

FILMS

The Japanese Wife and Udaan **Abhijit Ghosh-Dastidar**

The Japanese Wife

Aparna Sen takes Kunal Basu's short story to the screen in "The Japanese Wife" (colour, Bengali / English, 100 mins). The modern day weepie springs from a beguiling romance, where star-crossed pen friends battle a vast geographical distance. Rain and thunder introduces the Sundarbans atmosphere. Snehamoy (Rahul Bose), a Bengali school teacher, who speaks English in a heavy Bengali accent, introduces himself to Miyage (Chigusa Takaku), through letters. As the ornate visuals glide over emotions and the rural scenario, voice over reading the letter composed in English, acts as dialogue. Even though repetitious, the letters and the gift parcels, create a visual rhythm. Snehamoy explains the meaning of names, and emphasizes that pronunciation is to be practiced by rolling the tongue. There are cuts to Kolkata's road traffic. Snehamoy's parents were killed by floods in the Matla river, and was brought up by an affectionate aunt/'mashi'(Moushumi Chatterjee).

A boat full of people, conveys a huge box from Japan. A child recites a limerick recalling the Japanese dropping bombs on Calcutta. As Snehamoy's English ability is poor, he has to translate Bengali to English, after consulting a dictionary. Miyage has an elder brother who works in a big store in Yokohomma. She lives in the old family house in Tokyo, with her mother, who is ill. Her father died a year earlier. She is curious about India, and her father had visited India once, during a kite festival. The Matla was a strange river, which brought out different emotions at different times. Sunderbans was always under rains, monsoon and malaria. Snehamoy has been hit by malaria thrice. He is fond of listening to the water flowing. Gift cartons from Japan bring a letter in red envelope, photos of Miyage in Kimono, and a Polaroid camera. Miyage is unable to find a Bengali manual in any store in Japan. Mashi's friend, aunt Shoi arrives with daughter Sandhya (Raima Sen) and a marriage proposal with Snehamoy. Sandhya is shy and keeps her face lowered all the time. Snehamoy confesses his love for Miyage. He invites Miyage to come to India, and also conveys that the lavatory was Indian style. Miyage writes that there were similar lavatories in Japan. She was unable to come to India, as her mother was unwell. She sends a wedding ring, with her name engraved on it. Snehamoy consigns a packet of vermilion to Japan. He informs mashi that he was married to Miyage.

Fifteen years pass, and as wedding anniversary present, a box full of kites, arrives from Japan. There is a Japanese chemise and a shawl for Mashi, and woolen socks for Snehamoy. The young school teacher consigns a Bengali sari and 'champak' flowers. Miyage puts on the sari, and on the wedding anniversary day, Snehamoy telephones Miyage, from a public phone booth. When Snehamoy develops fever, Miyage visits a temple, with prayers. At the village fair, two young girls accost Snehamoy. The distractions lead Snehamoy to auto-indulgence on a static boat and physical exercise push-ups in his room. Meanwhile, Sandhya, now a widow in white, arrives with son

Poltu. She stays at mashi's house, and helps in household chores. She is still demure, and keeps her head covered. Snehamoy writes to Miyage about Sandhya. Miyage's dog and mother pass away. There is scarcely any communication between Snehamoy and Sandhya. But she fixes his bed and arranges his clothes. One day she stumbles on an album full of Miyage's photos, as son Poltu pulls out Japanese kites from a box. Preparations are on for a kite festival. Sandhya cuts her finger from broken glass, to be used with red vermilion, as paste on kite flying threads.

Japanese kites with Japanese sketches compete at the kite ripping festival, with Indian kites. Villagers gather in wonder and excitement. There are cheers for Indian kites, and amid cries of "Raze Japs" and "Workers of the world unite". A kite with Nagasaki colours is ripped. Miyage falls ill, closes her store shop, and moves to Yokohama, to reside with her brother. In anguish, Snehamoy consults allopathic and non allopathic doctors. Ayurvedic doctors find it difficult to diagnose patient, without seeing the patient. Through telephone and fax, Snehamoy tries to obtain information on Miyage's tongue coating, bowel movements, and manner of inhaling. Snehamoy sends Miyage, herbs wrapped in plastic, through post. He accompanies Sandhya to Gosaba, as she would pawn her jewels to raise money for Poltu's thread ceremony. On the boat, Sandhya sits next to Snehamoy. At the village fair, Sandhya buys incense and vegetables. While dining at a meal shop, she passes the fish to Snehamoy. When she cries at night, Snehamoy sits besides her. He conveys to Miyage that he had caressed the widow. The marriage had started with strokes of a pen, and now Snehamoy has doubts whether it would conclude with termination of letters and silence. A letter from Japan arrives, conveying news of chemotherapy. Miyage was weak and had 50% chances of survival.

Storm clouds and rains engulf. Returning after consulting a cancer specialist. Snehamoy is caught up in the rains. He falls ill with shivering fever, and is tended by mashi and Sandhya. The ferry is suspended, and there are no letters. In delirium, Snehamoy holds Sandhya's hands. The rain stops, sunlight returns, but Snehamoy is no more. Some while late, Miyage visits Sundarbans, dressed in white, and head shaved. The rickshaw puller declines tariff. Sandhya speaks to Miyage in Bengali. Japanese dolls and decorations adorn Snehamoy's room. A 'will' written by Miyage earlier, lies next to Snehamoy's photo. The film ends with an overhead shot of boat in the reefs.

Aparna Sen constructs the long distance, letter writing relationship with sumptuous visuals created by Anay Goswami's mobile camera, with a plethora of pans and gliding overhead shots. The plot becomes less convincing with Snehamoy's search for medical cures in South Bengal, for a cancer patient in Japan. While the performances are impressive, the irrationality of the male protagonist makes the narrative less absorbing and sluggish. Emotions are filtered through letters read out off-screen. The uninspired screenplay fails to add any dimension to the screen characters. The visual flair and the moving finale are dreamlike, meagre compensations for the glaring, narrative implausibilities. The understated drama of overseas correspondence turns into tortuous obsession in "The Japanese Wife".

UDAAN

Engaging, if unoriginal, Vikramaditya Montwane's "Udaan-Flying High" (Hindi, 140 mins) presents a gloomy and unyielding account of a school prankster who drifts from

aspirations to ruin. Four sixteen-year-old boys of Bishop Cotton School, Shimla, sneak out from a hostel corridor at night, jump over the school wall and run along a mountain road, to watch a late night movie. Except the Sikh boy, the other three boys smoke in the dark auditorium. In the rear of the auditorium, they notice Rathore, a teacher in the school, sitting intimately with a girl. The teacher recognizes the boys, and as the boys run, Rathore chases them on his scooter. One of the boys trips and injures his leg. Next day the boys, including the injured boy on crutches, are lined up before the principal. The principal expels the four students, who are saddened. A long rain journey brings one of the students Rohan (Rajat Barmecha) to his home town, Jamshedpur.

Rohan's father, Mr B Singh (Ronit Roy) a stern gentleman, receives Rohan at the railway station. The steel trunk is dragged upstairs along the staircase by Rohan. He aspired to become a writer, and now sits desolate in his room, having returned home after eight years. Rohan's mother is no more. He is surprised to find six-year-old, Arjun (Aayan Boradia), his half brother, from Mr Singh's second marriage. Arjun's mother is never seen. Arjun protests at Rohan sitting on his bed. Rohan takes over the bed, and removes Arjun's clothes from the almirah. Early morning Mr Singh takes Rohan on a long joy along Jamshedpur township roads, through gardens, and besides a lake.

Mr Singh and his sons visit Chacha uncle Jimmy (Ram Kapoor) and aunt, who have no children. Unlike the father, the uncle and aunt are kind to the children. Rohan wants to go to college for Arts, and become a writer. Mr Singh insists on Rohan studying engineering, and join the family factory. Father and son come to blows, and Mr Singh beats up Rohan. The father never visited Rohan in the boarding school for eight years. The uncle consoles Rohan, and advises that he must stand on his own legs. At home, Mr Singh insists on discipline, and teaches the two sons to address him as "Sir". In the morning, when Mr. Singh runs with Rohan, Arjun waits at the bungalow gate with a stop watch. Till noon, Rohan attends his father's iron melting factory, and in the afternoon attends engineering college. On the first day at the factory, Rohan is introduced to the factory manager and workers. He puts on a helmet and a white cloak. Away from the factory, he spends time on the banks of a lake, and at the local Zoo. Returning home in the evening, he finds Arjun playing with toys, and his father drinking whisky. Packed dinner comes from outside. He steals money from his father's purse, and takes his father's car for a drive.

At a local bar, Rohan meets three senior college students. They bully him initially, but a friendship develops. As Rohan recites a self composed poem, red sepia captures the young men drinking and smoking. Rohan drives the others around a road roundabout, frenetically. Next morning Mr Singh scolds Rohan for being late in going out. At uncle Jimmy's residence, Rohan scans through a family photo album, with his photos as a child. Rohan drives his drunken father home at night. Answering his father's queries, Rohan affirms that he was innocent of cigarettes, drinks and girl friends. Mr Singh describes him as a "girl". The father discloses that he had visited Rohan's school in Shimla, and watched him play football. He remained happy, but never spoke to Rohan. Later in the evening, Rohan relates his experiences with his drunk father to friends at the restaurant. The boys get into a fight with a group of other boys at the restaurant snooker table. They drive off in the rain, and laugh in triumph. From a roadside dhaba, Rohan telephones his Shimla school friend, Manu and enquiries of other friends, Vikram and Vinay.

Rohan gets isolated steadily, and spends time on concrete roofs and along rail tracks. At a family, garden picnic, Mr Singh does not approve the self composed poem recited by Rohan. A technical team visits the factory. Rohan has failed in college. Mrs Batra, the principal of little Arjun's school telephones Mr Singh, and informs Arjun has been expelled. Later Arjun is admitted in hospital, where he does not speak. Rohan brings along the superman doll and comics for Arjun. At the hospital, Arjun insists on portable drawn curtains for a change of clothes. But Rohan peeps and observes scars on Arjun's back. An eighty year old patient gets friendly, and along with other patients and hospital staff, listen avidly to Rohan's poems and stories. Mr Singh beats up Rohan when he receives information of Rohan's failure in college. Rohan confesses that he never understood engineering, and spent time by a river side. He charges his father for beating up Arjun. Next morning Mr Singh apologies to the children. Rohan is made to discontinue studies, and work full time in the factory. Arjun would be admitted in a boarding school. When Mr Singh is set to marry again, the uncle wishes to look after the children. In anger, Mr Singh drives away his brother. New wife Madavi, with daughter Nita from an earlier marriage, enters the house. On Rohan's eighteenth birthday, Mr Singh present him a watch, belonging to Rohan's grandfather. One afternoon, when the family car breaks down, Rohan smashes the car with a rod. He is arrested by the police for drunken behaviour. Returning home, he tells his father that he is leaving. They again come to blows. Rohan informs his uncle that he would be going to Mumbai, and work in Vickram's restaurant. He glances at old photos of his mother with him, as a child. Next morning he leaves the gift watch on his father's table, and finally quits with Arjun.

Mahendra Shetty's mobile camera follows gritty realism. Motwane and Anurag Kashyap's script delights in playing up the differences in Rohan's idealism and the father's sternness. Some of the contrived sequences fail to focus Rohan's indiscipline and his failure to strive for a settled income. Once the milieu of discontent is set up, the story takes a long time going nowhere very far. The acting is compelling but screen presence remains cold and distant. The extremity of the actions of the protagonists is engaging, even if most aspects of the human emotional condition are viewed fleetingly by the drama. Motwane avoids dramatized reportage, and offers inspired scenes, which build up a sharp intensity and elegance. □□□