

Book Review

Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay, *The Tale of Hansuli Turn*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, 405 pp., ISBN 9780231520225

Tarasankar Bandyopadhyay is arguably the most influential novelist of Bengali literature after Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Commonly labeled as “regional novels” since his country Birbhum along with its nature, people, culture and rituals are predominantly featured in them, his novels are not as widely read as those of other eminent Bengali novelists. In addition, some of his contemporaries harshly criticize his nostalgia of a feudal past. However, a profound reading of his novels would reveal some archetypal stories of human races, some of which have now been dissolved due to the colonial, industrial and scientific onslaughts. Inherently humanitarian, Bandyopadhyay ventures into the heterogeneity of human life and unravels it through the people he personally came across. His characters are not limited to local features; they rather represent almost all social strata, from rich landlords to famished vagabonds, as if microscopically thrust in his Birbhum country. From this perspective, his novel *The Tale of Hansuli Turn* (2011)¹ deserves more critical and scholarly attention for its insights into the universality of human condition in relation to cyclical movement of history, political revolution, dissolution of a subaltern population, clash between tradition and modernity, and the exploitation as well as decline of *Zamindari* system.

Compassionate to both older and younger generations of the *Kahar*² community, the novelist outlines a transitional contingency that inevitably transfigures and eventually disintegrates a subaltern population under the forces from within and outside. If the novel is termed as “regional,” it should then be ranked with the regional novels of authors like Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, James Joyce and William Faulkner. *The Tale of Hansuli Turn* (hereinafter *Hansuli*) weaves a story of the people living in the village of Hansuli Bend by the river Kopay flowing past the towns such as Santiniketan, Bolpur, Kankalitala, Kirnaha and Labhpur in Birbhum district of West Bengal. Due to the author’s first-hand experience of the lifestyle, joys and sorrows of this subaltern population, the representation receives sufficient experiential sensitivity in the novel. Rich in its regional, national and global implications, the novel throws light on many conflicts and dilemmas of the “modern

¹Originally written in Bengali as *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (1951), *The Tale of Hansuli Turn*, translated by Ben Conisbee Baer, has been published from Columbia University Press, 2011. 408 pp. ISBN 9780231149051

²In Hindu caste system, *Kahar* is a marginal population whose main occupation is that of a carrier.

novel”—between tradition and modernization, between servility to and rebellion against the feudal structure, and between faith and science. Colonial hangover and World War II, sometimes palpably and sometimes suggestively, seethe through the novel adding to further conflicts. Though it underlines the cultural celebrations of the Kahar society, a concatenation of diverse adversaries accompanied by the 1943 terrible flood wrack them with a threat of extinction. Thus, *Hansuli* can also be regarded as one of the acclaimed riparian novels of Bangla literature such as Manik Bandopadhyay's *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1936), Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's *Ichamati* (1950) and Adwaita Mallabarmana's *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (1956), which center on an endangered ethnic group.

Bandopadhyay contextualizes Kopay river in *Hansuli* in a way that it seems to flow through the pages of the novel and inundate the minds of the readers with the weal and woe of the societies. Near the village, the river makes a deluge of bends that look like *hansuli* (ornaments of women). The villagers are the Kahar servicemen, a subaltern group commonly regarded as a “criminal and untouchable” tribe to the colonial and feudal leaders (p. 49). There were two brands of Kahars in the village: *atporo* or ordinary Kahars and *behara* or palanquin-carrier Kahars. The ordinary or old Kahars, once the *Lathial* (stick-bearers) of the zamindars and indigo-planters, gradually became unable to make ends to meet from their vocation and got engaged in criminal activities such as dacoity, robbery and theft. On the other hand, the ancestors of the bearer Kahars, once the palanquin bearers for wealthier people and bridal parties, gradually turned to be sharecroppers, cultivating jungle land of their landlords.

In the course of time, this apparently cohesive society proves to be very crumbly in the face of industrialization. Although Bonwari, *matabbar* (headman) of the Kahars, who staunchly upholds the ethics of their society, sincerely urges his people to hold fast to their ancestral professions, the inexorable chasms from within pitiably shake their community bonds and promises. What is worse to this existential threat is the emergence of the young Karali, an unruly sans-culotte, who challenges the tribe's traditionalist attitude and indigenous rituals. Steadily turning Bonwari's unifying efforts into some ludicrous jokes and predisposed to protest any type of injustice and ridicule any type of superstition, Karali urges his community to give up servile existence to the *Babus* (landlords) and seek jobs at factories in order to live a better lifestyle as real men and women. In short, in his inability to show sufficient esteem to the existing rituals and superstitions, he appears to be an outcast in the community, especially to the old Kahars. In reaction to a strife thus caused, he stomps at the ancestral practices and leaves for the nearby city, Channanpur, aiming to usher in a new profession for himself and the young Kahars. This creates extreme disappointment in Kahar elders to whom Karali's renunciation verges on humiliation of their caste. What is even more threatening, his aspiration to bring in a new life in the promises of technological and industrial advancements has started influencing other young minds.

Right here, with the Kahar youths' stampede to nearby cities, the novel reaches its climax. Believing that gods and goddesses have abandoned them,

they apparently balk at the tribal orthodoxies. Likewise, they are not in any mood to submit to the fate that has been manipulated by feudal lords over ages. Rather, they take up the gauntlet of going beyond the periphery of the village and seeking newer ways of life. This leads the whole community to a menacing division between the Bonwari-led elders and the Kahar-led youths, and the future of the tribe essentially depends on this crisis around who will win: The old generation who hold their tradition, or the new generation who are impulsively thrilled by the optimism of modernization and industrialization?

Bandopadhyay's *Hansuli* shares stunning parallelism with his contemporary Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), especially as regards the authors' anatomizing ethnic customs and prejudices. The custom of appeasing the spirits of ancestral champions is one of the most remarkable resemblances across the cultures and over the centuries. They attribute all happenings, auspicious or ominous, to the spirits of those who supposedly built their societies in the past, *egwugwu* in *Things Fall Apart* and *Babathakur* in *Hansuli*. The distance between father Okonkwo and son Noibe echoes in *Hansuli* as a theme of "the falcon cannot here the falconer," that is, clash between the old and the young. Probably, the most striking similarity is that the internal crevices and contradictions infiltrate both groups that paradoxically corroborate with external inroads in the ultimate dissolution of the tribes. More precisely, the cracks within themselves significantly facilitate the external forces to easily deracinate the longstanding social affinities, which have so far propped up the tribes. Moreover, in both novels, the social elders seem to be proud of their ethnic structure, ironically, in a way that no internal disorder or external force can even stir any commotion, let alone destroy their clan. With the passage of time, however, the codes of authority, community faith, gender stereotypes, indigenous customs and, above all, the total identity of both populations fall apart.

It is interesting that the events of *Hansuli* also reverberate with those of Wole Soyinka's (1934-) play *The Swamp Dwellers* (1958), another work of African literary tradition. Both works make use of fascinating contrast and comparison for thematic and narrative strategies. As Bonwari-Karali conflict threatens the Kahar society, the difference between the two twin brothers Awuchike and Igwezu intimates a contingent future of the swamp dwellers. Despite the recurrence of cultural celebrations in both works, they engage in corrosive conflicts between country contentment and urban charm and between tradition and modernity. Like the playwright, the novelist reflects upon the socio-cultural disorders as well as the personal agonies, and ruefully points to the appeal of new ways of life. Besides, the commonality of a man's fight against the caprices of nature significantly binds both works. The people of both tribes live at the mercy of nature: Rain/water is both expected as the preserver of life and feared as the destroyer of the whole community. Again, in spite of a hearty celebration of the ancestral heritages, the winds of change were creeping underway quite un-apprehended by the leaders of both groups. Importantly, the trope of social injustice, thus manifest, by the landlords can be likened to Soyinka's theme of deception by the Kadiye, the priest of god.

However, whereas *Hansuli* chronicles the plight of a marginal tribal caste, *The Swamp* reflects the life of the people of southern Nigeria in a wider canvas.

Hansuli accentuates, to speak in general terms, those crevices and inroads that infiltrate a once unified community only to asunder it to pieces. The apocalyptic picture, portrayed in the novel that refers to specific historicity, symptomatizes the political chaos that went through the Indian subcontinent in the course of time. For example, the novel's treatment of ethnic disharmony of the Kahars along with an ununiformed use of their language can be likened to the dilemma, conflict and confusion that led to the historical partitions of British India into India and Pakistan, later into Pakistan and Bangladesh. Moreover, through these mental and linguistic differences, Bandopadhyay also underlines the community's deviations and quarrels anticipating the dilemmas of rural development, ecological and economic exploitation, and dalit militancy that palpably occupy the center of India's post-Independence politics.

It is true that all regional tales do not transcend parochial confines and become universal tales. Perhaps, the most important feature that renders a folk tale a universal classic is an intricate treatment of symbolism. More precisely, when provincial entities in a novel are suffused with universal themes, the novel transcends the local purport, fraternizing itself with universal human tales and attaining a classical ensign. Bandopadhyay's *Hansuli* deals with symbolism in such a way that the novel goes on par with the symbolist classics such as Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952). The river Kopay in the novel is, for example, not a merely a river in Labhpur village; it is inherently cognate with the Thames or the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* standing as a witness of devastation of a civilization and the resurgence of another. At a time, it symbolizes as the youthful blush of a Kahar damsel, and again at another time it appears to be Shelley's west wind—a destroyer by flood and preserver by providing the major source of water. Moreover, it serves as a cusp in the dichotomy of ancient-modern civilizations on its banks.

Apart from the river, the novelist makes some other symbolical uses in the novel. For example, the snakes, frequently referred to, stand for both poison as well as essential resilience that the Kahar community mostly needs for its existential crisis. What is more, the railway train, a traditional symbol of speed and advent of new civilization, is treated in the novel as "the timekeepers of *Kaharpara's* life" and as an omen that threatens the normativity of the Kahars' life (p. 29). The red of its shrill signal that signals a precarious future for the community can remind readers of the "green light" in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). However, the novel's initial murder of a pet dog by an unknown agent—a horrifying death in an otherwise joyous time—is perhaps the best of use of death motif that recurs all through the novel.

Though *The Tale of Hansuli Turn* apparently pertains to a sub-tale of a subaltern population whom the author constantly experienced from his prelapsarian childhood, it is basically a universal human story. It is not only one of Bandopadhyay's major novels along with *Raikamal* (1935), *Ganadebata*, and *Kavi* (1944); rather, it runs parallel with many canonical novels of

world literature. Accordingly, Meenakshi Mukherjee (2005)³ includes the novel in her list of ten best novels written in the twentieth century. Despite Tapan Sinha's 1962 film adaptation and Ben Conisbee Baer's 2011 English translation, the novel, as one of the masterpieces of world literature, deserves more critical attention in literary studies and intermedial discourse, especially in cultural, anthropological, subaltern, geratological, translation and adaptation studies.

Shah Ahmed
Associate Professor,
Department of English,
School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (SLASS)
Chittagong Independent University
Chattogram, Bangladesh
Email: shah_ahmed@ciu.edu.bd

³In her article "Divided by a Common Language: The Novel in India in English and in English Translation." Included in *Culture and the Making of Identity in Contemporary India* edited by Kamala Ganesh, Usha Thakkar