BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC NOVEL

Retelling mythology through comics in Dhaka Comics'

'THE STORY OF DURGA'

SADMAN AHMED SIAM



ILLUSTRATION: NAFISA AFREEN MEGHA

Durga Puja has been one of the most significant festivals in Bengali culture for centuries, evolving through the ages. It has taken different forms in response to different events, and each mandap tells a different story of the community that has built it. The history of Durga Puja and the mythology behind it have been told and retold in diverse forms, some becoming cultural icons, such as Akashvani's radio programme Mahishasurmardini. Numerous literary works have centred on Durga Puja, and *The Story of Durga* (Dhaka Comics, 2026) makes a praiseworthy contribution to that legacy through the art form of comics. The comic book was illustrated by artist Arindom Kundu Ayan and edited by Kaushik Majumdar.

The comic book tells the story behind Vijaya Dashami. It begins with Mahishasura and how he received a boon from Brahma that no man or god could ever defeat him. With that blessing, he conquered kingdom after kingdom, finally defeating Indra, the king of the gods, and taking Amaravati, the capital of Swarga, where the gods dwell. Humiliated, Indra returns to Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and complains about Mahishasura. In response, they create a goddess named Durga, as the boon granted Mahishasura invincibility against men and gods, but not against a woman. Durga, in turn, receives ten gifts from ten gods, each symbolising a fundamental characteristic of the god who presents it. In a ten-day battle with Mahishasura, she finally defeats him and severs his head. The day Mahishasura is killed is celebrated as Vijaya Dashami. That is why Durga is also known as Mahishasurmardini, the slayer of Mahishasura.

The story is simple, yet it has captured the attention of Bengalis for centuries, and they have carried it in their hearts. It has been written from different perspectives, and scholars have attempted to decipher its meanings from different angles. Still, it continues to generate new interpretations. The misogyny inherent in Mahishasura, his failure even to consider that a woman could defeat him, ultimately leads to his demise. Durga's victory has symbolised the triumph of good over evil for centuries, inspiring countless individuals not only to seek spiritual freedom but also to embrace political resistance. One prominent example is Kazi Nazrul Islam, who, in his famous poem "Anandamoyeer Agamane", celebrated Durga as a force of resistance against British colonial rule. The poem led to his arrest on sedition charges. Such is the influence of Durga and her story on Bengali culture.

In this context, Dhaka Comics' rendition of the story deserves special praise. There have been relatively few comic books exploring the mythological origins of Durga Puja, and Dhaka Comics' edition is splendid in its artwork and storytelling. Although short, the 22-page comic captures the story in its entirety. It is refreshing to see Dhaka Comics retain its signature artistic style. While the characters are drawn in a manner that pays tribute to their traditional depictions and remains faithful to the mythology, the illustrations also incorporate a distinctly modern style.

The battle and transformation scenes deserve special mention. The different battles between Mahishasura and the gods, and between Mahishasura and Durga, are vividly depicted. The action unfolds sequentially in a manner that could easily be adapted into a short animated film. The transformation scenes showing Mahishasura changing from a buffalo into an elephant, or assuming a half-buffalo, half-human form, are equally fascinating. The artist handles these sequences excellently, making them particularly captivating for readers.

Considering the long legacy of Durga Puja and its impact on Bengali culture, Dhaka Comics took on an enormous responsibility when it attempted to retell a story that has been revered by Bengalis for centuries in a form in which it is not traditionally told. But the experiment fulfils its promise and makes a successful contribution to the Durga Puja canon. Hopefully, it will inspire more artistic interpretations in the future, from more voices and perspectives.

Sadman Ahmed Siam, *as the name suggests, is indeed a sad man. Send him happy quotes at: siamahmed09944@gmail.com.*

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

When the grotesque becomes ordinary in Mashiul Alam's world

Review of *'The Meat Market: Ten Stories and a Novella'* (Eka, 2024) by Mashiul Alam

NOORA SHAMSI BAHAR



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

In the titular story of Mashiul Alam's *The Meat Market: Ten Stories and a Novella*, translated from Bengali by Shabnam Nadiya, a murdered man watches his own body become a meal for the people he loves. At the local meat market, he witnesses his own slaughter, decapitation, skinning and dismemberment, before parts of his body are sold to his brother-in-law, cooked by his wife and relished by his unsuspecting family. The intimacy of a shared meal thus becomes an act of cannibalism. The horror lies not only in the desecration of the dead man's "carcass" but also in the domestic rituals surrounding it: his family eats without knowing what it is consuming, making nourishment inseparable from an unspeakable violation. Elsewhere in the collection, too, the body remains vulnerable to the appetites of others. What makes these stories so disturbing is their refusal to confine such horrors to a remote, fantastical universe. Reality and nightmare become the warp and weft of narratives rooted in recognisable social relations and the precarious lives of people whose suffering does nothing to interrupt the world around them. In this, Alam's imagination finds a kindred spirit in Mojaffor Hossain's *Meet Human Meat and Other Stories* (Moving Words, 2025), as both authors blur the boundaries between the grotesque and the recognisably real, using the macabre and the bizarre for sociopolitical commentary.

In "Milk", the collection's opening story, which also won the 2019 Himal Southasian Short Story Prize, hunger is not an abstraction but a force that dictates the rhythm of existence. Agricultural labourers reap rice, sleep on straw in tin-roofed shacks, eat rice with legumes and green chillies, and return to the fields. Their lives unfold through a relentless succession of physical tasks, "cutting, threshing, boiling, and husking the rice harvest", while their hunger remains insatiable: "they just wanted to eat, eat, and eat". The narration reproduces this repetition, making the reader feel the weight of labour rather than simply observe it. The story's cruelty extends beyond human suffering, too. When a frightened dog runs between haystacks, apparently having committed no offence other than nourishing a toddler who had somehow survived on mud and rice water, the father, Salimuddi, brings the heavy back of a hoe down on her head. The blow falls within the same material landscape as harvesting and eating, without a dramatic pause to distinguish cruelty from the daily demands of survival. Hunger, exhaustion and violence become inseparable from bodily existence.

The violence in Alam's stories ranges from intimate fantasies of revenge to extrajudicial killing and mass complicity. In "The Hands of the Man of Light", a child imagines breaking his gambling father's fingers: "He would throw the horrible man flat on his back in the yard, and then climb onto his chest, and then he would break all his fingers, crack crack crack..." In "The Underpass", Kabirul is forced to accompany three unknown men through Dhaka's hellish yet familiar cityscape, eventually witnessing an extrajudicial killing in which a man is ripped apart by his legs. Around this spectacle, the bizarre and macabre accumulate: monkeys act as masseuses, a ghost sits at a sales centre's front desk, and bats with balls of flame for eyes fly overhead. The incongruity transforms the city into a world where the absurd and the horrific coexist with the everyday. By the time Kabirul awaits the blade, his throat taut with anticipation, the question of why he must die remains unanswered. In "Field Report from Roop Nagar", visceral gore unfolds with the relentlessness of a serial-killer film as a young woman's throat is slit and her body consumed by the men who abduct her, while the entire town falls into a deep, mysterious sleep. The scene recalls Sleeping Beauty, except that no magic explains the town's slumber, no one rescues the damsel in distress and there is no happy ending. The collective sleep invites a reading beyond the uncanny: justice, too, seems to have fallen asleep, leaving abduction, murder and cannibalism unchecked.

Alam's supernatural intrusions deepen these social horrors without reducing them to straightforward allegories. In "Horse", a child recounts a dream in which he strikes a ghost on the head, only for cockroaches to pour out of its cracked skull, an image of grotesque absurdity delivered in the same matter-of-fact voice that carries the collection's more recognisable realities. In "The Cuckoo Keeps Calling", a rickshaw puller named Madhu is beaten by his owner's goons, while the police demand hefty bribes to turn a blind eye and dispose of his body, even though he is still alive. Meanwhile, in his village, three ghosts descend upon his wife and a potential lover, "eating" the woman while repeatedly smashing a brick against the man's skull. Madhu's ordeal exposes the familiar machinery of exploitation and institutional complicity; the ghosts bring another register of horror into the intimate space of village life, where brutality assumes a different, yet no less disturbing, form.

For the unsettling continuity between the grotesque and the ordinary to survive in English, the translation must retain not only the strangeness of Alam's imagery but also the linguistic and cultural textures that anchor his imagined world in everyday Bangladeshi life. Nadiya's translation does precisely this, resisting the impulse to explain away or smooth over the unfamiliar. In "Horse", Dadi remembers her husband as "pretty", retaining the gender-neutral quality of the Bengali "shundor" even when the English adjective sounds unexpected, while "horse eggs", the literal translation of the Bengali idiom for nonsense, resists the familiarity of the English equivalent, "bullshit". Elsewhere, in "The Hands of the Man of Light", the working-class pronunciation "'eady one two three" preserves the rhythms and social inflections of Banglish speech rather than standardising it as "Ready, set, go." Nadiya also lets the everyday vocabulary of Bangladesh enter English without extensive explanation: "chotpoti", "fuchka", "jhalmuri" and "singara" remain the names of familiar street foods, while "Dosto", "Chachu", "Dulabhai" and "Dadu" retain the nuances of address and intimacy that English equivalents might flatten. Even onomatopoeia resists complete assimilation, from "Hyat! Hyat! Hyat!" in "The Cuckoo Keeps Calling", used to shoo cows away, to "phat", the sound of a cleaver striking in "The Meat Market". These choices preserve the particularities of speech, sound and social life in the English text, allowing the language to retain its cultural specificity and historicity, even as the stories lay bare the cruelty embedded in Alam's world.

Ultimately, Alam's amalgamation of social realism, the grotesque and the supernatural exposes the cruelty that familiarity can render invisible, from the exploitation of the vulnerable to institutional complicity. Nadiya's translation preserves the cultural particularities of this world without smoothing away its strangeness. What remains with the reader is not simply the revulsion these stories provoke but the unsettling realisation that the wall between their imagined horrors and the realities we inhabit may be a porous membrane rather than a concrete stronghold.

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