



BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC FICTION

‘SHAPOD SHONEY’

A beast of a graphic novel

For the very first time in the country, a Bangla novel has been adapted as an unprecedented, 400-page graphic novel and published just a few months back.

KAISAR KABIR

What comes to your mind when you encounter a graphic novel called *Shapod Shoney* (Graphic Bangla, 2021), which translates to ‘Along with the Beast’, the cover art showing a man holding a rifle under the dark sky? My first impression was that it could be something along the lines of Jim Corbett out in the wild, hunting a man-eating tiger. But as I would find out soon, the hunt here is for something more sinister than a deadly beast; *Shapod Shoney* falls more squarely under the category of the supernatural, with horror as its subgenre. The target audience for this graphic novel, consequently, excludes anyone below 18 years because of its graphic and gory imagery, the use of alcohol and cigarettes, and the explicit language in the dialogues.

The story revolves around two main characters. First, we have the paranormal investigator, Shiplu, who would go to the farthest corners of the world for a taste of the supernatural. It is his passion more than his profession. On the other hand we have Jamshed, an SAF gold medalist shooter, with a problematic and tragic past. Quick to lose his temper and quicker to draw a gun, he accompanies Shiplu on several of his paranormal adventures. This time, however, Shiplu asks for his help in investigating a case in a remote village in Rangpur. Little does Jamshed know, it will be the most terrifying one yet.

The characters here are flawed and operate in different shades of grey. The novel explores how human beings are capable of diabolical deeds with dark motivations that even the deadliest animals don’t seem to have the stomach for.

The source material was first published in 2016 as a standalone novel. A doctor by profession, Nabil Muhtasim has gained popularity as an author from a very young age for his brilliantly imaginative work. Some of his fan-favourites include *Bajikor*, an espionage thriller trilogy (Batighar Prokashoni, 2017), sci-fi thriller *Bibhong* (Abhijan Publishers, 2019), and of course, the first *Shapod Shoney* itself.

Muhtasim’s plots characteristically have climactic twists, and the way he misleads a reader from predicting them correctly is rewarding, which was something I enjoyed in both *Shapod Shoney* and *Bajikor*. He is also adept at describing intense action scenes, and writing great dialogues in line with each character’s personality. Most of all, though, I enjoy his intricate plot lines written with a nuanced simplicity, which makes it easier for any reader to follow through.

In *Shapod Shoney*, for example, the chapters alternate between Shiplu and Jamshed’s points of view, and while in Jamshed’s chapters the story progresses in a linear fashion, Shiplu’s sections jump back in time through flashback sequences to several of his paranormal cases. The juxtaposition allows us to witness both protagonists in their elements, their diverging personalities, motivations, and reactions, while experiencing some blood-curdling sub-plots along the way. With the author himself hailing from Rangpur, there is generous use of local dialect delivered by the inhabitants of the village in Rangpur where our two protagonists move.

Adrian Anik, meanwhile, has been a prominent artist in the comic book industry for a while now, and is known mostly for his

work in the horror comic book series, *Pishach Kahini* (Dhaka Comics). Talented as he may be, making a 400-page graphic novel can be a back-breaking and time-consuming process, but it was Anik himself who approached Nabil, who graciously agreed. What you will observe in the novel is his passion and determination to tell a story through his art. In the black and white colour palette, Anik’s talent shines the brightest when it comes to the anatomical detailing of the ‘body horror’ elements and in conceptualising nightmarish creatures.

There are, however, rooms for improvement—spelling mistakes in the prose could have been avoided, and the facial expressions on some panels could have been more nuanced in certain scenes. In one chapter, for example, the detailing of facial expressions—jaw lines, nasolabial folds, frown lines, etc.—are entirely missing.

Nevertheless, reading this graphic novel has made me feel optimistic about our local comic book industry. There are so many great novels in Bangla literature, and Graphic Bangla’s *Shapod Shoney* is one huge step towards adapting them into visual work that should reach a wider—and more varied—readership. After all, as Art Spiegelman, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Maus A Survivor’s Tale* tells us, “Comics are a gateway drug to literacy”.

Kaisar Kabir is a pop culture enthusiast and a former radio show host currently earning dough in the content industry.



ILLUSTRATION: SHEHZIL MALIK

INTERVIEW

Pakistani artist Shehzil Malik illustrates ‘Sultana’s Dream’

SARAH ANJUM BARI

A designer and illustrator whose work focuses on human rights, feminism, and South Asian identity, Pakistani artist Shehzil Malik has just created an artwork based on Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s novella *Sultana’s Dream* (1905). Daily Star Books editor Sarah Anjum Bari got in touch with Malik to discuss her motivations and inspirations for the artwork.

When and how did you first encounter *Sultana’s Dream*?

My younger sister is my go-to person when I need to talk about my feminist ideas (and she also studied literature), so she knew I’d love this story! Other artists have also drawn *Sultana’s Dream*—there is a brilliant rendition by Durga Bai in the tradition of Gond tribal art; as well as a collection of stunning linocuts by Chitra Ganesh. I was curious with what I would come up imagining a South Asian science-fiction feminist utopia!

What about the language did you find “fresh and subversive”, as you mention on your social media?

I think I felt it was subversive and tongue-in-cheek because even though it’s now 2022, we in Pakistan are still arguing over whether girls should be educated; whether it’s wrong to marry girls off when they’re underage; whether a woman is capable to do a job or become financially independent; whether a good Muslim woman should step out of the house... it feels like the world that Begum Rokeya was escaping, is still the world I live in.

And the pandemic has only exacerbated the situation for women. The few freedoms women had—in terms of leaving the house and having a support network—in many ways were snatched away, and the incidences of domestic violence worldwide have skyrocketed. In the early phase of the pandemic, everyone was instructed to stay home, and while the women easily complied, many men refused. It was unthinkable for them to have their basic freedom taken away, and yet they still don’t understand why women are angry and dream of a different world.

How did you conceive of the physical landscape of Lady Land, the feminist utopia Begum Rokeya imagines in her novella?

I was inspired by Indian and Persian miniature paintings and their use of space and time. These paintings often show many interactions happening in a single artwork, and take the viewer through multiple perspectives and scales to tell a story. There’s no one hero in these paintings, but it gives the viewer the chance to find their own meaning in the artwork. I think combining these pre-colonial methods of artmaking with a story from colonial India—and then drawing the artwork digitally in post-colonial times—it makes me excited to see the possibilities!

As an artist who works with feminist and South Asian identity, what place do you think *Sultana’s Dream* holds in the contemporary landscape of South Asian women’s lives?

I think everyone in South Asia (and beyond) needs to know this story! It is so ahead of its time, and talks about the kind of technology we still don’t have! It presents a sustainable and ecological future (beyond screens and the kind of dystopian science fiction that is popular today) and really gets to the heart of why we want labor-saving devices and how we can structure our work and relations with others so that it brings us peace.

OPINION

Growing up with Narayan Debnath’s ‘Nonte-Phonte’

RASHA JAMEEL

On a particularly slow day, all I have to do is sit down with a *Nonte-Phonte* comic book, and my troubles will lay forgotten to one side. I imagine it’s the same for most people who are fans of Narayan Debnath and his fictional characters from the small town of Paschimpara, West Bengal.

The unique illustrations coupled with quirky and colourful Bangla vocabulary that the author undoubtedly carried over from his childhood in Shibpur, Howrah, all make for a wholesome reading experience every time one picks up a copy of these books. As a fan, I’m eternally grateful that Debnath opted to stray from their family business of gold retailing, after dropping out from the Indian Art College in the 1940s, to pursue freelance work in art and design. While he illustrated plenty of children’s books throughout the 1950s, it wasn’t until 1962 that he released his first comic strip, *Handa Bhonda*, in *Shuktara* magazine.

The *Nonte-Phonte* series—and the witty humour with which Debnath weaved together his stories of small-town kids and their proclivity for pranking unsuspecting targets—started out in 1969 as a comic strip in the *Kishore Bharati* magazines.

It all went down in an unnamed boarding school for boys in West Bengal, where the eponymous Nonte and Phonte were best friends studying and residing together as juniors alongside their constantly-scheming senior, Keltu Kumar, all under the strict supervision of the boarding’s hostel superintendent sir, Patiram Hati. Over time, I even began to regard one of my cousins as the real-life counterpart of the fictional Keltu from the series—such was the comics’ influence on my childhood.

Narayan Debnath succeeded in offering me that which no other comic book writer-illustrator could: comfort in my personal identity. As a Bangladeshi with roots in West Bengal, the *Nonte-Phonte* comics



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

were a source of bibliotherapy for me, providing me with insight into the lives my ancestors had led. The more I read about that small town of West Bengal, the more I began to understand how the inhabitants

of said region carried themselves and interacted with each other. Having never visited my ancestral lands myself, the *Nonte-Phonte* comics helped me draw a parallel with the stories I’d always heard from my grandparents. I eventually came to have a better understanding behind the little things that made up parts of my cultural background, from items of food to slang from a bygone era.

What added to this sense of comfort was that, unlike most children’s books that were widely available at the time, the *Nonte-Phonte* comics didn’t come with an obvious set of moral codes for children to follow. Instead of lecturing kids on how to be a kid—which was a rather prevailing tone in the didactic children’s books in the 1990s-2000s, such as *Winnie the Pooh*, *Dr Seuss* and *Beatrix Potter*—Debnath truly understood what it meant to be a child. There were no apologies made for playing a prank on an elderly member of the community, or for stealing homemade

food from classmates.

There were other books by Debnath that left a mark on my childhood. *Handa Bhonda* (Shuktara), a spiritual predecessor to *Nonte-Phonte*, set in the same universe, and *Bantul The Great* (Shuktara), which gave Bengalis our own version of Superman in the form of Batul. As an adult, however, it is with *Nonte-Phonte* that I relate to the most, picturing myself wandering about the streets of Paschimpara with hostel superintendent sir Patiram Hati in tow, or gorging on the cream cakes and chicken kabiraji from Abar Khabo Restora.

The wordsmith and artist behind this childhood-defining comic books is no more, having breathed his last on January 18, 2022. His legacy will continue to live on through his iconic creations.

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