

THE SHELF

The nine faces of Durga and books that reflect each avatar

AGNILA ROY

The scent of marigolds hangs heavy in the air, mingling with the rhythmic clash of cymbals and the murmur of crowds waiting for a glimpse of the goddess. With the festive season returning and the air thick with dhaak beats, it is impossible not to feel the excitement of Durga Puja. Here are nine books that echo the spirit of Durga's nine faces, each reflecting the qualities the goddess embodies.

strength lies not in dominance but in grounding oneself and facing reality.

Brahmacharini: Mother of devotion and penance
Of Women and Salt (2021)
Gabriela Garcia

She walks barefoot across rough ground, the beads of a rudraksha mala hanging by her fingers. Being the ascetic form of Durga, she is worshipped for her austerity and steadfast faith. What could be more

the embodiment of righteous anger, a reminder that sometimes the only way to face darkness is to confront it head-on. Have you ever felt that moment when fear threatens to swallow you whole, and you wish for a power within to rise and fight back? *Debi* channels this very energy through its haunting heroine, Ranu. Gifted—or cursed—with psychic abilities, Ranu can sense truths others cannot, a burden that isolates her yet gives her uncanny strength. The novel does not present her as

within himself. Just as Kushmanda animates the universe with her energy, Santiago's journey reminds us that embracing curiosity, courage, and wonder can turn ordinary life into something miraculous.

Skandamata: The mother of a warrior
Soldier Sailor (2019)
Claire Kilroy

Smoke curls from incense, drums beat in the distance. Amid the golden glow, she sits serene, her hands cradling her son Kartikeya as if the world's weight rests in her palms. *Soldier Sailor* reflects that same maternal power in an intensely personal way. Told as an inner monologue from a mother to her sleeping child, the novel plunges into the brutal, visceral war of early motherhood—the exhaustion, the isolation, and the seismic shift in identity that comes with raising a young child. Like Skandamata, the mother embodies strength through presence, guiding and nurturing silently. True courage, the book reminds us, often resides in these quiet, uncelebrated acts of love.

Katyayani: The fierce warrior
The God of the Woods (2021)
Liz Moore

The forest breathes around her, shadows twisting like lurking demons, yet she stands unmoved. Katyayani teaches us to summon courage, confront danger, and act decisively when fear threatens to paralyse us. *The God of the Woods* channels this same relentless spirit. When Barbara Van Laar disappears from her family's summer camp, the town and its residents are forced to reckon with long-buried secrets and moral dilemmas. As the story unfolds, each character must wrestle with the shadows within themselves—greed, fear, and guilt—mirroring Katyayani's call to stand firm and act against injustice.

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Kalaratri: Goddess of courage
Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead (2009)

Olga Tokarczuk, Antonia Lloyd-Jones (Translator)

Her skin gleams like a midnight storm, eyes blazing with fearless resolve, as she rides into battle with a sword that cuts through shadow and fright alike. She is the tenacious face of Durga who destroys evil energies and liberates those trapped by fear and attachment. Legends say she appeared when all else failed, her presence so intense that even the bravest trembled, reminding us that after every dark night comes a bright dawn. The novel channels that same audacious courage. It follows Janina, an elderly woman living in a remote Polish village, who begins investigating a series of suspicious deaths of local hunters. Alone, dismissed and considered eccentric by her neighbours, Janina relies on her sharp intellect, moral conviction, and fearless determination to uncover the truth.

Mahagauri: Goddess of purity
The Remains of the Day (1989)
Kazuo Ishiguro

Holding a trident and a damaru, she is the radiant form of Goddess Parvati after she cleansed herself of the darkness and ashes from her ferocious battles as Kalaratri. Mahagauri teaches us to release anger, resentment, and attachments that cloud the mind. Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* captures this same quiet strength through Stevens, an English butler whose life is shaped by rigid devotion to duty and an unwavering pursuit of perfection. As he journeys across the countryside, revisiting memories of loyalty, missed opportunities, and unspoken emotions, the novel lays bare the subtle, sometimes painful costs of a life lived in restraint.

Siddhidatri: The bestower of supernatural powers
Taranath Tantrik Shomogro (2019)
Bibhutibhushan and Taradas Bandyopadhyay

She sits serenely on a lotus, guiding seekers toward wisdom, insight, and mastery over the unknown. She teaches that true strength is not just in conquering forces outside but in understanding the unseen. This essence comes to life through the enigmatic figure of Taranath, a tantric practitioner living on the edge of the natural and supernatural. The collection includes stories of Taranath Tantrik and the novel, *Alachakra*, where he recounts eerie, thrilling encounters with spirits and mystical phenomena. Like Siddhidatri, Taranath navigates the delicate balance between fear and knowledge, showing that actual power comes from insight and discernment.

Agnila Roy is hoping Goddess Durga will lend her an extra pair of arms this year, preferably before puja ends.



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA, ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Shailaputri: The daughter of mountains
Arronyer Dinratri (1968)
Sunil Gangopadhyay

Like the mountain she is born of, Shailaputri teaches us to remain rooted, unshaken by the storms that swirl around us. Have you ever longed for a stillness so profound that it anchors you even when everything around you threatens to collapse? As the reincarnation of Sati, she embodies inner fortitude. *Arronyer Dinratri* reflects this spirit in an unexpected way: four men flee Calcutta's bustle for the forests of Palamau. They arrive with arrogance, carrying the weight of their urban education like a badge. Yet the wilderness does not bow to them. It strips them bare and humbles their certainties. What begins as an escape turns into a confrontation with their own fragility, showing that true

humbling than a goddess who teaches us that true strength is not in grandeur, but in the grit to keep walking when the path feels endless? Spanning generations of Cuban and Mexican women, the novel traces migration, addiction and motherhood—each woman carrying her own burden of struggle yet pressing forward with unrelenting will. Like Brahmacharini, these women demonstrate that perseverance transforms struggle into an act of devotion—a radical form of love and strength.

Chandraghanta: Destroyer of demons
Debi (1990)

Humayun Ahmed

When Parvati wields a bell-shaped crescent moon upon her forehead, she becomes the warrior goddess whose roar scatters demons and whose presence terrifies evil itself. She is worshipped as

a polished warrior but as a fragile, complex woman who wrestles with her gift while navigating scepticism and the raw edges of human fear. Like Chandraghanta, Ranu embodies a paradox of vulnerability intertwined with ferocity.

Kushmanda: The cosmic creator
The Alchemist (1988)
Paulo Coelho

The goddess whose radiant smile gave birth to the universe. She embodies the light that awakens possibility in even the darkest corners. *The Alchemist* mirrors this celestial force. Santiago, a shepherd boy, leaves the comfort of his flock to chase a treasure that feels both mythical and inevitable. Across scorching deserts and vibrant markets, he deciphers omens, meets alchemists, and learns that the magic of creation lives not only in the world but also

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Bangladeshi theatre: A sociopolitical study

Review of Dr. Babul Biswas' Bangladesher Natoke Shomajbastobota (Nalonda, 2020)

ABDUS SELIM

Theatre in Bangladesh has never been merely a form of entertainment. It has always served as a mirror to society, reflecting its contradictions, struggles, and aspirations. In his seminal work, *Bangladesher Natoke Shomajbastobota*—adapted from his PhD thesis—Dr Babul Biswas takes on the ambitious task of exploring how Bangladeshi theatre has engaged with social realities throughout history and, in particular, in the years following independence. The outcome is an illuminating study that is at once scholarly, analytical, and profoundly relevant to contemporary cultural discourse.

At the outset, Dr Biswas situates his work within the context of a nation in flux. He reminds us that independent Bangladesh was born in the crucible of communal tension, hegemonic domination, and imperialist designs. Alongside these structural forces came new forms of consumerism and religious dogmatism that reshaped social consciousness. Against this backdrop, theatre emerged not only as a cultural practice but also as a form of resistance and a means of social commentary.

In this book, eminent playwright Selim Al Deen, among others, is credited with framing theatre in sociological and historical terms, and it is within this lineage that Dr Biswas anchors his own analysis.

The book is organised into five substantial chapters, each addressing a distinct periodic study in Bangladeshi theatre. The opening chapter provides a historical sweep, tracing cultural practices from the Pala period through the medieval, colonial, and postcolonial eras. This long historical arc reveals how shifts in political and religious authority left lasting imprints on literature

and theatre studies. Particularly striking is the analysis of how Western dramatic traditions were adopted during British colonial rule, gradually altering Bengali theatre's orientation. Dr Biswas carefully links these transformations to questions of class, domination, and identity, laying a solid foundation for his later arguments.

The second chapter examines pre-independence theatre, from the pre-British to Pakistani periods. Here, theatre is shown as a site of cultural assertion against colonial and authoritarian structures. The Language Movement of 1952 and subsequent cultural struggles are presented not merely as political events but as catalysts for theatrical innovation, demonstrating how theatre carried forward the fight for identity and autonomy.

It is in the third and fourth chapters, however, that the book truly comes alive.

The scope of the book is admirably wide. By juxtaposing Bangladeshi theatre within global processes of colonialism, consumerism, and hegemonism, Dr Biswas shows that the nation's cultural struggles are neither isolated nor unique.

Focusing on the Liberation War and the turbulent years that followed, Dr Biswas explores how theatre absorbed and represented the crises of a nation. Plays



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

such as "Ekti Michhil" are highlighted as pivotal texts that encapsulate the birth of Bangladesh, the trauma of war, and the vision of a new society. Liberation War-themed plays are reviewed in detail, with attention to how they reflected not only nationalist aspirations but also the disillusionment that followed. Post-independence theatre, he argues, became an arena where the manipulation of religion, the rise of authoritarian rule, and the spread of consumerism were critically examined. The realist framework adopted by playwrights is shown to be deeply connected to the lived experiences of a society grappling with betrayal, instability, and shifting values.

Perhaps the most compelling contribution of this book lies in its fifth chapter, which foregrounds women in theatre. Dr Biswas argues that the promise of equality and

empowerment for women remained largely unfulfilled in post-independence Bangladesh. Instead, women were subjected to new forms of oppression under the twin pressures of religious conservatism and capitalist consumerism. Through the analysis of three plays, he demonstrates how women's struggles for freedom, recognition, and dignity were represented on stage. Importantly, he also highlights the role of female playwrights in reshaping post-independence theatre, ensuring that women were not merely subjects but also creators of cultural narratives.

Methodologically, Dr Biswas employs a rigorous approach. His reliance on textual analysis, archival documents, supporting books, and interviews with experts allows him to weave together literary criticism with

social science perspectives. The application of new theoretical frameworks lends freshness to the study, while his careful attention to both historical continuity and contemporary change ensures a balanced perspective.

The scope of the book is admirably wide. By juxtaposing Bangladeshi theatre within global processes of colonialism, consumerism, and hegemonism, Dr Biswas shows that the nation's cultural struggles are neither isolated nor unique. Rather, they are part of a larger narrative of resistance and adaptation that spans continents. Yet, he never loses sight of the local, grounding his analysis in the particularities of Bengali nationalism, cultural practice, and historical experience.

What makes the book especially timely is its relevance to today's Bangladesh. As the nation continues to grapple with religious extremism, gender inequality, and consumerist values, theatre in Bangladesh remains a vital space for reflection and critique. By showing how our theatre has historically responded to such challenges, Dr Biswas implicitly calls for its continued role in shaping a more just and conscious society.

In sum, this book is an invaluable addition to the field of theatre studies and cultural history in Bangladesh. It will appeal not only to scholars and students of literature and theatre studies but also to anyone interested in the intersection of culture, politics, and society. Dr Biswas has produced a work of both academic rigour and cultural significance, one that ensures Bangladeshi theatre is recognised not only as art but as a vital record of social reality.

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