

FEATURE

Why don't Bangladeshi books reach international award shelves?

Kaiser Haq, poet, critic, and Professor of English at ULAB, says, "I think the main reason for the lack of wider recognition of Bangladeshi books on the international prize circuit is that we do not produce a steady stream of titles. The chances of high quality books appearing would be greater if books were appearing in greater numbers".

USRAAT FAHMIDAH

I was elated when Shehan Karunatilaka won the 2022 Booker Prize on October 18 for *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida* (2020). It's been a momentous year for South Asian writing. The novel lays bare the complex politics, and tragedy of Sri Lankan turmoil. Additionally, Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* served as the first Hindi language novel to bag the International Booker Prize, translated to English by Daisy Rockwell. The prizes felt like a long overdue recognition of the vibrant literature that the South Asian community has produced for decades.

"But when can we see our household names winning these prizes?" I wondered.

The Booker Prize, one of the most prestigious literary prizes, is awarded each year to the best novel written in English and published in the United Kingdom or Ireland. The long-listed books enjoy an immense power in increased international publicity and book sales—bringing focus on both the author, the publisher, and the community being written about.

When asked about the reasons for Bangladeshi titles not reaching these award longlists, Sudeep Chakravarti, a South Asian

beyond those cramped and overrated islands".

This puts us at a disadvantage when big publishers like Simon & Schuster, Penguin Random House, HarperCollins, or Hachette Book Group don't operate out of the country despite having a huge reader base. Their presence here or their buying rights to books published here would help distribute Bangladeshi books in other territories like the UK and Ireland to reach a larger audience, potentially making them eligible for international awards. However, the downside would be that local publishers would suffer a further loss.

Elaborating on this issue, Kaiser Haq, poet, critic, and Professor of English at ULAB, says, "I think the main reason for the lack of wider recognition of Bangladeshi books on the international prize circuit is that we do not produce a steady stream of titles. The chances of high quality books appearing would be greater if books were appearing in greater numbers".

He adds, "Given the relatively small size of our literary output in English, it is surely heartening that our writers have won a few prestigious awards or have been shortlisted. Adib Khan and Tahmima Anam won the Commonwealth Writers Prize; Monica Ali was shortlisted for

Press, Bengal Books, Nympha Publications, and writers ink have been publishing promising works of literature. The response to the Dhaka Lit Fest in recent years has shown that readers are interested in the anglophone literary scene. We just haven't been able to retain that market locally and grow it steadily.

In recent years, Shabnam Nadiya has translated the works of Shaheen Akhtar (*Beloved Rongomala*), Mashiul Alam ("Milk", "The Meat Market") and Leesa Gazi (*Hellfire*) among others, effectively introducing these authors' works to the international community. Mashiul Alam's "Milk" won the 2019 Himal Southasian Prize, and the author is currently completing his stay as a writer-in-residence at the prestigious Iowa International Writing Program 2022.

India's recent growth in translated works has also proven valuable, with Arunava Sinha translating Akhteruzzaman Elias's *Khwabnama* (1996) for Penguin India, and V Ramaswamy and Shahroza Nahrin translating the works of Shahidul Zahir for HarperCollins India. The latter have also published *The Taxi Wallah and Other Short Stories* (2021), a collection by *Babu Bangladesh* author, Numair Atif Chowdhury. In 2019, Nadeem Zaman was long-listed for the coveted DSC prize for South Asian Literature for *In the Time of the Others* (2018).

While many of these authors live abroad—some, like Monica Ali or Tahmima Anam, identifying as British Bangladeshi authors—locally based authors including Saad Z. Hossain, Shazia Omar, K. Anis Ahmed, Neamat Imam, and Farah Ghuznavi have presented their works of Bangladeshi literature to a broader set of English reading audiences. Critic, translator, and academic, Professor Niaz Zaman, has translated and anthologised several notable collections of Bangladeshi short stories, with Sohana Manzoor, Assistant Professor at English and Literary Editor at *The Daily Star*, bringing out her own anthology last year.

"Bangladeshi writing in English is evolving rapidly but the potential is far from achieved. There are several reasons", Sudeep Chakravarti explains.

"Bangladesh is largely Bangla-centric. That kept it away from growing with the advantage, say, provided by English being a link language as in India. In India, there has also been amazing growth in translations, both in quantity and quality, from Bangla and several other Indian languages".

"Tomb of Sand" (2018), which recently won the International Booker, was translated from Hindi into English. Translations into English routinely win top literary awards in India. There are excellent translations of Bangladeshi short stories and novels originally written in Bangla, but the numbers aren't yet what they could be", he says.

Unless we retain a local market for these growing numbers of English readers in the new generation, we cannot supply a steady stream of quality literature and steadily grow an international reader base—ultimately carving our place and creating a demand in the international market.

Usraat Fahmidah is a freelance journalist and writer. You can reach her on twitter at @usraatfahmidah.

THE SHELF



SARAH ISMAIL BARI & CLARKE HEAP

It's October and I am a basic human. You say October I say Spooky Season! When I decided to write this article, my initial thought was to go through my Goodreads and my memory bank and find some master creepy books to recommend. I realised fast enough that my creepy book bank is significantly less well stocked than my weepy. Thus, I decided to bring in a partner—a bibliophilic associate if you will—who is truly dedicated to the horror genre to help me out with this compilation. My husband Clarke, who grew up in the old English countryside (the perfect setting for any horror novel in my book), pulled out the big guns and helped me co-write this list.

I Am Legend (1954) by Richard Matheson is a part-vampire, part-post-apocalyptic novel. Robert Neville is the last surviving human in a world populated by the undead. He spends his nights holed up in his house in a Los Angeles suburb listening to his former neighbours (now vampires) shouting for him to come outside and join them. Matheson delivers a thoroughly chilling and intelligent novel that deals with themes of human loneliness, resilience and a masterful ending that leads to Robert's famous conclusion "I am legend".

Who Goes There? (1938) by John W. Campbell Jr is a genre-bending creature-horror where scientists operating in an isolated research station in Antarctica discover a wrecked spaceship buried beneath the ice. The shape-shifting creature that is unleashed from the spacecraft replicates any life forms it comes into contact with. This premise leads to a tale of intense claustrophobia, survival and paranoia as friends turn foes. At 161-pages this is a quick and fantastic commute-read that caters to sci-fi as well as horror lovers.



DESIGNS: MAISHA SYEDA

Mumin's story is then told entirely in the third-person-limited point of view—an effective method which ensures chills running down even the bravest spines. There is so much more to this book than the average run-of-the-mill possession drama; Rahman uses magic, adventure and even some wizardry to bring his story to the most satisfying end.

compelled me to leave my lights on at night for a whole weekend—and I do not scare easily. Rahman's central character Mumin, a teacher of Islamic studies in a district high school, is summoned by the headmistress to help liberate her young daughter from an apparent demonic possession. This compels Mumin to face his own demons from the past and the trauma that he has been on the run from all his life.

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Botol Bhoot (1989) by Humayun Ahmed. No list is complete without including a Humayun Ahmed horror-comedy! It wouldn't be a mighty exaggeration to say that for many of us Bengali readers, *Botol Bhoot* would rank among our all-time favourite childhood reads. The central character Humayun, loosely based on the author's own childhood, is a thorough backbencher whose academic prowess is underwhelming at best. He befriends the class-topper Munir, who promises to include Humayun in his plans of obtaining a ghost in a bottle from an apothecary. They meet Robi nana (an homage to Tagore) who hands them the "ghost" in a tiny homeopathy vial and thus begins the life of miracles for Humayun and Munir. For any parent struggling to get your kids to read Bengali books, I highly recommend *Botol Bhoot* to keep them engaged and yearning for more.

So, there you go, a carefully curated and fool-proof list of horror books that comes from a home of bibliophiles (who often do not agree on each other's choice of reading). May the month of October bring upon you the magic of goosebumps, shivers, and chills down your spine. When the hair on the back of your neck rises, please do think of us. Yours Truly.

Read a longer version of this article on Halloween, October 31, on *The Daily Star* website and on *Daily Star Books'* Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

INK FOR DAYS

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is the creator of the Sehri Tales challenge, and a fairly enthusiastic Inktober participant. Abak Hussain is a writer, a Sehri Tales veteran, and is trying out the Inktober challenge for the first time. The pair sit down for a friendly chat about Inktober as a medium for storytelling.

ABAK HUSSAIN AND SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

AH: I want to start with the basics for anyone who hasn't yet come across this phenomenon. For a lot of people, ranging from professional artists to folks who have never before drawn so much as a stick figure, October is an exciting chance to jump into Inktober. I'm doing it this month for the first time, and you have been doing it for a bit longer. Can you tell us, essentially, what Inktober is?

SFA: Inktober is an annual month-long art challenge created in 2009 by *New York Times* best-selling illustrator Jake Parker. Basically, it's a prompt-based challenge where you look at a creative prompt every day of October, and draw something in an ink-based medium (like with markers or pens). The idea, I guess, is to do it every day for a whole month to really build confidence, and to chart your progress over that time.

AH: When you asked me to give it a shot, I wasn't sure at all. I scrolled through the previous Inktober hashtags and was absolutely floored by some of the work, and didn't know if I belonged, but then I stopped comparing myself to others and just went for it and something interesting happened. I started to get



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

better (I won't kid myself, I'm still pretty bad), but I could really feel the growth, not just in terms of drawing, but using a new medium to tell stories. It's sort of like your very own Sehri Tales, but with pictures.

SFA: I'm glad you feel that way. While Sehri Tales started out as a different thing, when I decided to open it up to the public and set about tweaking the format, I did draw a lot of inspiration from Inktober. Interestingly, I hadn't yet attempted Inktober at that point, but as someone who doodles a lot—especially

when stuck in a boring meeting—I have long known that if you doodle even a little every day, you are bound to see some growth in your skills. And with Sehri Tales, I personally felt my writing get more confident as I did it every day, so I figured, why not take some of the principles of this widely successful art challenge and apply it to what I hope will be a widely successful flash fiction challenge and see if it works? Happy to report that the format is a good fit. Coming back to Inktober, I'm happy that you didn't let the intimidatingly

professional entries deter you from drawing your own.

AH: Pictures are really the most basic form of story-telling, aren't they? I imagine our ancestors sat around fires doing shadow theatre. They painted on cave walls long before writing came along. Of course, then came along movies and TV, which combine pictures and words to tell stories.

SFA: Having done both Sehri Tales and Inktober, do you feel that you've learned a few things from Inktober that you could apply to your writing, or are they just completely different?

AH: Different but same. With writing the prompt is just a word, right? So you can weave a piece around it however you want, as long as the prompt is in there. With Inktober, it's probably best kept more direct and literal, like if the prompt is owl you're best off just drawing an owl rather than thinking too much about how to interpret that word and what direction to take it in. You make a stylistic choice of course as to what kind of owl to draw, hence the story-telling aspect.

Read the rest of this conversation on Friday, October 28, on *The Daily Star* website and on *Daily Star Books'* Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.