

FRESH OFF THE PRESS: FICTION

Between the familiar and the alien

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

Imaan (Eka, 2021), written by Manoranjan Byapari and translated from Bangla by Arunava Sinha, starts on an interesting premise. Imaan Ali, who has spent most of his life in jail and juvenile homes due to no crime of his own, is suddenly released after years of bureaucratic complications and pending paperwork. The novel unfolds through Imaan's perspective on this new world outside the confines of the jail.

This opening scene strikes a chord. Imaan had entered Central Jail as an infant in the arms of his mother, Zahura Bibi, who is charged with the murder of her husband and dies when Imaan is six years old. Jail and juvenile homes are all he has seen till now. A man in his early 20s, with no real knowledge or experience of how the real world works, is now at a loss with the newly found freedom that he had so desperately wanted all his life. He finds a place to stay at Jadavpur Railway Station and a job as a ragpicker at the advice of a consummate pickpocket.

This life of hardship and uncertainty makes him want to go back to prison again. All one needs to do is get in trouble. But for Imaan, who finds himself unable to commit crimes due to his eponymous morality, it was seemingly easier to get out than to get back in.

Through Imaan's interactions with the world outside of the central jail in Kolkata, we meet rickshaw pullers, street hawkers, and tea-stall owners, who belong mostly to the lowest strata of the society and come from highly marginalised caste and economic backgrounds. Byapari's social commentary on these characters' lives paints an accurate picture of the reality lived by the ostracised. He portrays the vulgar disparities faced by them in society, along with the more personal human emotions of love, attraction and jealousy, reminding the reader of Manik Bandyopadhyay.

The characters in this novel, however, have very little development. It seems that they are involved only in so far as their descriptions, not to contribute to the story or to the development of other characters. It is Arunava Sinha's effortless translation that makes it an easy and smooth read.

What the text excels at is empowering its women characters. They have diverse stories to tell, but their experiences of belonging to a marginalised community are connected by the ever-penetrating male gaze. Yet all of them reclaim their lives as their own. They are, in every way, their own bosses, living lives in their own conditions and claiming the rights to their bodies and sexuality, owning their polyamory

with pride. Take Kamini, for example; a woman who adopts polyamory when her first husband brings another wife for himself. "If you can have this life, so can I," is how she starts, but eventually goes on to own the life with pride, depending on no one for anything. Such honest and closer to life portrayal of a woman's strength is quite rare.

My expectations of seeing the world through Imaan's eyes, and getting into his psyche, however, remained unfulfilled. The story never quite reaches a climax and keeps the reader wanting for more. One wants to see the other characters through Imaan's eyes with all his bewilderment, rather than the narrator's, to get to know and understand him more. One wants to see Imaan rise to the occasion. But his experiences don't contribute to his growth and do not let him take agency of his own life and its decisions. Till the very end, he remains the same naive and bewildered boy who comes out of jail with no experience of the outside world. *Imaan* is, eventually, a novel that fails to sustain the intrigue of its premise, but it is also an excellent example of class and social commentary in its rawest form.

Nahaly Nafisa Khan is a sub editor at the Metro desk, The Daily Star.

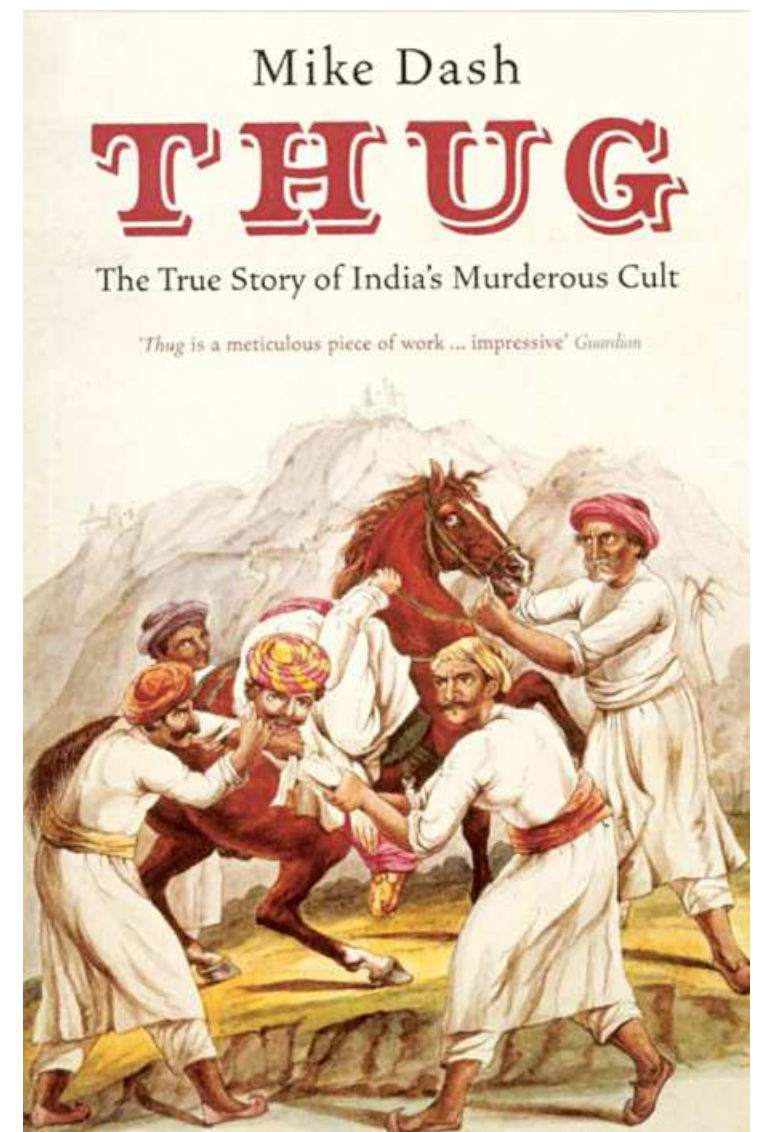
WORTH A RE-READ: NONFICTION

Mike Dash myth-busts British India's cult of stranglers

NOWSHED H IMRAN

It is nearly impossible to know nothing about British India's infamous cult that systematically killed and robbed Indian travelers for hundreds of years. However, almost every write-up available today is an exaggerated horror story that fails to reflect upon the real events. Mike Dash, in his gripping book, *Thug: The True Story of India's Murderous Cult* (Granta Books, 2005), explores this history through the written record left behind by British officials.

Although many "Thugs"—highway robbers who strangled their victims to death—claimed that their ancestors were involved in these killing rituals since the Mughal period, the early official records come from the 1800s, when East Indian Company officials started finding untraceable dead bodies in Etawah, a city in Western Uttar Pradesh that would become an important site during the 1857 Bengal revolt. In 1811, magistrate Thomas Perry had encountered a group of Thugs by sheer chance. After four days of interrogation, eight Thugs admitted to having murdered 95 people in a matter of eight years. They described a novel way of killing and robbing—befriending their victims and even traveling with them for days to gain trust. Once in a favourable place and condition, a predetermined signal was given, and the victim was strangled with a piece of folded cloth that had a tie on one end (sometimes containing a coin for effect).



It is easier to think of this group of people as degenerate or psychopaths. Yet most of them just took it as a profession; generation after generation stayed involved for the profits the trade yielded.

Thug groups had ranks and divided responsibilities. Some worked as scouts who would gather information on potential targets, some as gravediggers, others as inveiglers who charmed and won the trust of their victims, and some, finally, were *phansigar*, who killed their victims mainly by strangulation. Each year, the group was led out by one Jamadar on an expedition, mostly in winter, when people were most vulnerable on the roads. Some Thugs were high caste and hunted only for bigger groups and prizes. For those with lower demands, even half a rupee was enough to kill a person! Some lay under the protection of the local zamindar, as they would share a portion of their loot with their lord.

Mike Dash's rich narrative looks at this history while shining light on British Indian society and its socio-economic conditions. There is, for instance, a vivid description of the opium trade of India and how the East Indian Company failed to enforce taxes that would've otherwise benefited them. The Company couldn't cope with local traders, smugglers, and bankers. While explaining this, Dash depicts the banking system of India in the early 1800s and how its local bankers (*seth*) maintained the craft generation after generation. These bankers had great influence in many locations, and when Thugs looted their treasure bearers, the Company had to take notice.

The downfall of the Thugs came by the hand of Captain William Sleeman, who didn't just capture them, but also used them as approvers (state's evidence) and extracted information that would help destroy the entire network. It was due to his effort and request that Ferris Robb, a cartographer, created a skeleton map ranging north and south from Madras to Delhi, and east and west from Calcutta to Bombay. It contained detailed routes which the Thugs preferred for killing and villages where they were most concentrated, among other useful information.

Dash provides some unique information in his book. The lesser-known "River Thugs" were described along with a rising new group that killed just to abduct and sell off children as slaves. Dash also explores the religion practiced by the cult, who are generally thought to be a devious group of solely Kali (Hindu goddess of time, doomsday, and death) worshippers. In reality, almost one in three Thugs were Muslim and most didn't worship Kali in their day-to-day lives; only when they were on a killing expedition.

Contrary to popular myth, there was no Thug stronghold that British officials had destroyed. Thugs that had turned into approvers of the Company were imprisoned at first and afterwards, rehabilitated into community prisons. Dash's account helps clear many misconceptions about this cult, but the reader will also discover facts and stories that will send a shiver down their spine.

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OPINION

DARK ACADEMIA

why we love it and what needs to change

NAWSHIN FLORA

Dusty libraries, tweed blazers, candles, classics, coffee pots and armchairs: these are some of the basic elements of a social media aesthetic when one is into Dark Academia. The rising popularity of Dark Academia, which essentially romanticizes an intellectual lifestyle and classic literature, has turned into more than just a facet of contemporary literature and culture. It has evolved into a prominent subculture and even a lifestyle choice for a niche audience.

Books considered to be part of the Dark Academia (DA) sub-genre are usually set in an academic establishment, be it a boarding school or a liberal arts college, illustrated by a darkly poetic atmosphere, often with the backdrop of sinister, gothic architecture. Books like Leigh Bardugo's *Ninth House* (Flatiron Books, 2019) and Victoria Lee's *A Lesson In*



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

for knowledge as "nerds", DA-enthusiasts find embracing "the dark academia lifestyle" comforting and relatable. It allows them to vicariously live through a privileged academic life with a perforating access to knowledge.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture Of Dorian Gray* (1890) may be thought of as the bibles of Dark Academia, but it was Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (Vintage, 1992) that became the modern cornerstone of the sub-genre. Tartt's debut novel had all the key tropes to appeal to a new generation of readers who enjoyed fantasizing about life on campus, about learning an ancient language and solving mysteries. But, like most other genres, Dark Academia, too, is disproportionately eurocentric.

Earlier books of the sub-genre, like *Maurice* (1971) by EM Forster or *Dead Poets Society* (1989) by Nancy H Kleinbaum, all glorify western culture. It is only recently that the landscape has been including and publishing authors of different ethnicities. Naomi Novik's *Scholomance* series (2020), for instance, has the most diverse characters among contemporary DA. *Ace Of Spades* (Macmillan, 2021) by Faridah

Abiké-lyimidé also offers remarkable critique of the traditional elements of DA, as it challenges the existing racism and classism of academic establishments in the western world. In the book, Chiamaka and Devon, the only two Black students in an all-white school, find themselves in an old system of social eugenics where Caucasian students and teachers try to sabotage their pursuits and have them thrown out.

These narratives, however, still promote the toxic prejudice of western educational systems, which establish the prominence of characters belonging to a predominantly white, bourgeoisie class. Apart from this, the DA culture also highlights unhealthy behaviour and problematic habits such as alcoholism, intake of morbid amounts of caffeine as sustenance, romanticising mental health problems, and even glorifying suicide.

The mystifying beauty of DA culture lies in the romanticisation of the mundane; there is something poetically sinister about the way these books represent something as basic as academia, which is alluring to the younger generation of readers. Perhaps it is the idealised aesthetics that draw them in. But how politically justifiable is the non-critical consumption of this sub-genre?

In reality, educational institutions have always maintained a certain level of racist and classist hierarchy and it is concerning that the Dark Academia aesthetic and its most prominent books only perpetuate such discriminating practices. I believe that as readers, we should be wary of any toxicity that pop culture propagates. We must not forget that Dark Academia should be a critique of the system rather than perpetuating the very conventionalism against which literary criticism stands.

Naushin Flora is currently daydreaming about catching up to her never ending TBR list. Remind her to get enough sleep at naushinflora@gmail.com.

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Vengeance (Delacorte Press, 2021) outline this especially well. Characters belonging to the genre usually have a profound passion for seeking knowledge. Dwelling in existential dread, their diction is dominated by classical prose. Surrounding the brooding, morally-grey characters are common themes of murder, secret cults, and queer angst in these books.

In today's late capitalist era, where everyone is dependent on modern technology, DA has risen as a countercultural response. While pop culture often satirises individuals with a thirst