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A STUDY OF THE NARRATIVE OF *THE JAPANESE WIFE*,
A FILM BY APARNA SEN

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ABSTRACT

Narratology, even though has its roots in Aristotle's *Poetics* gained prevalence by the mid twentieth century. It is the study of how a chain of related events are presented through words or images, called a narrative, and by whom they are narrated. With the growing interest in multimedia, film narratology which studies the structures in film narratives came into prevalence. *The Japanese Wife* is an absorbing film directed by the Bengali filmmaker Aparna Sen. It is based on the short story of the same name by the Bengali writer Kunal Basu. Released in 2010, the narrative revolves around a Bengali school teacher, Snehamay, and a Japanese woman, Miyage. It is an epistolary film and Sen brilliantly takes the narrative forward mainly through the exchange of letters by the main characters. The film is set both in India and Japan. This paper has attempted a study of the narrative of *The Japanese Wife*. A study has been done with its focus on the method of narration, the story-plot distinction, the dramatic acts (based on the theories by Syd and Todorov), the frame and embedded narratives involved, space, time, the order of narration, narrators, the narrative devices used and the editing techniques employed.

Keywords: Narratology, story-plot, narrative, narrator, analeptic-proleptic, film editing

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A narrative is a logical presentation of a string of interconnected events which can either be real or imaginary, in a series of words that are written or spoken, or through images that are either still or moving. It is presented through the various narrators involved and the very act of this presentation is called narration. The study of how the events are presented and by whom they are presented is called narratology. According to Peter Barry "narratology is the study of narrative structures"(214). The French word 'narratologie' was coined by the Bulgarian-French scholar, Tzvetan Todorov, and borrowed into English as the term 'narratology'. Narratology as a theory gained prevalence by the mid twentieth century. Russian formalist, Vladimir Propp and French literary theorist Gerard Genette are considered pioneers of narratology.

Film Narratology has recently made its way into the field of narratology. Film Narratology as the name suggests is the study of narrative structures in films. Film is a combination of the many visual and audio effects.

The audience are lured into a feeling of excitement and suspense and the filmmakers strive to sustain these emotions throughout by strategically making use of a number of narrative techniques. Johann N. Schmidt quotes Deleyto who says, "[it] is through cinema, television, and video ... that most stories are 'told' nowadays" (www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/).

The Japanese Wife is a fascinating romantic epistolary novel which was released in Bengali, English and Japanese. It was directed by the Bengali filmmaker Aparna Sen who based the film on the short story *The Japanese Wife* by the Bengali author Kunal Basu which appeared in his anthology *The Japanese Wife and other stories*. The major roles were played by the actors Rahul Bose, Raima Sen and the Japanese actress Chigusa Takaku. Sagar Desai directed the music for the film.

The production of the film began in 2007 and it was released in 2010 by Saregama films. Set in both Japan and India, the film focuses on the relationship between Snehamoy, a young Bengali teacher, and Miyage a Japanese woman who never meet but get married through letters and remain loyal to each other. Initially titled *The Kite*, Aparna Sen admits that it was indeed a challenge to transform a short story into a full-fledged film. The film won her the Star Entertainment Award for Best Director. It also won many other awards including Star Entertainment Award for Best Film, Best Film Award at Hidden Gems Film Festival (2010) and Silver Crowe Pheasant Award (audience's choice) at the International Film Festival of Kerala (2010).

The Japanese Wife is an epistolary film and so letters form a significant part of the film. As an epistolary novel relies solely on letters for narration so does an epistolary film. The film begins with just the voices of Miyage and Snehamoy. English is the second language of both the characters and so they communicate in broken English which brings about the humour in the film.



Fig.1 Snehamoy writing a letter to Miyage



Fig.2 Miyage writing a letter to Snehamoy

Figures 1 and 2 depict Snehamoy and Miyage writing a letter to each other. The film opens with the reading aloud of the first letter they write to each other.

MIYAGE: Dear Snehamoy, I was waiting for your letter ever since I send my name to the magazine where you find it, I am expecting a letter from India. Yes I will accept to be your pen-friend. The meaning of my name is gift. I cannot pronounce your. Can you teach me? Yours sincerely Miyage.

SNEHAMOY: Dear Miyage, Thank you for your letter. Yes, my name is very much difficult to pronounce... unless you are a Bengali... what I am. My mother tongue is Bangla. In Bangla, Sneha is meaning affection and 'moy' means full of, so 'full of affection' is the meaning of my name which is same as affectionate. (*The Japanese Wife*)

This introduces the audience to the genre of the film namely epistolary film.

In narratology pertaining to media studies a difference in 'story' and 'plot' has been identified. It is referred to as 'fabula' and 'syuzhet' respectively. Nick Redfern differentiates them thus- "The fabula embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a duration and spatial field. The syuzhet... is the actual arrangement and presentation of the fabula in the film" (cf.hum.uva.nl>narratology>a05-redfern). The fabula or story is chronological and has a beginning, middle and end and in films it also involves the assumptions and inferences of the spectators from the syuzhet or plot that is presented on screen.

The story of the film, *The Japanese Wife*, can be distinguished quite clearly from its plot. Snehamoy's parents were drowned in river Matla during the floods and ever since then he was brought up by his mother's sister. Snehamoy, a Bengali, begins a relationship with Miyage, a Japanese girl who runs a family store from her home. Snehamoy becomes her pen friend after finding her name in a particular magazine. We are not told as to how they came to be friends. Their relationship is confined to the exchange of letters which began when Snehamoy commenced his college education. After his education he secures a job as an arithmetic teacher in a local school.

In time his aunt tried to arrange a marriage for him with her best friend's daughter, Sandhya. When Snehamoy wrote to Miyage about this arrangement, she offers herself as his bride. She sends him a ring with her name engraved on it. To seal the marriage, Snehamoy sends her a pair of conch shell bangles and vermilion powder to be worn in the parting of the hair which are signs of marriage.



Fig.3 Miyage's symbolic marriage ceremony



Fig.4 Snehamoy with conch shell bangles

Figures 3 and 4 depict the symbolic marriage ceremony they undertake. Thus they get married over letters and begin their family life. The relationship is kept alive through gifts and of course letters.

On their fifteenth wedding anniversary, Miyage sends him a huge parcel with Japanese kites as Snehamoy mastered the art of flying kites when he was fifteen years old. Sandhya who is now a widow with a little son, Paulto, comes to live with Snehamoy and his aunt. Around this time Miyage's mother also passes away and though she is left alone in the world she is too sick to travel and come to Snehamoy. Paulto discovers the colourful kites that Miyage sent to Snehamoy once. Together with Paulto, Snehamoy enters the local kite fighting competition.

In the meantime Miyage's condition worsens and the news of her sickness leaves Snehamoy downcast and depressed. He takes a leave of six months from his job to help Miyage get over her illness. Miyage is diagnosed with cancer. She informs this to Snehamoy and encloses a will along with the letter as he is her husband. A desperate Snehamoy goes out during a heavy rain and storm to consult a doctor in Calcutta with the medical document and prescription that she sent him. The doctor insists on meeting the patient in person. A shattered Snehamoy makes his way back to the village in the dreadful weather and on the way he places a long distance call to Miyage and is simply happy to hear her voice. He comes down with pneumonia soon after and we infer that he has passed away.

Miyage is informed and she finally arrives in the village draped in a white sari like the one adorned by widows. She takes a ferry and a carriage and reaches Snehamoy's residence. Sandhya identifies her immediately and takes her to his room where she takes in the memory of her late husband in the image of him lying in a boat floating in a river.

The plot of *Japanese Wife* is quite strikingly different in the first part of the film. It does not occur in the chronological order. We are initially introduced to Snehamoy as he makes a phone call from a telephone booth. We do not know who he is talking to and the connection is faltered due to bad weather. As we come to the close of the film, we realize that this is the last phone call that Snehamoy places to Miyage. The voice of Miyage reading aloud her letter as she writes, introduces us to her and also states how the relationship between Snehamoy and Miyage commenced.

But the first visual we are introduced to is the mailman delivering a huge parcel from Japan, to Snehamoy's house. An aging aunt gets help to get the parcel indoors. A villager goes to the school that Snehamoy teaches and informs him about the package. The Snehamoy that the viewers are presented here has grey hairs denoting that many years have passed by since Snehamoy and Miyage started their relationship. Again the scenes switch back to Snehamoy's college days when they were still getting to know each other. Snehamoy communicates his difficulty in writing in English and the need to consult the dictionary every time. Miyage on the other hand gives an account of her.

Embedded in between these scenes are shots of the parcel that has arrived and Snehamoy as a school teacher. Snehamoy opens the huge parcel which is a gift from Miyage celebrating their fifteenth wedding anniversary. Again, back in the college days Snehamoy writes and fondly remembers that it has been three years since they started their relationship. He relates that he has acquired a job as an arithmetic teacher in the local school. The scene of Snehamoy with a Polaroid camera sent to him from Japan, indicate that they are well acquainted now. She wants him to send her photographs of him and his aunt and the village. A happy Snehamoy runs to take a picture of his aunt (depicted in Fig 5) who asks him to come in. Waiting for him was Sandhya with her mother. His aunt and her mother want them to get married. Snehamoy narrates this incident to Miyage who offers her as his bride. She proposes that they get married even though they are in two different countries. They get married and a year later Snehamoy informs his aunt about her marriage.



Fig.5 Snehamoy and his Aunt with the polaroid camera

The scene again shifts to the present with the parcel which denotes their fifteenth wedding anniversary. The rest of the novel moves on in a chronological order similar to the fabula.

The 'setup' in which the audience are introduced to the protagonist and the problem he faces, the 'confrontation' in which he/she encounters more problems and the 'resolution' in which the protagonists finally gains control and achieves victory are the three dramatic acts identified by Syd field. He also identifies three plot points out of which two are important and one less important (placed in the middle of the film) which brings about a changing point in the film. Todorov who also identified structures in a story states that there is an equilibrium that is maintained initially which is disrupted by a problem leading to a disequilibrium which is finally resolved leading to an equilibrium again (<https://brianair.wordpress.com>).

Initially in *The Japanese Wife* the audience are introduced to the characters, Snehamoy and Miyage through the letters that they exchange. The narrative indicates how their relationship bloomed over the years. This is the first act and all the forces are in balance and so there is equilibrium. The proposal for the arranged marriage between Sandhya and Snehamoy is the first plot point as this prompts Miyage to offer herself as a bride to Snehamoy and they get married leading to the second act which is confrontation. For fifteen years their married life goes smoothly without much trouble. Miyage's sickness can be considered as a plot point, a plot point which is less important. This causes a disequilibrium in the plot. Snehamoy tries to get her treatment from India. The diagnosis of Miyage's illness as cancer is the third plot point. This is an important plot point as this leads to the resolution and the final act of the plot. Snehamoy goes to Calcutta in a heavy rain and catches pneumonia and he dies due to lack of medicines. The resolution here is not the victory of the hero as Syd proposed but the victory of death over the hero. A new equilibrium is established as everybody comes

to terms with the reality of death especially Miyage who visits her late husband's residence in the final scene of the film.

Another aspect of film narratology is the kind of narratives involved. There is usually a frame narrative within which other narratives are embedded. It thus forms a story within a story structure. The frame narrative need not always be the main narrative or the primary narrative but the first narrative is usually referred to as the primary narrative.

The frame narrative in *The Japanese Wife* is the striking relation between Snehamoy and Miyage. Their friendship began with just a "stroke of the pen" as Snehamoy reminisces years later. Their letters brought them closer day by day and eventually gave them the role of a husband and wife. Even though they lived in two different countries they remained loyal to each other. Tragedy entered in the form of sickness when Miyage was diagnosed with cancer. Doing everything he can to help her from India, Snehamoy dies of pneumonia thus drawing a veil to their beautiful relationship.

Embedded within the narrative of Snehamoy and Miyage is the narrative of the widow Sandhya. Sandhya is Snehamoy's aunt's friend. Snehamoy's aunt tried to arrange a marriage between him and Sandhya but it did not take place as Snehamoy accepted Miyage as his bride. Sandhya comes into view, later in the film, as a widow wearing a white sari without border, as is the custom, with her little son Paulto. She has lost her mother and her husband's family considers her a burden and so Snehamoy's aunt takes her in as she is her god-mother. Snehamoy automatically takes the responsibility of taking care of them while remaining loyal to Miyage. He is especially affectionate towards Paulto and he in turn delivers the letters from Japan to Snehamoy from the mailman of the village. During the last days of Snehamoy's life it is Sandhya who takes care of him.

According to Schmidt, "To evoke a sense of the "real," film creates a temporal and spatial continuum. Time can be stretched out in slow motion or compressed in fast motion"(www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narration-film). In narrating a film analepsis and prolepsis are employed by filmmakers. Analepsis is used to flash back at a particular point in a story to narrate events that happened in the past and prolepsis flashes forward to give the spectators a hint at what could happen in the future.

Time and space in *The Japanese Wife* is noteworthy. Snehamoy is a Bengali and so that part of the narrative that focuses on him is confined to a tiny village in Bengal and so India. Miyage is Japanese and so the other part of the film is set in Japan. Therefore the spatial continuum covers India and Japan. Fig 6 and 7 depict this. Time is stretched out over a period of nineteen years.



Fig. 6 Clipping depicting the Bengali village



Fig.7 Clipping depicting Japan

The order of narration in the film does not correspond to the order of the scenes. It moves back and forth. The film begins in media res or in the middle of a chain of events. The visuals commence with a huge parcel the mailman delivers, which denote the fifteenth wedding anniversary of Snehamoy and Miyage. As the film proceeds the viewers are taken back to the college days of Snehamoy, the time when his relation with Miyage started budding. Through his letters to Miyage the viewers are made known that he is an orphan who lost his parents during the floods of river Matla. The narrative also includes their decision to get married, though they are in two different countries. All these form the analepsis or the flash-back of the narrative.

The flash forward anticipates something that is to happen later or in the future. Likewise in Japanese Wife, as soon as Miyage is diagnosed with cancer and Snehamoy receives the medical document, he travels to see a doctor in Calcutta. The weather is extremely rough with a raging wind and heavy rain. Nowhere else in the film is there a terrible weather as on this particular day. This weather denotes or is in anticipation of the doom that awaits Snehamoy. Even the phone call that he makes for the last time foreshadows the tragedy. Unlike any other time that he makes a long distance call to her, this time the connection was clear. Miyage says "Yes...Yes... I can hear you very clear... It is good to hear your voice" to which Snehamoy replied, "Your voice also Miyage. Today it is wonderful..." (*The Japanese Wife*). These parts of the narrative are proleptic.

Dialogues play a vital role in a film. The narration through dialogues can be in the first, second or third person. The narration in *The Japanese Wife* is in the first-person. Since the film is in the epistolary form there are not many dialogues in the film. Fewer number of characters, the film set in two different places with its main characters in two different countries and the visuals mainly focussing on Snehamoy and Miyage communicating through letters all contribute to the lesser number of dialogues in the film. Snehamoy admits that his English is not so good. His English is heavily Bangla accented and so is Miyage's with her Japanese accent. The audience do take a little time to get acquainted with the language of the film.

A film is complete only after going through various editing processes. It organizes and unites the narrative of a film into a whole. Jump cut is an editing technique that denotes a shift that takes place from one shot to another. Jump cut is employed in *The Japanese Wife* when a shift occurs in shots that move from Bengal and Japan and vice versa. The setting at the beginning of the film is Calcutta, India which soon shifts to Yokohoma, Japan. The jump cut takes place with the narration of the letters.

Lap dissolve is another editing technique that is employed where the current shot fades out and simultaneously a new shot fades in leaving a tiny window of superimposition of the two shots. Many instances of lap dissolve can be pointed out in the film. These are used usually when the emotions of Snehamoy and Miyage are depicted. Weather is in pair with Snehamoy's mental state. This is portrayed through the technique of lap dissolve. In the scene where Snehamoy describes the river Matla, he says "the Matla is a strange river, it is bringing out different emotions in me at different times" (*The Japanese Wife*). Here the scene of Snehamoy watching the river dissolves and the river is focussed which in turn merges with the cloudy sky. In the scene in which Miyage offers herself as Snehamoy's bride, the image of a tree is dissolved into the image of Miyage as seen in Figure 8.



Fig.8 Clipping depicting Lap Dissolve

Fade out is another editing technique used in *The Japanese Wife*. In the last scene, when Miyage visits Snehamoy's home, she reminisces him. The scene fades and the focus shifts to Snehamoy who is lying in a boat. The fading of the scene is a visual narration of the death of Snehamoy.

The Japanese Wife is an engrossing film that captures the attention of the spectators right from the onset with its unique epistolary mode of narration. A study of the film with respect to its narrative focussing on the method of narration, story, plot, dramatic acts, narratives involved, space, time, order of narration, narrators and the editing techniques employed reveal how brilliantly the various facets of film narratology has been blended to present to the audience a truly absorbing film.

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