Contemporary Literary Review India

Print ISSN 2250-3366 | Online ISSN 2394-6075

Vol. 11, No. 2

CLRI May 2024

Page 12-35

From Fear to Freedom: The Liberating Journey of Banka Harichandan

Dr. Kerstin W. Shands

A Professor Emerita, Stockholm

Abstract

Combining different literary and formal dimensions, Dipti Ranjan Pattanaik's novel *The Life and Times of Banka*

Harichandan is a coming-of-age story in which we follow the psychological and moral growth of a young boy for more than a decade, from childhood to college. It is the story of Banka Harichandan and his journey to understand himself, family, and community, and, gradually, the world beyond, a philosophical and psychological journey from fear to freedom. Form and theme reflect each other in this composite novel where connections on structural levels reinforce continuities and discontinuities on the levels of theme, characterization, and narration, underpinning the central theme of the hero's development and his turning to writing. Pondering universal questions concerning God's omnipotence as related to the suffering in the world, the eponymous hero moves through conflict, desire, and disappointment toward an increasingly enlightened state of mind.

Keywords: Indian literature, Odia literature, Bildungsroman, coming-of-age story, composite novel, education, pedagogy of fear, psychological development, spirituality.

Introduction

Combining different literary and formal dimensions, Dipti Ranjan Pattanaik's novel *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan* is a coming-of-age story in which we follow the psychological and moral growth of a young boy for more than a decade, from childhood to college. It is the story of Banka Harichandan and his journey to understand himself, family, and community, and, gradually, the world beyond, a philosophical and psychological journey from fear to freedom. Form and theme reflect each other in this composite novel where connections on structural levels reinforce continuities and discontinuities on the levels of theme, characterization, and narration, underpinning the central theme of the hero's development and his turning to writing. Pondering universal

questions concerning God's omnipotence as related to the suffering in the world, the eponymous hero moves through conflict, desire, and disappointment toward an increasingly enlightened state of mind.

A Pedagogy of Fear

Constituting a unifying focus, the experiences, moods, and emotions of the protagonist are at the center of Pattanaik's novel. While food and physical needs are uppermost for survival, emotional needs for love, appreciation, and recognition are crucial for a child's development. An illustration of this hierarchy of needs, Banka Harichandan's story shows how a gifted child has enough strength and resilience to make his way in the world despite a fair amount of physical violence and psychological putdown.

One of the key images in *Banka Harichandan* is a haunted house, and Banka's childhood, metaphorically speaking, is a haunted house full of pitfalls and people who hurt him physically and mentally, even though sometimes unintentionally. Growing up in Odisha, mostly in Cuttack and Choudwar, Banka Harichandan is surrounded by family—father, mother, uncles, grandparents, Nani, his elder sister, and Chhotu, his younger brother. Banka appreciates his family, and is particularly fond of his mother's cooking, but he is ill-treated by many.

Banka feels that "nobody ever [tries] to understand him" (45). His own family seems not to recognize his talent, perhaps because it is not regarded as a good thing to praise members of your immediate family. Certainly, Banka wishes to please his father and perform the duties his father has set for him but all too often has to submit to his "Father's red-eyed angry discipline" (214) and to disparaging remarks about his need for security (as when Banka wishes to hold his mother's hand, something that makes him a coward in his father's eyes).

Rigidly authoritarian, Banka's father wants to press his son into a mould, and brutal beatings follow if Banka does not follow the norms stipulated.

Outside of Banka's immediate family, on the other hand, everyone seems to recognize his talent and intelligence. Even an unknown man in a train journey is able to recognize Banka's intelligence, to judge by the comments he makes to Banka's father. This kind of attention and praise is lacking in Banka's own family. To the contrary, his family prevents Banka from seeing his own talents, something that affects his self-esteem negatively. Influenced by his father's mindset, Banka's joy at the friendly encouragement from the man in the train is short-lived. It is soon replaced by suspicion: the man might be a thief about to steal the family's luggage!

Despite his talent—or perhaps because of it, as it might stir jealousies—Banka is bullied at school and punished at home (mostly unjustly). When he joins a group of supporters for a new village head, for example, he is punished afterwards, and the summer vacation is cut short. No one explains why. At that point, Banka is so used to being punished that he regards it as tolerable.

Banka's feelings of guilt are aggravated because of the disciplinary practices at home where his parents are raising their children through threats and punishments that, demeaning and repressive, may be just as much about venting their own frustrations in life. Having been humiliated, they humiliate their children in turn, as when Banka's mother is calling him "a careless fool" (192). Thinking about his father's hard existence, Banka comes to a realization: "Just because he was forced to work so hard, he was probably venting his anger by thrashing his children" (110).

Certainly, a hard life may explain why a home becomes marked more by fear and punishment than by love and trust, but it can never justify beating a young child. As a result of the

violence and ill-treatment, Banka, at one stage, comes to feel that life is meaningless. He notices that people who should be punished are *not*, while those who should not be punished *are*. Everything seems arbitrary and confusing, and at one point, very briefly, Banka has thoughts of suicide. Fortunately, the thought of the reactions of others and of the undignified state in which his body would be found puts a stop to such thoughts.

Banka's relentlessly critical family has an inhibiting effect on his creativity. Remembering earlier punishments, such as the hour and a half of thrashing he received when a friend brought a book by a famous pornographer into Banka's house, he is constantly worried about the reactions his writings might have. Because of the constant criticism Banka develops a low self-esteem that not only makes him lament his own lack of refinement but that also inhibits free and creative expression. When a trendy and forward friend from Cuttack, Debashis, comes to visit him after the family has moved to Choudwar, Banka wants to ask the friend about people back in Cuttack, but refrains from doing so because he thinks that the question might sound childish.

As a result of a pedagogy of fear reigning in his home and an internalization of disparaging remarks, Banka is tormented by guilt feelings and a lack of self-esteem. While guilt may be appropriate as an expected and necessary consequence of one's behavior, Banka, a remarkable child with a strong wish to improve himself and learn about the world, has little to feel guilty about. True, on occasion he fails to prepare his schoolwork properly, but more often than not the punishments are as exaggerated as they are unfair. It is understandable if Banka harbors an anger toward his family for not giving him the comfort and encouragement he needs and deserves, and it is understandable if his experiences of violence end up haunting his dreams. In one dream he is

imprisoned in an enclosure at a zoo, separated from his friends and surrounded by a huge cage.

One consequence of a pedagogy of fear peppered with unfair punishment is that Banka begins to ponder spiritual questions concerning God's omnipotence as related to the suffering. Even though young Banka would not delve into concepts such as the theodicy problem, he does wonder how God can allow suffering in a world he has created. Has suffering been caused by humans who disobey God? But Banka has not disobeyed God, and if God is omnipotent, he ought to stop his parents from hitting Banka. At the same time, God could also improve Banka's looks and make him look like an attractive film star such as Rajesh Khanna!

In the Biblical story of the fall, Eve found herself in a primeval situation that called for absolute obedience, one in which humans did not need knowledge and ambition beyond what God allowed. When Adam and Eve sinned in going against God's prohibitions, God's punishment was drastic. Living in a patriarchal society controlled by fathers and uncles (even though the women know how to dole out punishments, too) and ultimately by God, Banka, too, has suffered drastic punishment, and he is constantly afraid of being punished again if he goes again the rules and prohibitions set up by family and religion.

A Stint in Hell

Fortunately, there are exceptions to the punitive child-raising style, one of them being a maternal uncle (Middle Mama), who play positive roles for Banka's journey of development. In his Introduction to Pattanaik's novel, Himansu Mohapatra sees Uncle as Banka's first mentor. Indeed, this uncle fulfils a positive paternal role teaching Banka to place both the undesirable duties and the glories of life in a greater perspective.

When a discussion arises at Banka's grandmother's place about latrine-emptying, the uncle volunteers to clean the latrines and invites Banka to help him. Banka most certainly does not wish to participate in this nasty work. Nonetheless, despite conflicted feelings, he comes along, and in performing this task learns a valuable lesson about life. While they are scooping out filth from the latrine, Banka's uncle gives a down-to-earth yet deeply philosophic speech. Everyone has to get some acquaintance with hell, uncle tells Banka, even king Yudhishthir, the avatar of Dharma and truth, had to do so. Now that Banka has helped his uncle clean the latrines he has done his a stint of hell, and life can only get better, according to the uncle.

"Does a human being become less worthy if he does his own work?" the uncle asks (34). Banka understands that this is not the case, and he is able to recognize that even the efforts of 'scavengers' are valuable, since they, too, perform a necessary task. Thus, the experience of emptying latrines leads to a philosophic view of life as an all-encompassing circle where all parts and phases are needed for a movement forward. The foul-smelling filth will contribute to the growth of the most delectable fruits, and where the latrine has been emptied, huge aubergines will be growing the next year.

Uncle then brings Banka along for a pilgrimage of sorts to a hill with a temple and a tall Hanuman figure. The uncle emphasizes religious rules but with a more forgiving and understanding attitude than Banka's family. He bolsters Banka's self-esteem, telling him that he will be a great man like Mahatma Gandhi. Literally and metaphorically, Uncle opens up a vast perspective as they look out over the landscape from the hilltop. Thanks to this uncle, then, a philosophic and spiritual approach to life is planted in the young boy. Uncle talks to Banka in a way that no one else has done: "At home nobody ever talked to him like a friend.

Nobody had even sought his help in any work. He was filled with a sense of gratitude for this uncle" (37).

Wisdom is conveyed in other situations, too, and a similar philosophy is expressed by one of his teachers, Sankar Sir, who says: "Whatever may be the work, to do it sincerely is a real human quality. Whether we will excel in our studies may not be in our hands, but to strive to excel is in our hands. So strive for that wholeheartedly. Work so hard that you do not have time to think a bad thought let alone do a bad deed" (122). One of the cooks at Banka's grandmother's place, too, has insights to dispatch: "As the saying goes, those who are well-fed, hanker after more" (29). Even Chacha, Banka's paternal uncle, has realistic advice to offer, as when he points to Banka's routines and study program and asks: "What value is there in a mere timetable however well-made it is?" (130). Here, Chacha points to the necessity not just plan and think but to act in order to have results.

But wise words and guidelines often clash, and goals can be contradictory and confusing. Should one become a good human being or do one's work skillfully, is the question: "To obey whatever your elders say, to do your work skilfully: are these the qualities of a good human being? But in this case when he obeys the elders he is unable to do his duties properly as a student" (131).

The emotional context may dictate our behavior, moods may change depending on how others react, and Banka seldom remains unaffected. He often finds himself in a cross-fire of the emotional needs and reactions in the household. When he offers to go out and buy betel nuts for his paternal uncle on one occasion, he does so in a wish to escape the emotional turmoil at home.

Disenchantment

Disenchantment is a recurrent theme on *Banka Harichandan's* journey, especially as concerns friendships. In a chapter called "Dwarf" notions of friendship and disillusion are explored, with subtle descriptions of the emotional roller-coaster Banka experiences when he understands the real motif behind his classmate Alok's befriending him and offering food. Alok, as it turns out, is interested in Banka's sister, something that is deeply distasteful to Banka, who struggles to deal with all the conflicting emotions that arise. In a crisis such as this one, where should he look for guidance? Should he trust his own instincts—and brutally beat up Alok? Should he follow his mother's advice—never accept anything from strangers and always tell the truth? Should he turn to religion—and request the help of Bajrangbali? At this point Banka starts to doubt everything, including religion, and he asks himself: "Had the god ever fulfilled any of his prayers so far? All gods are like homeopathic medicine, in real crisis they are useless" (52).

The perhaps most moving of all chapters, "The Account of a Pilgrimage," is about a trip to Puri. When Banka's friend, Debashis, invites Banka to come along to Puri, this seems like a dream. Out on his own for the first time and traveling without his parents, Banka is excited. Sadly, however, it turns out that Debashis has planned the trip to Puri so that he can buy a gift for a girl he likes—and pay for it with money borrowed from Banka. Heartbreakingly, through the egocentric irresponsibility and carelessness of his friend, Banka misses out on everything he had hoped to see in Puri. He learns a painful but valuable lesson about truth and trust.

In the final chapter, "On the Edge," Banka has left his Odia medium school and arrived at college, where he once again feels marginalized and humiliated. Even though he had been bullied at medium school, everyone there had come to

recognize his talent, but in college, he vanishes among the smart and stylish, who are also loud and self-assured. The girls in college "did not care for the underlings of the world like Banka" (217).

When a new friend, Michael, turns up, Banka gains some self-confidence. Unfortunately, this is short-lived since this friendship, too, leads to disappointment and disillusion. On one occasion Michael and Banka notice some scribblings on the blackboard in a classroom, words ridiculing a teacher because of his religion and caste. Having a clear moral and ethical outlook, Banka is ready to stand up for the teacher: "to cast aspersions on one's caste or religion, whatever be one's inability, was rude in the extreme" (218). He wipes the humiliating letters off the blackboard, but is then taunted and even physically attacked by the students who had written the offensive message. Michael, the new friend, fails to stand up for Banka, who suffers alone at the hands of these young thugs. Once again, Banka has reason to be disappointed and ponder the injustices in the world: "Those criminals were able to live in this world with their heads held high; but why was a God-fearing good student like him so oppressed, at home, outside home, almost everywhere?" (220).

Metabolic Metaphors

Fear and punishment often take concrete form in *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan*, as when the symbolism relies upon items such as food. Banka has a weakness for food, according to his grandmother, and food is often lyrically described. There is the ripe fruit in the plantain grove, black-gram, dosa, the kheer served after dinner, the mouth-watering food at Banka's grandmother's place, bhang sherbet, cashew nut paste and rabri, meals served in earthenware pots. There is rice, dalma, lentil soup, and sweet and sour condiments; paani puri, dahi vada, and chat.

Real and concrete, food also has an important metaphorical function. Banka's feelings are described through images related to the digestive system (accepting or rejecting food, or vomiting). Metabolic metaphors convey visceral feelings, as when Banka is "consumed inside by a bitter agony and anger" (78). Chocolate, associated with the advances of a somewhat older girl who gives Banka chocolate, has symbolic overtones of sensuality, pride, and power: "Licking on his chocolate he was returning home like a king after a royal visit. He wanted the whole world to witness that he was feasting on such an expensive chocolate entirely by himself" (64). Powerfully encapsulated in this piece of chocolate are the main ingredients of Banka's selfhood, his need to enjoy special foods along with his need for recognition and praise—legitimate needs that are satisfied only to a small degree.

Disappointments and injustices are expressed symbolically through images of food, as when Banka has been looking forward to eating tamarind fish at his grandmother's place and finds out that nothing has been left for him, and as when he misses out on "the unique kind of meals served in earthenware pots" at the temple of Lord Jagannath in the disappointing trip to Puri (191). Food is central in the conflicted friendship with Alok, too, in whose car the aroma of chicken biryani wafts alluringly around Banka.

Growing Insights

Banka understands that someone like his class-mate like Alok comes from very different circumstances. Alok, who is not really a friend but who tries to befriend Banka for reasons of his own, has a driver who delivers midday meals, some of which the spoilt Alok throws away. Riches may come with wastefulness and arrogance, and thus with a lack of understanding of the fundamental truths of the physical and spiritual circle of life that Banka's uncle had taught him about.

Growing up, Banka learns about social differences and begins to understand how he and his family are socially positioned. Noticing distinctions between people, he asks himself questions about social status in his community and in his own family, and he wonders if the professional status of his father might actually be lower than that of other relatives.

Noticing what pays off, what earns the goodwill of others and leads to success, Banka is learning about causes and consequences and becomes increasingly able to foresee the reactions of others. Steeped in religious rules, he wonders if offering more bananas to the simian god, Bajrangbali, would have as good an effect as studying hard if he wants to get the best results. If God is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient, why doesn't he punish Banka's friend, Faka, who blasphemes?

Placing realistic events within a larger spiritual framework, a chapter entitled "Alone" describes an episode where a small incident takes epic proportions both in Banka's mind and in the community. Through the experience of an eye infection thought to be highly contagious and potentially disastrous, Banka, initially his usual competitive, ambitious, and emotionally passionate self, is thrown into torment and anxiety, and he comes to understand things about life he has not pondered before.

In the midst of everyday life with all its intense and sometimes conflicted contact with family and friends at school, Banka discovers that people may be false, unreliable, and mendacious. He comes to realize that there are no guarantees for anyone, one's existence may turn around quickly and unexpectedly, and insignificant things may lead to large consequences. Relations of power and prestige may be turned upside down in a minute, and friendships may be reevaluated, as when Banka comes to see his friend, Ainthu, in a completely different light. No longer finding Ainthu's smile

hideous, Banka perceives Ainthu as a saintly and sagacious person of beatific vision. Moving through the vicissitudes of material existence and the youthful desires of the ego, Banka learns the wisdom of embracing and accepting material existence as it is while placing it in a greater spiritual framework.

In a chapter entitled "Resolution," religious life is described more in detail. The different times of worship, offerings, and rituals are outlined, along with Banka's realistic view of the differences between those who pray and those who do not. He draws the conclusion that prayer is a 'job,' one that seems meaningless, and he thinks that if he got a well-paid job he could escape the "drudgery of prayer" (104). Pondering spiritual issues, Banka addresses a pragmatic prayer to God, asking for the wealth and power he reckons that he needs. It is noteworthy that Banka is not asking for this out of a desire for luxury and ostentation but as a protection against people who may otherwise treat him cruelly and condescendingly. If he had wealth and power, he thinks, he would no longer have to be afraid.

At this point, freedom from fear is thus a strong motivating factor in Banka's pragmatic prayers to God. Unable to completely let the bad guys off the hook, however, he also prays for the punishment of people who have been nasty and selfish and, as a part of his dreams of sweet vengeance, he wishes for "four to five voluptuous young girls" to show off (114).

Turning to Writing

A perceptive boy who is trying to understand the world, Banka knows that there is "a difference of heaven and hell between the meaning of a word and the experience to which that word beckoned" (62). In the chapter entitled "Dwarf," Banka's linguistic sensibilities and writing talent become apparent. In

composing a letter to the aforementioned Alok, Banka is highly conscious of the effect he wants his words to have. Pondering the strong emotions his letter might evoke and the unforeseen consequences it might have, he considers alternative expressions, including forms of sarcasm so sophisticated that the receiver might not even understand them!

Banka's ambition becomes more pronounced as he grows up. In a chapter entitled "Initiation," he dreams of producing "something new, the kind of writing that broke with whatever had been written so far. It would use the same words, the same language but would appear new to readers" (163). Banka regards himself as far more serious-minded than his blaspheming friend, Faka, who is not a very good student but who has great creative talent.

Classics open up new perspectives. Reading books such *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Banka comes to realize that he "desperately [longs] to experience the larger world beyond the veranda of his home" (167). He identifies with and compares himself to the characters in his favorite books. In his first boat-ride on the Mahanadi river, for example, he remembers Huckleberry Finn's adventures on the river Mississippi. Clearly, Banka's boundaries are increasingly felt to be too restrictive, and he longs not just for the smiles of a girl like Nibedita but for the world beyond, for speeding vehicles, and for areas beyond the field at the end of the street. Thinking of future experiences in life, Banka formulates his ambition thus: "He would frame that experience within a measured, disciplined language and serve it to the world" (168).

As Himansu Mohapatra points out in his Introduction, "the whole narrative is permeated by Banka's oneiric state, which is of two kinds, reveries and dreams," with reveries having an "important deconstructive function in the coming-of-age

narrative of Banka" and dreams being "more revealing in their close connection with trauma" (xxii; xxiv, xxv). In a dream associated with writing and spirituality, Banka sees three similar looking circles that have three different names. He calls out the names of Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheswara: "The first name was for the creator, the middle one for the preserver and the last one for the destroyer. But how was it that all three were big zeroes?" (170). It is after this dream that Banka finds real inspiration and courage to turn to writing.

Composite Form

Writing, then, is a major theme in Dipti Ranjan Pattanaik's novel, *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan*, whose very title points towards a 'life and times' genre of writing that, combining the private and the public, comments on the personal life of a protagonist. Placing the main character in a greater social and historical context, the life and times genre explores both what is private and what is public, often tipping the scales toward one or the other. The hero may typically describe his own situation and the manners of people around him, domestic life, education, social life, and confrontations with authority figures.

As a subjective life story that connects the *life* of someone to the *times* in which he lives, this genre may resemble the *Bildungsroman* while having a stronger emphasis on local and historical context. Since *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan* follows the life of a young boy from childhood to young adulthood, we may see it as a coming-of-age story which takes the form of a composite novel in which each chapter stands alone as an individual story at the same time as all the chapters link together to form a unified story. In Pattanaik's novel, arguably, this form underlines the central themes.

In *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite*, Rolf Lundén suggests that the most elementary question about the short story composite is "why the author employs this particular form of writing" (21). Lundén identifies four major types or subgenres—the cycle, the sequence, the cluster, and the novella—that he relates to "a continuum ranging from the short story collection to the novel" and to "closural and anti-closural narrative strategies" (9). Until recently regarded as a hybrid form, the short story composite has been "relegated to an existence in the shadowland"; it has been "absent from critical works on genre and narrative," perhaps because a "post-Kantian, Coleridgean ideal of esthetic organicism" brought a "privileging of totalized prose forms such as the social-realistic novel" (Lundén 11, 8).

Pointing to the apparent contradiction in that the short story composite became more widely used during the twenty-first century even as it was "refused critical acknowledgment," Lundén proposes that "unity, coherence, and closure have been privileged at the expense of discontinuity, fragmentation, and openness" (8). While some critics have tried to make a case for the unity and coherence of the short story composite, Lundén finds to the contrary that it is the "tension between variety and unity, separateness and interconnectedness, fragmentation and continuity, openness and closure" that needs more attention, since in his view this is what is most interesting about this genre (12).

While terms such as 'short story cycle' and 'short story sequence' have been used earlier, Lundén prefers the term 'short story composite.' Discussing and discarding a plethora of critical terms, he finds the term 'composite novel' less exact since it might point to a variant of the novel and perhaps also to "a novel co-authored by several writers" (13).

The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan could indeed be regarded as a variant of the novel, and it could be read as a

composite novel. There is an "integrity of the whole" that emerges thanks to the unifying devices concerning setting and protagonist that produce a "novelistic coherence," to use the terminology of the Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris in *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (5, 37). In *The Short Story Cycle: a Genre Companion and Reference Guide*, further, Susan Garland Mann writes that the 'short story cycle' is at the same time self-sufficient and interrelated:

> *"On the one hand, the stories work independently of one another: the reader is capable of understanding each of them without going beyond the limits of the individual story. On the other hand, however, the stories work together, creating something that could not be achieved by a single story. . . . The ability of the story cycle to extend discussions—to work on a larger scale—resembles what is accomplished in the novel." (15)*

While causality and temporality may be less emphasized in the composite novel, there is temporal linearity in *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan*, even though exact references to time or age are not given. There is unity in the focus on one geographical area, the context in which Banka grows up: "the action always either starts off from or returns to Cuttack in the end. Thus the entire action of the composite novel is confined within the narrow compass of a small town and its knowable community" (Mohapatra xvi). There is an organization of the story around a central protagonist, his moral and intellectual character, and his psychological and spiritual dilemmas. Banka's development during childhood and adolescence forms the thematic link between the episodes.

Arguably, further, theme and form in *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan* reflect each other. Connection and disconnection on formal levels reinforce continuities and

discontinuities on the level of characterization and narration. The silence between the chapters and the lack of information about what happens between the 'snapshots' of each episode mirror the theme of unanswered questions in Banka's life and the lack of communication and dialogue in the midst of his family.

Susan Garland Mann argues that the "self-sufficient stories" in the composite novel "are especially well suited to handle certain subjects, including the sense of isolation or fragmentation or indeterminacy that many twentieth-century characters experience" (11). Exploring the importance of the story cycle for ethnic authors in the US, further, Rocío G. Davis argues that "the dynamics of the short-story cycle have converted it into a form that is especially appropriate to the kinds of conflict presented in ethnic fiction" since it relates to and expresses multiple perspectives rather than linear stories and thus reflects the lived experience of fragmentation in these writers' lives (4).

Affirming that "the Banka stories, in the way they unfold chronologically and thematically, add up to a remarkable coming-of-age narrative in Odia and Indian literature," Himansu Mohapatra finds that "[t]he volume made up of the twelve short stories about Banka Harichandan is one of the most delicate exemplars of a 'composite novel' that one can encounter in the whole gamut of modern Indian literature" (xiv). Dipti R. Pattanaik has been inspired by J.D. Salinger's *Nine Stories*, and in the implicit and explicit focus on writing and language, one might also see links to James Joyce : "Not only are two of the twelve short stories in the book explicitly about writing, its meaning and mechanics as well as the mysterious process of the emergence of this 'divinity in words' ('Initiation'), the entire volume is in a subtle way about the gradual awakening of Banka to his dimly perceived destiny as a writer" (Mohapatra xv). As Mohapatra rightly concludes, "this unique blend of the stand-aloneness of each story and

the connectedness of stories across borders is the hallmark of the composite novel" (xiv).

A Moral and Spiritual Journey

Thanks to his great intelligence and resilience, Banka Harichandan, coming from a context dominated by a pedagogy of fear, moves towards greater freedom, clarity and maturity. On a spiritual level, the Trimurti and the aforementioned three circles that turn up in Banka's dream correspond to the three stages of his journey, from the innocence of childhood through the turmoil of adolescence to the breakthrough in young adulthood to greater comprehension, self-expression, and decisiveness.

If knowledge is a trump card, it is always so within the particular framework set up by a cultural and familial context. Young Banka is not encouraged to go as far as possible in pursuit of knowledge beyond traditional boundaries. There are important role models, such as Banka's maternal uncle (with whom he cleans the latrines), but since teachers and parents tend to be blind to Banka's needs, much of the education he receives could be categorized as a poisonous pedagogy.

Marked by cruelty and violence leveled at a young person who cannot defend himself, a poisonous pedagogy is likely to damage a child. In books such as *The Body Never Lies: The Lingering Effects of Cruel Parenting* and *The Drama of the Gifted Child and the Search for The True Self*, Alice Miller has explained how mistreatment, violence, and derision attack the integrity of a child, who may end up believing that he deserves the treatment. As an adult, he may become self-destructive, and his suppressed rage may lead to physical illness later on in life.

Thanks to his unusual talent and resilience, Banka Harichandan gets through the experiences of being been ill-treated by almost everyone: "At home he suffered at the hands of Father, Mother, uncle, auntie and other relatives. Outside of home friends, teachers and even toughies and bullies tormented him" (220). Even his shoes work against him! Humorously yet incisively symbolizing the frustrations of not having his needs met, the cheap plastic chappals his uncle insists on buying for him slip off Banka's feet when he tries to kick his aggressors at college.

Coming to the realization that he may not find the support he needs, that members of his family may be against him, and that even his God, Bajrangbali, might not be able to help, at the end of the novel, Banka arrives at an inner resolution arising from a new confidence in himself. No longer afraid of further disappointments, he is prepared to face things head on: "If this hell was his fate, his ultimate destiny, then he would delve deep into its bottomless pit, fully conscious" (228). With that courageous resolution, Banka leaves childhood behind, ready to face life in all its beauty and cruel unpredictability.

Life and times biographies are often performance-oriented, and this is the case also with the story of Banka Harichandan. At the same time, philosophical and epistemological questions are uppermost. Looking at people around him, Banka wonders about their motivations: What, on the most fundamental levels, drives people to do what they do? Why do they marry? Why do they study? What is truth? What is freedom? *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan* brilliantly places such existential questions in a greater social and spiritual context.

Should we see ourselves as part of a network so that when problems arise, as they inevitably do, we know who to call? Or, if people are neither helpful nor encouraging, should we aim for the highest degree of independence and rely primarily on

ourselves? Growing up in a highly interdependent context in which his elders routinely apply a pedagogy of fear and punishment, Banka Harichandan learns to turn inward and rely upon himself. Observing how we are connected to each other, Banka develops an ability to negotiate a balance between the safety of group approval and individual freedom. Thanks to his capacity to take comfort in compensatory fantasies that benefit his creative talent, Banka is able to place himself in relation to the universe, contemplate how the earth travels on its axis, and put his life and that of his family within that greater framework.

Initially, there is a lack of control and comprehension, and young Banka's fears and apprehensions are channeled through superstitious interpretations. He may turn to God for support in stressful situations, and experience a sudden sense of peace. Not least because of the setbacks and disappointments he has to handle, Banka's understanding widens. While the mysteries of human relationships are unfathomable from the perspective as a child, Banka listens and observes, and he progressively learns about both fascinating and unpalatable realities. When visitors come to Banka's home and open their boxes of stories, Banka listens intently even though he is not supposed to. Through female conversation and gossip, in particular, disappointments and letdowns are aired and friendships and hostilities toward neighbors and acquaintances ventilated and cleared.

Through conflict and desire, Banka Harichandan moves toward an increasingly enlightened state of mind. The reader cannot help but cheer Banka on and rejoice in his victory in the end when an inner explosion of anger puts an end to ill-treatment and opens new possibilities for Banka to assert his own will and freely choose his own way forward in life. He is now ready to take the consequences of his own choices—a real sign of maturity.

Commenting in his Introduction on developments in translation, Mohapatra finds that new trends have helped "create a place for Odia literature and culture at the global table but on its own terms, that is, by showcasing the culture's unique flavour and identity" (xxxi). As Mohapatra affirms, further, Banka "is worth reading especially to gain a keener perception of how religion, politics and economics are absorbed into the textures of daily life" (xviii).

Indeed, in the fine portrait of Banka Harichandan there is both uniqueness and representativeness. What makes his story particularly convincing is a poetic and subtle realism that remains free from idealization. Banka would prefer not to help clean the latrines, for example, and he does think of ways to get out of it until he reluctantly accepts to participate in an experience from which he learns lessons about life. Banka is far from angelic and he often has negative reactions and vengeful feelings, but in the course of his journey he is increasingly able to define his own values for himself and discard what doesn't fit—like the useless shoes forced upon him. In the end, Banka has moved a fair distance from the suffocating structures of his social community and familial context. With the liberating power of insight, he is able to write his own story.

References

1. Davis, Rocío G. "Identity in Community in Ethnic Short Story Cycles: Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club,* Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. In *Ethnicity and the American Short Story*. Ed. Julia Brown. New York, NY: Garland, 1997. 3-233. Print.
2. Dunn, Maggie, and Ann Morris. *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. New York, NY: Twayne, 1995. Print.

3. Miller, Alice. *The Drama of the Gifted Child and the Search for The True Self*. Transl. Ruth Ward. London: Faber and Faber, 1983. Print.
4. Miller, Alice. *The Body Never Lies: The Lingering Effects of Cruel Parenting*. Transl. Andrew Jenkins. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2006. Print.
5. Mohapatra, Himansu S. "Introduction." In Pattanaik, Dipti R. *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan*. Translated by Himansu S Mohapatra. New Delhi, India: Simon & Schuster India and Yoda Press, 2023. xi-xxxvii. Print.
6. Pattanaik, Dipti R. *The Life and Times of Banka Harichandan*. Translated by Himansu S Mohapatra. New Delhi, India: Simon & Schuster India and Yoda Press, 2023. Print.
7. Lundén, Rolf. The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite. Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999. Print.
8. Garland Mann, Susan. The short story cycle: a genre companion and reference guide. New York, NY: Greenwood, 1989. Print.

Dr. Kerstin W Shands

Dr. Kerstin, Professor Emerita, Stockholm, is the author of Embracing Space: Spatial Metaphors in Feminist Discourse and Journeys Within: The Contemporary Spiritual Autobiography. She is the editor of several anthologies, among them Neither East Nor West: Postcolonial Essays on Literature, Culture and Religion, Living Language, Living Memory: Essays on the Works of Toni Morrison, and Writing the Self: Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction. Dr. Shands is a contributor to Southern Literary Review, A Magazine for Literature of the American South.