earthy slackness seems to stem from an awareness of the spatial moorings of idiom and intonation, and seeks to translate that into written prose. While it contrasts starkly with the luminous poetry of *Miniaturist* or *The Japanese Wife*, what the two books share is Basu's characteristic economy of words – not laconic, but sufficient.

The stories in *The Japanese Wife* are set across diverse global locations and often hinge on the nuances of inter-racial and inter-cultural encounters. In *Filmi Stories*, the focus is on an India poised ominously and momentously on the brink of change, to the extent that the land becomes a visible, concrete protagonist. Will it fall? Will it rise? Will its rise be its fall? One cannot tell for sure. But it is just the sort of moment when Basu returns to experience the *real* India that might soon become a figment of history. Basu's India in *Filmi Stories* is a *Romantic* construct, where people dream of getting from rags to riches and still remain anchored in humbleness. It is a fragmented, fractious India of disparity that nonetheless allows for fluidity and amorphousness of the kind we meet in Shakespearean comedies. It is an India yearning to cross over to the other side, prone to grand desires yet equally susceptible to a sentimental longing for the common life. Speaking of Propp, these tales often bring the prince and the pauper face to face, and the encounter, though initially tense, ultimately leads to a humane resolution.

Benjamin observes how "a great storyteller will always be rooted in the people" (10). One could easily call Basu's protagonists humans of India, across a wide spectrum of

socio-economic strata. For that is what they are, people going about their lives and jobs. The stories are about their humanness, their self-deception, their dangerous fallibilities. The insinuation in calling them "filmy" is in the perceived merger of *real* India and *reel* India, of which one could say, after Samuel Beckett, that it is any colour so long as it is grey. It amounts to underlining the truism: truth is stranger than fiction, and insisting upon its particular pertinence in India. Yet Basu does *not* sensationalise or exoticise the land and its people. Many of the stories are recognisably modern in that they project, indeed collude in the assisted implosion of dreams and illusions about money and power.

Walter Benjamin also talks about "the traditional sympathy storytellers have for rascals and crooks" (13). Crime is a prominent pivot of Basu's stories; though like any good storyteller, Basu gives a wide berth to moralism. In some of them, the point is to look for the ordinariness of even the most hardened culprits, while in others the author challenges the societal gaze and becomes complicit in the breach of manmade laws in human interest. Crimes are not shown to pay. Quite the contrary. But criminality and immorality are not seen as synonymous either. Some go to jail for crimes of love. Others come out of jail and seek out their love.

Thus, the second interface that Basu appears to explore, besides the big city and the small town, is the one between people who lead regular law-abiding lives and those who cross over. One would not ordinarily think of a parallel with Agatha Christie, but several of Basu's colourfully erring and errant "criminals" are creatures of passion, like Christie's culprits. Basu chooses to walk the fine line between poetic justice and humane compassion. We are not invited to ask Sophoclean questions as to the rationale of humans suffer when they do wrong, or the extent of human agency in their own *culpa*, as it were. In the last of them, titled "The Enemy", empathy is not allowed to interfere with a reiteration of the moral order to

which all humanity is subject. We are reminded, instead, of Plato's *Laws*, where Socrates, that most radical, most subversive of intellectuals, submits graciously to the law of the land. The order of the stories, certainly the first and the last among them, demonstrates this Kantian balance between public reason – daring to ask – and private reason – agreeing to submit. Basu, the storyteller, shows his humans stumbling under the weight of others' injustices, but never instigates wrongful redress. Like Benjamin's "novelist", his abiding concern is the meaning of life (9) but his "counsel" (3) as storyteller is to note and pass.

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About the reviewer: Ananya Dutta Gupta

Ananya Dutta Gupta teaches at Visva-Bharati and writes research articles, literary and cultural essays, poetry and travelogues in her leisure. For her review of Kunal Basu's *In An Ideal World* see Kunal Basu's *In An Ideal World: Old Country of Young People* , The Punch Magazine, 9 April 2022, https://thepunchmagazine.com/the-byword/review/kunal-basu-amp-rsquo-s-in-an-ideal-world-an-old-country-of-young-people . She has also twice interviewed the author on invitation: in person for the Nabanna Earth Weekend (2019), an international literary festival curated by Anjum Katyal, and as part of an online international lecture series hosted by the Department of English, Bankura Christian College in 2020.