

ESSAY

Ghosts in the secretariat: Mapping the Bangladeshi Gothic

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It is a Tuesday afternoon in Dhaka. Cars are honking, fumes are rising. A banker named Anirban rear-ends another car—typical for the city. Until he steps out. He sees that the other driver has been dead for what seems like days but is still moving. And he wants to talk.

This, we might call, for lack of a better term, the Bangladeshi Gothic. Its haunted spaces look nothing like the crumbling castles of its European ancestors; instead, terror emerges from Dhaka flyovers, government offices, and village lanes. Its protagonists are not knights or clergymen but bankers, doctors, freelance exorcists, and secret state agencies working for the PMO. Its theological ideas are drawn not from folklore alone, but also from scripture and the lived rituals of Islamic practice.

The books discussed in this essay reveal a certain movement taking shape across different settings, tones, and generations. Some are urban thrillers, some domestic hauntings, some rural exorcism tales, and some theological adventures. Yet all ask the same questions: what happens when institutions fail, when justice is delayed, and when the past refuses to remain past?

This literature uses the supernatural to ask unsettling questions about justice, history, and power. It imagines



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Bangladeshi writers are shaping something rare: an indigenous occult procedural that treats faith, folklore, and institutional power as moving parts of the same engine. They deploy demons and exorcism not to escape reality, but to argue with it—about justice, history, and who we become when the law fails us.

institutions capable of confronting evil—and in doing so, quietly points to the ones we already live with. These books summon ghosts that carry the weight of 1971, of war criminals who prospered, and of wounds that official narratives failed to close. It creates antiheroes who operate in moral grey zones because easy answers no longer convince us.

Take, for instance, the opening of Aamer Ahmed's novel *Pappinjar* (Batighar Prokashoni, 2019). No single work announces these ambitions more vividly—and it does so in a traffic jam. Horror no longer waits for midnight; it appears in rush hour and demands to be taken seriously in broad daylight. But *Pappinjar* is not alone. Elsewhere, an aristocratic lineage is cursed by an

entity from the Garo Hills—embedding horror within regional history and geography. In another, rural politics are entangled with black magic and vengeful jinns, where power operates as much through the unseen as through the visible. On the surface, these are genre thrills, but beneath them lies something more serious: a deliberate re-situation of the Gothic within distinctly Bangladeshi social and spatial realities. That repositioning—from night to noon, from myth to municipality—signals a literary movement taking shape. Bangladeshi writers are shaping something rare: an indigenous occult procedural that treats faith, folklore, and institutional power as moving parts of the same engine. They deploy demons and exorcism not to escape reality, but to argue with it—about justice, history, and who we become when the law fails us.

Steering away from the traditional crumbling castles, Bangladeshi Gothic has discovered its own architecture of terror, and it looks suspiciously like the government real estate. In *Pappinjar*, Ahmed introduces the Directorate of Special Investigation (DSI)—a secret agency under the Prime Minister's Office tasked with handling, recording and archiving all supernatural phenomena. The DSI maintains archives and library, relic

rooms, and a Medical & Preservation Room. Enchanted artifacts, like the Maddiya min Hattusha dagger or the Goyju Hua (Demon Detection Box), are studied under fluorescent lights for containment, analysis and use. The administrative detail is meticulous: reporting hierarchies, jurisdictional turf wars, etc. It is Marvel's S.H.I.E.L.D. by way of the Bangladesh Secretariat—and we recognise it because we already know the parameters (as well as the failures) of this system. The question here then arises: if an institution must be invented to confront ancient evil, what does that say about the institutions we already possess? In a country where bureaucratic failure is a daily lived experience, watching a fictional agency function smoothly almost seems utopian.

Set against post-1971 Bangladesh (perhaps during the '90s), M J Babu's novel *Djinn* (Grantharajjo Books, 2022) follows Sajed, and his wife Tareen, who adopt a young girl named Mahaa after being unable to conceive—an intimate decision that soon draws them into an unexpected and supernatural journey alongside Muazzin Hafej. As the supernatural takes hold, beliefs are tested, and a cryptic adventure unfolds. Mohaimin Arefin's novel *Porompura* (Iha Prokash, 2022) turns horror domestic: a wealthy family's

mansion becomes a prison of inherited guilt, with curses passed down like heirlooms and death arriving before every wedding. With the last heir targeted to end the Rahman family's legacy, the question lingers: will they break the curse, or become its next victims? Nabiha Nupur's novella "Ekhan Bhoor Tarano Hoy" (Satirho Prokashona, 2025), moves terror to rural Bangladesh, where black magic becomes social technology—petty, vindictive, transactional. The village becomes a haunted house, every relationship potentially a trap.

These are just a few. What unites these settings and creates one of the characteristics of Bangladeshi Gothic is their ordinariness—the horror emerges from traffic jams, tenancy disputes, fluorescent offices, and villages thick with rumor. This grounding makes the supernatural incursion more threatening. When the uncanny rubs shoulders with everyday life, it stops being a foreign concept that we find in western literature.

Then there is theology. Much mainstream western horror rarely attempts the meticulous classification of the demon or djinn. But M J Babu through his novel *Djinn*, has seemed to create a theological textbook disguised as a thriller. Here, we learn about ifrit

and marid djinns, their habitats and relationships with humans, and the ethics of exorcism. The book delves into origins, creation theories, types of black magic, signs of possession, and methods and precise Quranic verses required for protection against the dark arts. These elements are built into the narrative framework in an engaging way. Many Bangladeshi readers approach these books with a lived, intimate relationship with the spiritual world—djinn are not merely metaphors but familiar beings named in the scriptures, discussed in sermons, and whispered about in family stories. "Ekhan Bhoor Tarano Hoy" similarly portrays ruqyah (Islamic exorcism) with clear research, blending ancient wisdom with contemporary storytelling. The rituals feel real because they are: drawn from practices still observed, prayers still recited. This theological sophistication distinguishes the genre from mere entertainment.

This is an excerpt. Read the full essay on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature* websites.

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INTERVIEW

Faith, patriarchy, and resistance: Banu Mushtaq on 'Heart Lamp'

MOHAMMED FARHAN

Banu Mushtaq, an Indian writer who writes in Kannada language, was awarded the International Booker Prize in 2025 for "exploring the lives of those often on the periphery of society" in her collection of short stories, *Heart Lamp* (And Other Stories Publishing, 2024). The collection dominantly focuses on the havoc wrought on Muslim women by the Muslim men and their ensuing plight. Taking a dig in *Granta* magazine at what he sees as the lopsided portrayal in these stories, Thomas Meaney writes: "*Heart Lamp* could have been titled 'The Bad Deeds of Muslim Me'." However, some of the stories realistically flag the fraught questions about the ingrained issues of marriage, religion, and ignorance in the Muslim community. In this interview, Mushtaq talks about the Booker-winning collection and her journey of becoming a novelist.

When did it first strike that you should write fiction, and what was the first piece you wrote?

The realisation that I should write fiction did not happen as a sudden flash. It arrived quietly, like a whisper that insists on being heard. The very first piece I wrote was a short story titled "Naanu Aparadhiye?" ("Am I the Culprit?"). It was published in 1974 in the weekly supplement *Prajamata*, a reputed Kannada literary platform at the time.

When I wrote that story, I was moved by a single idea, just one burning question in my heart. I wrote it down and then,



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

strangely, my mind became completely blank afterwards. The story simply rested with me for a long time; I did not know what to do next. At that stage, I had no literary circle, no mentor, not even the vocabulary to understand something as simple as the instruction to "write only on one side of the paper." There was no one to guide or correct me.

Later, during a personal visit to Bengaluru, I happened to notice the nameplate of the editor of *Prajamata* while walking on the street. With a mix of innocence and courage, I stepped in, introduced myself as a writer, and asked him how one should send stories for

publication. He was amused, but he guided me with remarkable kindness. I rewrote my story exactly as instructed and sent it. Then began the long wait—one year of checking, hoping, and slowly letting the anticipation settle in my heart.

So, my beginning in literature was not just about writing, it was about patience, innocence, learning without guidance, and holding on to a quiet belief that words find their way, even when life takes us elsewhere.

What would you like to say on the affinity between religion and patriarchy as it subtly reflects in the character of Abdul Khader in the story "Fire Rain"?

When we speak of religion and patriarchy, we are not speaking of faith itself, but of the structures that have settled around faith. In "Fire Rain", the character of Abdul Khader, the mutawalli of the mosque, precisely carries this layered complexity. The mosque is a sacred space, but even sacred spaces are not immune to the social hierarchies that shape our everyday lives.

What I try to express, in my writing and in my lived politics, is that patriarchy is not a single-faced enemy. It operates through many doorways, religion, domestic relationships, caste power, media influence, and political authority. It can look respectable, even pious. It can speak softly, quote scripture, and claim moral purpose, yet it works to diminish women's agency, intellect, and presence.

So, when we see Abdul Khader asserting authority in the name of religious propriety, what truly speaks is not Islam, but patriarchy wearing a religious mask. The mosque, therefore, is not an exception. No institution—religious or secular—is free from these power dynamics unless we consciously interrogate them. The struggle, then, is to reclaim these spaces, so that faith does not become a fortress of control but remains what it is meant to be: a refuge of justice, compassion, and dignity for all.

Suffering of children in a fraught marriage is another often ignored problem that you have explored in the story "Heart Lamp", where the character

of Salma embodies the suffering of a child. How do you look at this issue?

In our society, child rights and child psychology are among the most ignored aspects. We often assume that children are mere spectators to the conflicts unfolding around them, as though they are too young to absorb emotional harm. But children do not just witness pain, they inhale it. In a fraught marriage, the child becomes the silent corridor where every unspoken argument echoes.

In "Heart Lamp", Salma is not merely a character; she is a metaphor for all those young hearts who are forced to grow up in the shadow of adult failures. Her silence is not emptiness; it is a language of deep wounds. I wanted to show that when a family fractures, it is the child who gathers the broken pieces with bare hands.

As a society, we talk about children as the future, but we rarely protect their present. We forget to ask what the quarrels, the neglect, the emotional storms are doing to their sense of self. Children deserve dignity, emotional safety, and the right to be heard.

This is an excerpt. Read the full interview in *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature* websites.

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