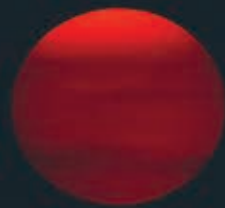


Forbidden Blood

Roudri Bandyopadhyay



Right before leaving she holds my hand and says, “Please don’t be mad at me, my dear one. I am not doing this to hurt you. These are the customs we have followed for ages. My mother taught me, and her mother taught her, and so on. I am just trying to pass on the custom, teach you what I have learned.”

I WAKE UP TO AN EARLY AUTUMN AURORA, wrapped in serenity and splendid morning colors. I walk out of my room and toward the balcony, and the sound of celebratory songs playing over loudspeakers outside my house becomes gradually louder. I stand at the balcony for a while, soaking in the absolute beauty that lies ahead of me; pearl-like dew drops on freshly bloomed flowers, foggy mist covering the green grass, and the air filled with the aroma of coral jasmines. I can smell the festivity in the air; I can hear it standing at our door step.

Every year in the Hindu month of Ashvin, which falls between September and October, India wears the most extravagant colors and dances to the rhythm of the *Dhak*¹ to celebrate the arrival of Goddess Durga. I run to my grandmother and wake her up from her deep slumber.

“Wake up, wake up, wake up, Nani!”² I vigorously shake her.

“What?” My grandmother jolts up on the bed.

“It’s the first day of Durga Puja. How can you forget? Tell me the story!”

It has been an unsaid ritual in all Bengali

families for ages. On the first day of Durga Puja, at 5 A.M. sharp, the radio broadcasts the show that tells the tale of Goddess Durga and her victory over the evil king Mahishasur, reading directly from the Upanishads.

Unfortunately, this happens only in the state of West Bengal where most Bengalis reside. For Bengalis like me, who live outside Bengal and may have been born and brought up there, grandparents are the radio. TV channels broadcast the story in the form of an hour-long re-enactment, but they definitely fail to capture the essence of the story that we get when we hear it from our grandparents’ sleepy voices.

Shaking her head, perhaps to bring back the story and shoo away the sleep, my grandmother starts, “Long ago, during the Vedic times, there lived an *Asura*³ named Mahishasur. He was power hungry, evil, and wanted to be immortal. So he started doing a deep meditation to impress and summon Lord Brahma, the creator.”

I listen to her attentively as if all this is new to me. And she clarifies each minute detail as if speaking to someone who has no idea of any of this.

1. *Dhak* is a [membranophone](#) instrument from South Asia, quite similar to a drum. It is usually played only from one side with two sticks. One end is coated to create a deeper sound. *Dhak* beats play an integral part in Durga Puja.

2. Maternal grandmother.

3. In Hinduism, there is no such concept as demon or devil. Nothing is perceived as pure evil. [Asura](#) is a category of superhuman demigods and/or power-seeking deities that can be good or bad. They are in constant battle with the gods who live in heaven. Each bad Asura has its own reason for hatred. Asuras with some remarkable quality are called *Adityas*, while the malevolent ones are called *Danavas*, meaning someone who is monstrous.

She continues, “Lord Brahma, pleased by Mahishasur’s devotion, dawns before him and offers him a boon. ‘Ask whatever your heart desires,’ he says. Greedy Mahishasur immediately asks for immortality. Brahma, however, declines his wish saying, *‘immortality is only for those who reside in heaven. Everyone who has been born will have to die. That is the rule of the universe,’* proclaims Brahma. Mahishasur, being the devious person he is, thinks of a boon that shall be equivalent to immortality. He asks, *‘O great Brahma! If I cannot be made immortal, then grant me the boon to be so powerful that no male—be it a man, god, or demigod, on this world or any another—is capable of killing or defeating me. I shall not be killed in the morning, nor in the afternoon, nor in the evening, nor at night.’”*

I sit back straight at the anticipation of what comes next. “And then?” I ask.

Grandma sighs and says, “Bound by his own words, Lord Brahma grants him the boon.”

“And then?”

“Then Mahishasur wreaks havoc all over the world. He massacres people of the mortal world, dishonors the women, and moves on to the kingdom of gods. He declares a war against the king of gods Indra, which he inevitably wins. Upon winning, Mahishasur throws all the gods out of the heavenly kingdom and takes the celestial nymphs and maidens as his hostages. This begins the dark rule of evil.”

Sitting upright and visualizing each scene in my head, I lean closer to Grandma and ask,

“What did the Trinity⁴ do then? Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva?”

“Well, the gods reach out for help from the Trinity, and Lord Vishnu, being the protector of the world, feels responsible for the situation. But there is only so much he can do, for he is also a man, and according to the boon, no man can harm Mahishasur, not even Lord Vishnu or Lord Shiva. Therefore, after much thinking, he suggests a solution. If a man cannot kill him, a woman will. All of us will combine our powers, summon the ancient divinity, and personify her⁵ as a goddess. She will be the slayer of this monster.”

Almost jumping in excitement, I say, “And then came the goddess!”

Laughing at my impatience, my grandmother says, “Yes. Then came the goddess, wearing a bright red saree with a body full of jewels. On her head she wears a huge crown of gold. Each god gives her a weapon. Finally, Lord Brahma comes and gives her a lion that is to be her escort animal; Lord Vishnu gives her a conch shell that she is to blow to announce the beginning of the battle; and Lord Shiva gives her a trident that she is to use to slay Mahishasur.”

Grandma takes a small pause, which I assume is to increase the momentary tension, and then continues, “And then begins the battle. Since the boon also said Mahishasur was not to be killed in the morning or afternoon or evening or night, Goddess Durga calls for battle at a time that is neither night nor morning, a time between 3 A.M. and 4 A.M. Mahishasur first

4. Hinduism has the concept of Trinity: Lord Brahma, the creator; Lord Vishnu, the preserver; and Lord Shiva; the destroyer. They are the authoritative divinities who run the universe.

5. In Hinduism, *Adi Shakti* is the ancient divine power or energy that divided itself to create the universe. This ancient power is perceived as female even though it doesn’t necessarily have a physical form. Goddess Durga and the various forms she takes (all different goddesses) are considered to be the embodiment of this ancient female divinity.



Beautiful [video](#) about the celebration of Durga Puja in Kolkata! A must see!

disregards the call. He laughs at the goddess because he thinks that when a man is incapable of fighting him, what can a woman do? But then, he decides to join the goddess in the battlefield. And can you guess why?”

I smirk and say, “I know! Because she is beautiful.”

“Yes, yes, yes! Typical man. He sees a woman whose beauty pierces through his eyes, and he wants to have her now. So, he goes. But he is unaware that he is facing an embodiment of the supreme deity, the ancient energy from whom all beings were created. She is as powerful as all gods combined together.”

Grandma goes on to narrate the war, and the movie in my head plays along with her words—the clanking of swords, blood, fallen soldiers, roaring lion, the angry goddess—all with the backdrop of twilight before dawn.

“And finally, she slays Mahishasur by stabbing him in his chest with the trident. Petrified, Mahishasur falls at her feet, but she stands straight, unmoved. A smile plays on her lips as she knows that she is invincible. She then earns the name Mahishasur-Mardini—the slayer of Mahishasur.”



Letting go a deep exhale, I finally relax. I have been hearing this story forever, and it still evokes enthusiasm as if it’s my first encounter with it. Even at the age of twelve, I am as excited as I was as a child. The feminist in me rejoices every time I hear this tale. The fact that I was given the name that belongs to this fierce goddess also adds to the pride.

THE DAY PROGRESSES, and I, with my head preoccupied with the story, try to do everything that is expected of me. But I don’t feel quite right. I feel a strange discomfort coming over me. My mom asks me to shower quickly so we can go to the temple where the nine days of celebration are going to take place, and I obey. I enter the shower, still uncomfortable, and I start removing the

multiple layers of clothes I am wearing. It is then that I notice my underpants are soaked in blood. Presumably fresh blood, judging by the look. I throw them away and notice blood running down my thighs. I panic, wanting to scream . . . but not screaming. I am convinced I am going to die.

Is this why I have been feeling sick, uncomfortable? I try to contemplate what this could be. Did I fall? Did I hurt myself? Is it my

bicycle? My underpants and legs look like the bloody battle was fought there. Shivers run down my spine.

I pace up and down the bathroom for a while but then put my clothes back on, wear a brave face, and step out. I walk up to my mother and say, “Ma . . . Ma this . . . , ” and I break into tears. My brave face washes away with tears when I see my mother standing in front of me. I run and hug her tightly and say, “Ma, there is blood.”

My mother hugs me back and says in her ever-so-soothing voice, “Where? Show me.”

I, feeling guilty for reasons unknown, show her my underpants. She stares at me for a moment and laughs and hugs me tightly. She says to me, “Don’t be scared, my darling. You have grown up. You are a lady now. This is just nature’s way of letting you know.”

Still scared and hugging her tightly, I ask, “What do you mean?”

“It means you got your period. You studied

it in school, remember? Menstruation. I get it. Your sister gets it. All women get it. You are a woman now.”

My mother takes me to my room and demonstrates how to tackle the situation. I then shower and get ready to go to the temple. I still feel uncomfortable, not with my body anymore but with this extra stuffing in my underpants. I’m all set to go to the temple, when my grandma comes out of her room and stops me.

“Wait. Where are you going?” she asks me.

“To the temple with Ma and Didi,”⁶ I say, confused, because she knows where I am going.

I see her hesitate a little, but then she speaks, “No. You cannot go. Why don’t you stay with me? Your father isn’t here, and I will

be alone. Stay with me, let your mother go.”

Surprised by what she said, I react, “What? You want me to stay at home on a festive day, the very first day of the festival? Not meet my friends, not wear new clothes, not



6. In India, elder sisters are addressed as Didi, not by their names. There is a broad custom that older relatives are not addressed by name; it is considered disrespectful. Therefore, every relation has its own category name, used specifically by those younger in age.

celebrate, and just stay here because you are not coming?"

She tries to convince me not to go, and I refuse to listen to her. I sense something suspicious. Grandma isn't someone who is afraid to be alone, certainly not in broad daylight. Furthermore, she would never ask me to stay home on a festive day. My mother comes out of the room and asks what the argument is all about, and I tell her. I expect her to speak in my support, but she doesn't. She doesn't speak at all. My grandma and mother exchange looks, and the three of us stand in silence. I call for my sister, for she is my last hope.

Dressed in new clothes, my sister comes out of her room. I tell her everything, and she instinctively rolls her eyes and throws angry looks at my mother and grandmother.

"Seriously! Are we doing this with her too?" she exasperates.

"Doing what?" I inquire.

"Go on, tell her," my sister says to my mom and grandma.

My grandma takes up the responsibility and explains. "My dear, women aren't allowed to enter the temple during this time. It's impure. You are impure during this time. You will pollute the goddess."

I stare at her in disbelief. I am impure? But I just showered and put on fresh new clothes. I am impure because something is happening to my body that I didn't even ask for?

My grandma immediately clarifies, "I am not saying this. This is known. Women have followed this rule for ages."

"Why wasn't I told this before? Why was all this hidden?" I demand an answer.

My mom says, "Because it wasn't proper to tell you any of this up until now. But now you know."

Tearing up, I say, "Where is Papa? I want to talk

to him. He teaches me the scriptures and he never taught me any of this. I want to ask him. How can I be impure? He always taught me purity comes from the heart. I want to talk to him."

As I try to walk away to find my dad, Grandma grabs my arm and pulls me back. With a hint of anger in her voice, she says, "You will tell your father about this? Have you got no shame? You are not to talk about this to any man. Not even your father!"

My sister protests and insists. "Enough of this! Grandma, she is coming with us. We will take care she doesn't enter the temple and doesn't touch the goddess's idol. I will make sure she stays outside the temple area. Don't make her stay in the house."

My mom agrees, and Grandma finally allows me to go, but on the condition that I will not enter the temple. I will pray from afar but not touch the idol or anything that is holy.

Right before leaving, she holds my hand and says, "Please don't be mad at me, my dear one. I am not doing this to hurt you. These are the customs we have followed for ages. My mother taught me, and her mother taught her, and so on. I am just trying to pass on the custom, teach you what I have learned."

I smile and reassure her that I am holding nothing against her.

We sit in the car and drive toward the temple. Throughout the journey I think only one thing: *If the goddess is a woman, then perhaps she bleeds too, just like me. Then why am I not allowed in the temple while she is? Are gods really that fragile that I am able to "pollute" them?*

I turn to my mother and ask, "Ma, if God created the world and all of us, if everything happens according to God's will, then women bleed because of God's will. Then how can this be impure? And why isn't the goddess impure?" ❖