

ESSAY

THE VAMPIRES of Bangla literature



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

One night, after a series of supernatural occurrences to protect Gadadhar, the narrator and Amulya Babu uncover an unsettling truth: Mrs Choudhury had died, 15 days after her husband's death in another town, years ago. And though I won't spoil the ending, this story featuring the titular character as the undead prying on unsuspecting villagers is definitely worth a read.

SABRINA SAZZAD

Pale, aristocratic, seductive forces lurking in the dark—when we think of vampires, we often perceive them through a western lens, as works like *Dracula* (1897), *Interview with a Vampire* (1976), or even the sparkling creatures from the infamous *Twilight* series (2005) primarily influence the way we think of vampires. While Bangla literature offers a treasure trove of monsters and spirits of the dark, seldom do vampires make their appearance.

When I was a child, I would often urge my grandmother or ma to read fairytales to me, or even horror stories from Bangla folklore, when I wanted to be lulled or scared to sleep. Then, as a teen obsessed with (sparkling) vampires, I had always been fascinated with vampiric lore like many, but there was a lack of these undead entities in our folktales and literature, as far as I knew. Although *Thakumar Jhuli* (1907), the collection of Bangla folklore collected by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder, offered a glimpse into the many unique ghosts of Bangali culture, vampires were notably missing there too.

Certain beings in our folklore, however, share similar qualities with them. For example, *Betal*, a demonic spirit from *Betal Panchabingsati* (1858) by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and the *pishach*, which is a shape-shifting creature haunting cemeteries and feeding on carcasses, mirror vampiric attributes in certain ways.

Still, known examples of vampires in classic Bangla literature are scarce, although several translated versions of Stoker's *Dracula* abound. In fact, oftentimes the character of *Dracula* is perceived to be synonymous with vampires in Bangla books. Many adaptations and translations of *Dracula* in Bangla are widely available, notably by Kazi Sarowar

Hossain and Anish Das Apu, written in the early 2000s. However, this leaves a number of 20th century Bangla classics featuring original vampires rarely discussed.

Hemendrakumar Roy is rather well known for introducing vampires to Bangla literature through his short stories, "Mrs Kumudini Choudhury" and "Bishalgarer Duhshasan" (1949). In "Mrs Kumudini Choudhury", the narrator, who happens to be an aspiring author, visits a new place in the hopes of writing a novel and meets his neighbours Amulya Babu, a retired professor (who has an odd fascination with the occult); Mrs Kumudini Choudhury, an older widowed woman; and Gobinda Babu, a doctor recruited by the railways. During a discussion between Professor Amulya Babu and the narrator regarding the occult, Mrs Choudhury joins them, her eyes flashing peculiarly.

As the story progresses, a series of deaths linked to severe anaemia grips the village. The last, gravely ill patient is none other than the gardener's son, Gadadhar, who appears deathly pale—his energy drained—and his caretaker is found to be none other than the seemingly kind and motherly Mrs Kumudini Choudhury. One night, after a series of supernatural occurrences to protect Gadadhar, the narrator and Amulya Babu uncover an unsettling truth: Mrs Choudhury had died, 15 days after her husband's death in another town, years ago. And though I won't spoil the ending, this story featuring the titular character as the undead prying on unsuspecting villagers is definitely worth a read.

Another work by Hemendra Kumar Roy, "Bishalgarer Duhshasan" (1949), features Rajput Rudrapratap Singha as a counterpart to Stoker's *Dracula*, while Indianising other characters such as Johnathan Harker to Benoy, who happens to be an apprentice attorney, and Van Helsing to Abinash Babu. The story closely

mirrors Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, with the writer taking a few liberties with character traits and locations here and there. Roy also uses Rudrapratap's Rajput lineage and position as a Raja to address the shared interests of the ruling Indian class and British oppressors. Much like *Dracula* in Stoker's novel, who represents an invasive threat, Rudrapratap arrives to prey upon Calcutta, once the capital of British India which lost its status to Delhi, in the same year the story was set, in 1911. The novel's protagonists, Benoy, an apprentice attorney, and Abinash Babu, an amateur spiritualist, must fight against Rudrapratap as he preys on Benoy. Rudrapratap shapeshifts into a bat to sit on a jackfruit tree outside Benoy's house every Saturday at dusk, and sets eyes on his prey, just like *Dracula* who preys on Harker, thereby adapting the setting to fit our context. This story therefore depicts colonial dynamics while portraying the imperialistic vampire as an outsider who exploits regional resources.

Another take on *Dracula*, "The Disembodied Spirit" (Mandal Book House, 1967) by Sunil Kumar Gangopadhyay was published 18 years after "Bishalgarer Duhshasan". Set in Assam in the 1960s, Gangopadhyay interchanges the infamous Transylvania with the remote regions of Assam, where Bishalgarh is ruled by Kritanta Barma, the counterpart of Count *Dracula*. This adaptation too takes some liberties; for instance, Ashoke is married with a child, which adds a traditional South Asian layer to his character, thus distinguishing him from his Western counterpart, Harker, in Stoker's original. As Ashoke grapples with advances from Krinata and his subordinates, his family, particularly his young son, Alope, becomes vulnerable to the vampire's influence. In order to save Alope and stop the spread of vampirism, Ashoke joins forces with a group of men, including Tarun (the Arthur Holmwood counterpart), Arup Kar (John Seward), Sanatan Mitra (Quincey Morris), and Shankar Chakrabarti (Van Helsing). Together, they must embark on a mission to defeat Kritanta Barma and prevent the vampire from taking over the village.

Today, modern authors are using the vampire trope and creating new stories in light of Bangladeshi culture. Authors such as Anish Das Apu and Kazi Sarowar Hossain actively wrote various compilations and original stories featuring vampires or *pishach* in the early 2000s. Published by Sheba Proakshoni, some notable collections which include Bangladeshi vampires and feature deshi characters include *Horror o Pishach Kahini* (2006), *Pishach Kahini: Pishacher Pallay Norshinghorur Pishach* (2005), and *Pishach Kahini Volume: Dhushor Atonko* (2006), edited by Anish Das Apu.

Although several authors of classic Bangla literature have at one point or another written vampire-centric books, many have been lost to time. I continue to ponder the fates of Bangla vampire tales lost to the dark, doomed to obscurity and shadows forever.

Sabrina Sazzad often spirals into a loophole of research unrelated to her actual studies. You can info dump at her email, sabrinazzad07@gmail.com.

POETRY

My heart is a gilded oligarch

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

My heart is an oligarch:

A staunch, pot-bellied, knuckle-cracking middle-aged man lounging carelessly, lazily in his sitting room with his limbs spread out on a settee

before a tall, gilded mirror.

Disfigured and discolored from the hours inside his great house, away from even a single taste of the sun,

he pops a ripe grape into his small mouth and carefully follows the droplet of juice snaking its way down his chin with his yellowed eyes; but he—

he feels no urge to wipe the stain of purple away.

In fact, he feels no sense of urgency at all even though

the grandeur of the mirror, of the mansion, of his weighty clothes

are on fire.

The fire is a strange shade of gold but not the kind you'd imagine to see behind your eyelids when you look directly at the blazing sun.

It's the gold that the oligarch might see reflected off of the rows and rows of wheat planted outside his window should he choose to look—

it's the gold that he might notice coating the edges of his great looking-glass should he allow himself to notice.

But his eyes don't deign to fall upon the flames which have consumed the orderly rows of wheat and ingested the golden-hued serfs and are inching their way

towards his silk-covered toes. No,



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

he stares only at his withered countenance, and at the purple droplet which itself is now standing still and

waiting for the fire.

I wonder why he can't feel the heat: it must be suffocating him by now, right? I mean,

the flames have reached the top of the mirror and are licking away at the fleeced edges of his tights and the gold is disintegrating and dazzling teardrops are

on the face in the mirror, distorting it, carrying its features away in a stream down the length of the glass until the only discernible part about it are the

two yellowed eyes, looking, unflinching and unbothered, into themselves with dispassion.

The oligarch waits until the eyes are captured, roped into the gold, and the droplet on his chin has evaporated into the crowded air before

looking down at the bundle of grapes in his hands and taking another bite.

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POETRY

Jogphal

FARUQ MAHMUD

Healthy water-bodies are sunk by envy-blind waste's outburst

All former fames of air break down
Like lost love the mind of sky is broken into pieces.

I see the lament-wet trees

Who are condemned to die without crime

When obscure laws are in vogue

To strangle birds' throats.

Blossoming doesn't make flowers

Rusts accumulate on grass blades.

Theories heavy as hills

Questions, anachronistic tree-policy

What's their use to man and nature?

Best is the policy—a permanent good—

If we can cover up the greedy tongues

With delicious fruit trees and

Multitude of cheerful flowers.

Sun's rays in the cloud are waiting for us

Crop's fresh glow, divine-good sunny-future.

Translated from Bangla by Md. Abu Zafor.

Faruq Mahmud is a contemporary Bangladeshi poet. He has received a number of awards namely, Sukumar Ray Sahitya Puroshkar in 2009, Kabi Uttam Das Sriti Puroshkar in 2017, and Arani Sahitya Puroshkar in 2017, among others. His last volume of poetry *Andhakarer Utsho Hote Utsarito Alo* came out in 2023.

Dr Md. Abu Zafor is Associate Professor, Department of English, Jagannath University.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY

Unfaithful month

UMMA HABIBA

I spent the last night with your lover
In her 52 hands are 10 fingers only
Beneath her lips grasses are growing wild
The cholesterol shoots up when the lover is vegan
He hisses words on a May night
Those who are rejoicing the news of
Rohingya rehabilitation
Do not know that here evening is synonymous to
Article 144
You can't even kiss your child now
I have told your lover
To send me news when the sea gets heavy
I told her
Men live on sex but not on love

Translated by Quamrul Hassan.

Umma Habiba is a poet and theater activist from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her debut poetry collection, *Ghashe Ghashe Roktoful*, was published in 2022.

Quamrul Hassan is an author, poet and an MFA Candidate of Creative Writing and Translation at the University of Arkansas.

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