ESSAY

The hungry women

RANIA FATEMA TUI



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

The power would go out around nine, as it did on most evenings of our childhoods, and the whole household would drift onto the veranda or rooftop with a hand fan and a plate of cut fruit. Somewhere between the first mosquito coil and the second round of tea, a grandmother would lower her voice. Do not whistle after dark, she would say. Do not answer if someone calls your name from the tamarind tree. And if a voice asks, through its nose, for a little fish, do not look back.

Nobody asked why the voice wanted fish. We were too busy being frightened.

It is a question worth asking now. The women who haunt Bengali folklore—the daini, the petni, the churel, the rakkhoshi and the shakchunni—are usually filled with horror, a shelf of things that go bump in the delta at night. But their stories read side by side, and a different pattern surfaces. These women are frightening not simply because they are monsters, but because their stories circle around hunger, deprivation and the threat of a woman who wants more than she is permitted to have.

Think about who ate last in the kind of household these stories grew up in. In some Bengali households, the choicest fish and meat went to guests and male family members, while women ate later or made do with less. Widows in some communities also faced restrictions on their diets, sometimes giving up fish and meat altogether. These practices varied across time, region and household, but they reveal how appetite could become a matter of social discipline.

Folklore has always been good at making the invisible visible. Sometimes, it gives deprivation a face, a voice and a pair of backwards feet.

If this tradition has a spine, it is the daini.

The daini is the woman blamed for what the community cannot explain. A child falls ill, a cow stops giving milk, a family's luck turns, and suspicion settles on someone already living at the margins. In some tellings, she is old, widowed or isolated, a woman without the protection that comes with belonging to a household.

Her supposed power is frightening, but so is the ease with which it can be assigned to her. Calling someone a witch transforms uncertainty into accusation. The community gets a culprit, and misfortune acquires a face.

The daini is imagined as powerful enough to harm an entire household, yet vulnerable enough to be cast out by it. Her story asks who gets blamed when things go wrong, and why a socially isolated woman can become a more convenient explanation than circumstances themselves. Sometimes, the monster is not the person who threatens the community, but the person the community has decided it can afford to threaten.

The petni, by contrast, arrives with a request.

In many Bengali tellings, she is the nasal-voiced ghost who trails a night traveller and begs for fish. The details vary, but the request is ordinary. Why fish? Why not revenge, gold, or a human life? The ghost wants something that might have appeared on a dinner plate.

In some Bengali households, widows have historically faced restrictions on what they could eat, including fish and meat. The petni's appetite does not establish a direct connection to these practices, but it makes an evocative comparison possible. What if the ghost's hunger reminds us of a woman whose ordinary pleasures were restricted while she was alive?

She asks for so little that her desire seems almost innocent. Yet she must approach the living as something uncanny to express it. Her hunger survives the body that might have been disciplined into going without. Perhaps the most unsettling thing about the petni is not that she wants fish, but that even after death, she is still asking.

The churel is more disturbing because her body becomes the site of the horror.

In many tellings, she is a woman who dies during pregnancy or childbirth, her feet turned backwards so that her tracks deceive anyone attempting to follow her. Other versions give her different histories, but the childbirth narrative carries a particular unease. What happens when a woman dies in the very process through which her family and community expect life to continue?

In Bengali fairy tales, including stories associated with Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder's *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907), rakkhoshis threaten the security of the household through disguise, deception and appetite. In familiar versions, a monstrous woman assumes a trusted appearance, drawing close to the people she threatens. The danger lies partly in discovering that someone who seems to belong inside the home may actually be its predator.

Her backwards feet make the familiar body unfamiliar. They turn following into a trap, unsettling the ordinary relationship between movement and direction. Read alongside the story of maternal death, this inversion suggests a world turned wrong: the woman expected to give life instead loses hers, and her return becomes something to fear.

In some tellings, the churel is also sexually dangerous and capable of harming men. Her transformation from vulnerable woman to threatening ghost gives her a power she may never have possessed in life, only for that power to become another reason to fear her. The story cannot undo her death, but it can imagine her returning with the ability to frighten those who remain.

Then there is the rakkhoshi, who gets to do what the others cannot: eat openly.

In Bengali fairy tales, including stories associated with Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder's *Thakurmar Jhuli* (1907), rakkhoshis threaten the security of the household through disguise, deception and appetite. In familiar versions, a monstrous woman assumes a trusted appearance, drawing close to the people she threatens. The danger lies partly in discovering that someone who seems to belong inside the home may actually be its predator.

The rakkhoshi does not ask for a meal; she threatens to consume others. She turns the household's ordinary arrangements upside down. The woman expected to nourish and protect becomes the one who devours.

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

Rania Fatema Tui *is a writer and master of making simple tasks complicated. Powered by iced coffee and last-minute panic, she spends 10% of her time typing, 90% staring at a blank screen, and re-reading texts five times before sending.*

FICTION

Nazma's uncertain journey

KAMRUL AHSAN



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

After her second marriage fell apart, Nazma married off her 15-year-old son to her brother's 14-year-old daughter. She wanted to drive the emptiness out of the house by bringing in a new person and to bind her son to the home. Seven years ago, five years after her first husband had gone off with another woman, Nazma had married a second time. Among the drivers she cooked rice for at the mess, there was a van-puller named Asgar who lived there. In the gaps between her cooking, she would now and then exchange a few words of joy and sorrow with Asgar. Asgar would tell her about the breakup with his wife, and Nazma would tell him about the pain of losing her husband. Little by little, the two grew close, and at some point, they decided to marry. But Naimul could not stand the sight of his stepfather. He cursed his mother with the foulest words whenever he felt like it and stayed out of the house as much as he could. While still very young, the boy had fallen into bad company and drugs. Asgar, for his part, couldn't tolerate Naimul either. Caught in this snake-and-mongoose hatred between her husband and her son, Nazma was at her wits' end. Again and again, she felt it would have been better if she had never married. But she couldn't make anyone understand how empty she felt inside her own chest.

Nazma had been married for the first time at a very young age. The son was born soon after the wedding, and though he shot up quickly, Nazma herself had not yet grown old. So, by the very nature of youth, she'd had no choice but to marry again. When Asgar went back to his first wife two years later, Nazma took some comfort in at least this: that now, perhaps, her son would come back home. But having tasted the fun of the outside world, the boy's heart no longer settled at home. Nazma had asked around and got him a job at a big grocery shop. But every few days she'd hear that the boy's mind wasn't on his work, that he slipped away whenever he got the chance. Left with no other way, Nazma married her son off.

In the midst of this running about, Nazma also kept trying with all her might to bring her second husband back home. Even after Asgar had gone to his first wife, on paper and in writing the two of them had not been separated. So hope hung on in Nazma's mind: perhaps, somehow, by clasping his hands and feet, Asgar could be brought back.

But once her brother's daughter came into the house as her daughter-in-law, a different problem arose. The daughter-in-law found out that her mother-in-law worked in other people's homes. She had known that her aunt, now her mother-in-law, worked as an aya in an office, and there had been a little respectability in that. Nazma did do that job, but after evening she also cooked at a Madam's house, and this wounded the daughter-in-law's pride. She kept a sullen face all day and put her hand to no household work. This made no difference to Nazma. She did the work herself and fed her son and his wife. As long as her son stayed at home, her heart was full. But this arrangement didn't last either. Over a small quarrel, the daughter-in-law went off to her father's house. As a result, the son began making more and more trips between Dhaka and Brahmanbaria. Even after pleading with her brother, Nazma could not bring her brother's daughter back to her own home. Instead, her brother got the son into his grip and put him to work at a wholesale warehouse in Brahmanbaria.

Meanwhile, a child was born to her son. To see her grandchild's face, Nazma too had to rush between Dhaka and Brahmanbaria two or four times a month. Between her job and cooking at Madam's house, she could hardly manage. Friday was her only day off. Boarding the Brahmanbaria train on Thursday night, she had to reach her brother's house in the last hours of the night. This meant seeing the dark faces of her brother, her brother's wife, her son and her son's wife. But the sight of her grandchild's smiling face soothed Nazma's heart.

In the midst of this running about, Nazma also kept trying with all her might to bring her second husband back home. Even after Asgar had gone to his first wife, on paper and in writing the two of them had not been separated. So hope hung on in Nazma's mind: perhaps, somehow, by clasping his hands and feet, Asgar could be brought back.

But where would she find Asgar? If she called his mobile a hundred times, Asgar would graciously pick up once or twice. The moment he answered, he would pour out abuse, whatever came to his mouth: "You wh*re, why do you keep ringing my phone? Didn't I tell you I won't live with you anymore? Still, you keep tormenting me, why! Call me again, b*tch, and I'll give you a proper thrashing."

Asgar would cut the call. Still, Nazma kept calling, and calling. What else was there for her to do but call?

Translated from Bangla by Alamgir Mohammad. This is an excerpt. Read the full story on *The Daily Star* and Star Books and Literature websites.

Kamrul Ahsan *is active in every field of writing except poetry. Besides short stories, novels and essays, he writes television dramas and also translates.*

Alamgir Mohammad *teaches literature at the tertiary level. He has published 25 translation titles, including* Mrityukshuda *by Kazi Nazrul Islam and* New Normal and Other Poems *by Pias Majid,* The Portrait of an Adivasi Beloved *by Ehasan Mahmud and* Selected Letters *of Kazi Nazrul Islam.*