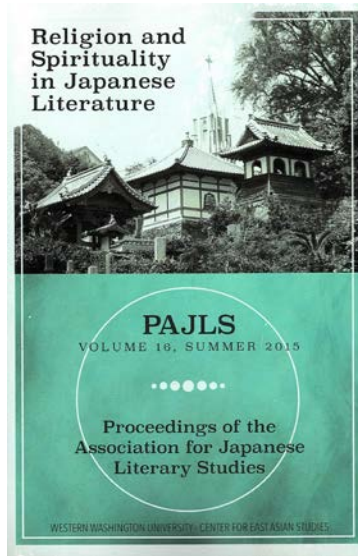


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Spiritual Recovery in Yoshimoto Banana's Amrita

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Beginning with her debut in 1987, and continuing into the present, Yoshimoto Banana has written novels about protagonists who encounter grief at the death of someone important, or the agony of death in one's mind, but recover by reexamining life in its everyday forms. Writing stories that assist this healing process has been Banana's main purpose in creating novels; she has become a healer for people who lived in the gloomy state of Japan in the 1990s. In her full-length novel *Amrita*, the author extensively examines and confirms her belief in the healing powers intrinsic to everyday life.

The original Japanese version of the book was first published in two main parts in the literary magazine *Kaien*. The first part, titled "Melancholia," came out in April 1990. The second part, "Amrita," the largest and central part of the book, was published monthly from January 1992 to October 1993 in the same magazine. "Melancholia" and "Amrita" were combined into a hard cover book in January 1994, under the single title *Amrita*. When *Amrita* was published in a paperback in January 1997, a third part, "Nothing has changed," was added as epilogue.

At the time *Amrita* came out, in the 1990s, New Age and other religious cult movements, so-called healing methods, had become very popular among young people in Japan. According to Yumiyama Tatsuya (1995), a professor of religion at Taisho University, "broad interest in healing began in the 1970s, increased through the popularization of New Age thought in the late 1980s, and became a fixture in the 1990s" (Yumiyama 265). Taneda Wakako (2009), a professor of Japanese literature at Fuji Women's University, states that the time when "Melancholia" and "Amrita" was being serially published overlaps with the time in the early 1990s when the new religions were receiving much attention and that there is an obvious correlation between such social trends and Banana's choice of the topics of supernatural power and the occult in *Amrita* (Taneda 123).

In the midst of this general pursuit of extraordinary experiences there came, in 1995, the Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. This religious group was new, having been founded only in 1987. According to John Hall, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Davis, its origin

came with the flourishing at this time of “new new religions” (*shin shin shūkyō*). In 1984, its founding guru, Matsumoto Chizuo, became widely known for his claim of levitation, with a famous photo published in the magazine *Twilight Zone* showing him meditating in the air (Hall 86). In 1987 he took on the religious name of Asahara Shōkō and named his movement Aum Shinrikyō, Religion of the Supreme Truth. Asahara built a communal village in 1988 where he gathered his followers (Hall 86). The goal of the community was for individuals to liberate themselves from bad karma (p.86). Asahara preached to his followers that yoga and other spiritual trainings would bring them to salvation. Thus by isolating them from the society, Asahara brainwashed his followers and spread his doctrine.

However, after the Aum sarin gas attack, the widespread search for a power that transcends everyday life quickly crumbled. Banana's *Amrita* extensively deals with the theme of spirituality, and in this paper I will examine how in this novel the author reacted to the interests in spirituality shared by many of her readers by differentiating herself from new religious movements, and in particular Aum Shinrikyō.

In the first part of *Amrita*, “Melancholia,” the protagonist and narrator, Sakumi, introduces the background of her family. Sakumi's mother, Yukiko, had given birth to Sakumi and her younger sister, Mayu. Her father died when she was a child, from a blood clot in the brain, and six years later, Yukiko had remarried and given birth to Sakumi's half-brother, Yoshio. The family was melancholy. Yukiko soon divorced Yoshio's father. Mayu grew up to be an actress, living with her boyfriend, Ryūichirō, but eventually came to drink and take pills after abandoning her acting career. Half a year before the time when the main story takes place, Mayu died in a car crash, which Sakumi and Ryūichirō believed was not an accident but a suicide. Now, the people living in Sakumi's house were Yukiko, Sakumi, Yoshio and two others, Sakumi's cousin, Mikiko, and a childhood friend of Yukiko, Junko, who had run into trouble with her husband.

After Mayu's death, Sakumi goes through a death of her own mind in such a way that she becomes a night person and feels nothing: “Generally the sun comes up before I go down for bed, and as a fundamental rule I never open my eyes until early afternoon” (*Amrita* 3). Mayu had left acting after suffering a nervous breakdown, and Sakumi supposed that she had been too young to handle the stress of the life of a movie star. She does not realize her own agony in Mayu's death. Sakumi begins to move towards a greater understanding of her

own feeling when Ryūichirō, a young occult writer, sends her a package from one of his travels. Opening the wrapping, Sakumi finds a statue of Nipper, the old RCA Victor mascot. Sakumi thinks, "Clearly the statue was trying to tell me something. . . There had to be a reason" (*Amrita* 7). But she does not figure it out and ends up putting it in front of the bathroom.

A couple of days later, Yoshio and Mikiko invite Sakumi to watch *My Neighbor Totoro*. Sakumi does not know what kind of movie it is, but five minutes into the video she knows the movie is about two sisters. Sakumi tries not to think about her dead sister, but she remembers their childhood together. After the film is over, she heads for the bathroom, and after opening the door, the first thing she sees is the statue of Nipper.¹ While looking at the statue, she feels like crying; it is the first time she has done so since Mayu died. Nipper was famous for grieving for a lost master, and inspired by the package from Ryūichirō, Sakumi becomes aware of her own agony, sympathizing with the dog who has lost his master. Note also that Ryūichirō, who sent her this statue, shares the same despair as Sakumi has after Mayu's death. Banana thus starts this novel, the "Melancholia" prologue, by situating her protagonist in the midst of loss for a loved one.

The main body of the book, the part originally titled "Amrita," begins about four years later, with Sakumi losing her memory. This section begins in the early autumn, with Sakumi, now twenty-eight, in a hurry to get to work. On the way she takes a shortcut, which she rarely does because of the steepness of the stairs, loses her footing, falls down, and smashes her head against a stone. The impact is so strong that she loses her memories as a result. After the concussion, her life changes. By chance, Sakumi sleeps with Ryūichirō, and they become lovers. Attending a friend's wedding, she is told that she looks different:

"You really think I've changed?" I asked. They all nodded their heads without changing the expression on their faces. "You mean I've become more beautiful?" I said, joking around.

"No, no, not that," one of them said, making me angry. "Something else about you is different."

"Yes, yes, something else," the others replied. (*Amrita* 50)

¹ Nipper is a dog that lost his master. When his master died, the dog was taken to his master's younger brother who was a painter. His new master observed Nipper's puzzled face when the dog discovered a phonograph. In 1895, three years after Nipper's death, his second master painted a picture of Nipper listening to a phonograph with a black horn. (designboom, 2010)

As mentioned above, after Mayu's death, Sakumi had turned into a night person and lived a largely purposeless life. But with her memory loss, change of appearance was accompanied by change of attitude towards her lifestyle. When she hears an old man's boring speech at the wedding reception, she conversely comes to recall her days in elementary school:

It had something to do with an event in my life so boring I could have died right there on the spot; then again, it could have been a time I could have gone crazy over how much I loved being there.

The memory finally came back to me. I was with these same people. We were in a classroom, and I'd fallen asleep.

... the smell of dry wood, the brilliant rays of the sun, the green outside the window, and those people all around me – all who had been with me from childhood. The fresh gust of wind rushing in when it was time for our break. Light bouncing off my pencil case and dancing on the ceiling above me. I knew that when I left that place the elements, everything that came together like tiny miracles, would never come together again. Pondering that thought, I could feel my newfound wisdom wafted around me like the scent of a subtle perfume. That was the impression, just one more brilliant memory that seemed to pierce through my heart. (*Amrita* 50-51)

Sakumi discovers how much she now cherishes her old memories, although she used to think her everyday life was nothing to care about and was boring. From the retrieved memory she learns that days that pass by would never come back. By losing her memories, she had become sensitive to the vivid details of her lost everyday moments, and to learn of the fragility of life. This acute awareness of the beauty of everyday reality changes her – from a night person with nothing to look forward to tomorrow into a person ready to enjoy a new day. Her change of appearance shows this shift.

Meanwhile, Yoshio, now in the 4th grade, starts to hear and see odd things and becomes a clairvoyant child. Suffering from the uncontrollable nature of this new power, Yoshio stops going to school. Worried about her little brother, Sakumi takes him to Kōchi prefecture. One night in Kōchi, Sakumi happens to see a ghost at the apartment for the first time in her life. When Sakumi and Yoshio are watching TV, the doorbell rings. The apartment has a security camera at the front door of the lobby and, glancing into the monitor, Sakumi sees a small but young woman in a red dress. Although the woman is a total stranger to her, she looks familiar to Sakumi: “There was something familiar about her face, something that gave me the impression I knew her, even though I was sure I'd never met her before” (*Amrita* 129).

After returning to Tokyo from Kōchi, Ryūichirō invites Sakumi to visit his friends in Saipan, and there Sakumi unravels the mysterious figure in Kōchi. Ryūichirō's two friends are psychics, the couple Saseko and her husband Kozumi. Kozumi is able to hear the voice of his dead brother, while Saseko is capable by singing of healing the spirits of those who died in the war. It was Saseko who was the spirit Sakumi saw at the apartment in Kōchi. When they meet for the first time, Saseko says to Sakumi, "You're half-dead" (*Amrita* 158), explaining that:

When a person is about to die and they suddenly come back to life, they bring with them the resources to tap all the powers they have inside. They've actually been reborn. Some people try to accomplish the same thing with yoga, but that takes an entire lifetime. You should be happy you have access to something so rare. (*Amrita* 158)

With her psychic skill, Saseko has learned about Sakumi's concussion, and implies Sakumi has been "reborn" by going through its trauma, has been able to reform her own self. Having lost her memories, she knows nothing about herself; having lost her identity she has become more sensitive to blessed moments in life.

If Sakumi is "half-dead," the psychic couple would be completely "dead," in the sense that having gained supernatural power from their tragic childhood, they had escaped from their tragedies. Kozumi had grown up in an ordinary family in Shizuoka and led a happy childhood, with his parents and siblings. One day, however, his eyes popped open in the middle of the night, he smelled sulfur around his body, and heard a deep voice saying, "Only you will be left" (*Amrita* 168). Later he came to understand the meaning of his premonition as all his family members died. The one exception, his mother, lost understanding of the world, and would end up living in a mental institution. Since the time when he had smelled sulfur around his body, Kozumi had gained the ability to hear the voice of the dead spirits.

Saseko had also had a tragic childhood experience. Her name *Saseko* means "a word generally used to describe a woman as a public toilet" (*Amrita* 153), and as Kozumi explains, the name was linked to her tragic background:

Saseko's mother was an alcoholic, and when Saseko was three her mother rolled over and died. By the time the man who was married to her mother had discovered that Saseko was not his child. Apparently the baby was the result of a casual fling outside the marriage, if you know what I mean. The father who'd been cheated on was angry, for obvious reasons, and to get even with his wife he went down to the city office building and had Saseko's name changed to 'free public toilet.' Her mother never found out. (*Amrita* 153)

In addition, Sakumi gets to know Saseko's supernatural power originated from her tragic childhood:

Saseko's always realized, even from the time she was in her mother's belly, that she was hated and unwanted. But she came into this world anyway, knowing throughout the entire nine months that the world didn't want her. She couldn't go anywhere, because she was attached to the umbilical chord. So she had to listen and feel all the things she didn't want to. The pain grew so bad that the voices inside her heart crying for her to get out was actually what allowed Saseko to start a new form of communication between herself and others. (*Amrita* 154)

After growing up, Saseko lived for a time as a prostitute until she left for Saipan, when she stopped sleeping with unknown men and instead began to heal the spirits of the dead with her songs. Thus, for both Kozumi and Saseko it was tragic childhood that led them to start communicating with the spirits of the dead. And they used these supernatural powers to try to escape from society. Sakumi explains her impression of the couple: "Occasionally when I'd see Kozumi and his wife, I'd bring a retired couple to mind, their efforts seemed that devoid of life. They'd left their country to spend their lives gazing out over the sea. Even though they were still young, their youthful vanity was gone" (*Amrita* 198). Sakumi sees the couple as "a retired couple." They had given up living in the real world and instead live in the world of the dead by using their supernatural power to communicate only with them. In *Amrita*, there is a negative quality to this: the couple uses their supernatural powers in a rather wasteful way. Sakumi comes to critically distance herself from them.

After returning from Saipan, Sakumi retrieves her memories when she happens to read a book that she had previously read, before her concussion. Meanwhile, Yoshio has stopped going to school and is playing truant at the park. He tells his family that he decided to go to a private school, which specializes in treating autistic children, and other children unable to cope with regular environments. The decision of going to the private school shows that Yoshio is becoming "dead," symbolically. From the standpoint that Sakumi now has, as a person recovered from memory loss, Yoshio seems gloomy as he says, "I feel kind of lonely, but don't know why, ... I think the Saku-chan [Sakumi] who lost her memory understood more of my pain" (*Amrita* 248). His pain is not only the effect from his supernatural power but also from his sense of isolation from his parents. Naturally, he misses his father who is living apart from him, and although Sakumi is his half-sister, since he has only one full blood relative in his

family, his mother Yukiko, he is fearful of the day when he becomes alone. Yukiko's friend, Junko, now steals Yukiko's money and leaves the house without telling anyone. This causes Yoshio all the more to fear that he will be left alone. Lonely, and worried about his family abandoning him, he decides to go to a private school knowing that it will provide him with special care, and that his supernatural power will be accepted by other students more positively than at the regular school. Thus seeking a special shelter for himself, he is trying to escape from reality, just like Kozumi and Saseko did.

Playing in the park while waiting to go the special school, Yoshio becomes a friend of *Noodles*, a female college student whose real name is Kaname. She is nicknamed as *Noodles* since she is often witnessed eating noodles at the school cafeteria. One day, *Noodles* approaches Sakumi, rightly asking if she is Yoshio's sister. At that time, Sakumi has an impression that she is familiar with *Noodles*. *Noodles* has clairvoyant power. She had previously worked for a research institute at a university in California, which specializes in supernatural power, but unhappy with her own supernatural ability had suffered from a nervous breakdown. She then decided to live in the real world, not depending on her supernatural power. Both Sakumi and *Noodles* value the fragility and blessing of everyday reality of ordinary people and resist the urge to escape from it. Because of their shared choice in values, Sakumi feels nostalgically familiar with her.

In contrast to *Noodles*, who pursues living in reality without transcendent power, her former boyfriend, *Mesmer*, attempts to make the most use of his supernatural power. When Yoshio starts to go to the private school, *Noodles* is worried about him concerning whether or not *Mesmer* would influence Yoshio. Hearing that *Mesmer* frequently appears in Yoshio's dreams, she predicts *Mesmer* will invite the boy to create a new religious group with him. But this is a misunderstanding. *Mesmer* actually intends to invite Yoshio to join the very special California research institution, where *Mesmer* and *Noodles* had originally met. One day Sakumi receives an envelope with a cassette tape, which includes no name or address of the sender. A few weeks later, *Mesmer* stops Sakumi on a street and chats with her, and it turns out the sender is *Mesmer*. He correctly guesses how deep Sakumi's loneliness is:

After meeting with you today my suspicions have been confirmed. You're lonely. You're so starved for someone that there's nothing that any of us, including yourself, can do. Before you fell and hit your head you'd lost a number of people very close to you. I can only say you're next – it's something in your blood."

I thought about the phrase Saseko has used to describe me, “half-dead.” “ ... You’ve paid a tremendous amount of attention to yourself to avoid feeling lonely. But you are lonely ... It’s so easy to become hopeless. Everything inside you is trying desperately not to fall victim. You’ve already died once. Things from your former life have taken on new form.” (*Amrita* 325-6)

As Saseko had, *Mesmer* also refers to Sakumi’s concussion as the definite turning point of her spiritual life. After the concussion she loses her memories and, at the same time, her identity as well. And having no identity makes her lonely, but she subconsciously tries not to feel that way. Unlike the psychic couple Kozumi and Saseko, who are escapists from their past, Sakumi keeps resisting her sense of despair due to her loss of identity, and she reexamines her life in searching for something hopeful. *Mesmer* mentions that Sakumi does not fall victim of her deep loneliness because she has “something beautiful” in her mind while comparing her to her dead sister Mayu:

Your support is not the power of your will, but something hidden in that thinking, something beautiful, like a baby crying for her first time, like people forced to pick up an enormous piece of luggage for a single second, or like the smell of bread when you’re starving. It resembles those things. Your great-grandfather had it, and you’ve inherited it naturally in some way. Your sister didn’t have it, but your brother does.

... You have a lovely smile. It expresses the essence of hope. (*Amrita* 326)

The examples for “something beautiful” that *Mesmer* gives are all the moments that have “hope.” *Mesmer* mentions that Sakumi inherits those beautiful things from her grandfather. Her grandfather taught Yukiko the secret formula for living when she was about 10 years old, and Sakumi hears about it from her. The secret formula for living is asking the following questions: “Do you look forward to tomorrow? How about the day after next? What comes to mind when I say ‘future’? Does it excite you? Depress you? How do you feel right now? Are things going well? Do you look in the mirror and like what you see?” (*Amrita* 142) All these questions are the ones to ask about one’s current life, oneself, and one’s future. What Sakumi has inherited from her grandfather is how to evaluate where she is in life. On the other hand, her dead sister Mayu did not get this, and took sleeping pills and drank in order to just let moments of her life slip away fruitlessly. Mayu could not discover the happiness around her and only saw pain in her surviving days before her death. A careful reexamination of life’s moments gives people a chance to find good things around them. In this way, Sakumi realizes that there are various kinds of blessings in people’s lives. Believing in the existence of the type of power that unconditionally celebrates

life gives her hope for living life. Thus, even the characters with psychic power, like *Mesmer* and *Noodles*, join Sakumi in celebrating her philosophy of everyday beauty.

In the last chapter, Sakumi narrates her conviction that there are always blessings in life:

It had always been out there, shining brightly. I just hadn't reached out to touch it. But every now and then I felt surrounded by its presence. From right to left, from here to there, like water flowing downstream. Limitless amount of sweet oxygen. The more I took in, the greater the supply. Like a saint in the legends who reached out and took jewels from the sky, I had the same kind of talent for gathering miracles in life. There was no doubt about it. Those feelings had always been with me. (*Amrita* 360)

Sakumi gains chances to reevaluate life after she has her concussion and becomes aware of the beauty and hope in life. Knowing that blessed moments ripple through the course of her life "like water flowing downstream" leads her to a spiritual rebirth. Ryūichirō tells Sakumi that by taking her as the model for his new novel, he is going to write about a girl who loses all her memories in the past, and the title is going to be named *amrita*. He explains the meaning of *amrita*:

It comes from the old Sanskrit word *amrta*. You know, a divine nectar, something the gods indulged in by guzzling the stuff down. They say that when you let the liquid gush through you, you've actually achieved life, because what happens to the flowing water is similar to what happens to people. (*Amrita* 354-5)

According to Ryūichirō life is like drinking water. And both Sakumi and Ryūichirō consider life as something limitless. Yoshimoto Banana puts the main message of this novel at this point. Life itself contains continuous survival energy like the "limitless amount of sweet oxygen."

In the third part "Nothing has changed," which was added to *Amrita* three years later, Sakumi narrates what has happened to Yoshio and Ryūichirō several years later. Yoshio has become a junior high school student and no longer has his supernatural power. Ryūichirō had cheated on Sakumi in Spain, but Sakumi overcomes what happened between them and ponders over the flow of life from a larger perspective: "Regardless of what might happen, things will never change. I'll continue to flow endlessly through life . . . And nothing will get in my way" (*Amrita* 366). In adding the third part, Yoshimoto Banana was emphasizing the general truth that life's flow is something essentially hopeful and positive, uninfluenced by occasional unexpected disturbances.

The protagonist of this story, Sakumi, became lonely after the death of her younger sister, deepening this loneliness with a memory loss caused by her fall and concussion. In this way, she was transferred into the borderline realm of life and death, where she lived through her “half-dead” spiritual crisis. The crisis, however, allowed her to reexamine her life and thanks to her interaction with friends with psychic power, she revived spiritually in a steady and progressive way. Although during the time when *Amrita* was published, the new religious movements such as the Aum Shinrikyō invited people to believe that the transcendental world could lead them to spiritual rebirth, Banana completed *Amrita* in a way exhibiting her strong belief in the spiritual healing power within one’s everyday life.

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