

For Review



Nights of the Dark Moon is a collection of 13 dark folktales compiled from around Asia, with two bonus stories from Africa. Retold in the Gothic tradition known for its air of brooding mystery and chilling fear, the tales feature haunted places, ancient curses, supernatural creatures and desperate maidens. Ranging from the eerily thrilling to the pitifully tragic, the stories not only evoke dread and terror, but also longing, affection and sorrow. Some serve as cautionary tales, reminding us that there are monsters lurking among us in the real world.

A few of the tales are well known in their country of origin and have become part of the national folklore. Others are obscure folktales waiting to be discovered, perhaps long forgotten even in the places they originated from.

The folktales have been extensively researched to be the most complete version published. They are not simple retellings and even the familiar will appear strange and fascinating.

This spine-tingling collection features:

- The Haunted Bridge of Agi
- The Curse of Miryang
- The Tiger of Flower Hill
- The Shapeshifter of Co Lao
- The Temple of Rara Jonggrang
- Hang Nadim
- The Seven Princesses of Ulek Mayang

- The Strange Tale of Chief Naam
- Princess of the Bamboo
- King Vikram and Betaal the Vampire
- The Weeping Lady
- The Witchman
- The Curse of the Iroko Tree

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Tutu Datta



Nights of the Dark Moon

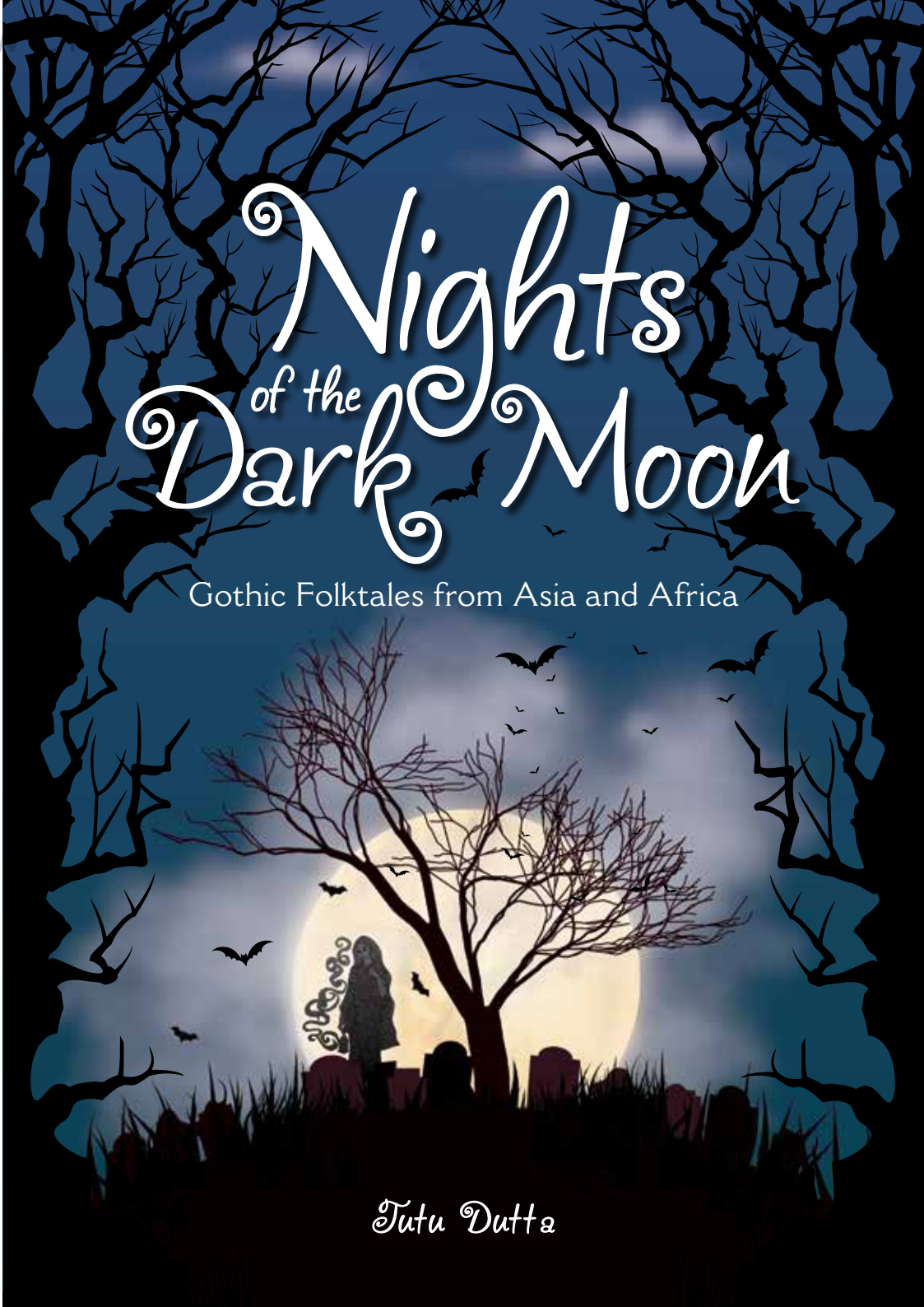


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Nights of the Dark Moon

Gothic Folktales from Asia and Africa



Tutu Datta



Nights of the Dark Moon

Gothic Folktales from Asia and Africa

Tutu Dutt



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CONTENTS

Preface	7
The Haunted Bridge of Agi	10
The Curse of Miryang	22
The Tiger of Flower Hill	36
The Shapeshifter of Co Lao	50
The Temple of Rara Jonggrang	62
Hang Nadim	78
The Seven Princesses of Ulek Mayang	90
The Strange Tale of Chief Naam	104
Princess of the Bamboo	120
King Vikram and Betaal the Vampire	134
The Weeping Lady	148
The Witchman	162
The Curse of the Iroko Tree	174
About the Author	184

The Haunted Bridge of Agi

A FOLKTALE FROM JAPAN





A GROUP OF young men were telling each other ghost stories one chilly autumn evening. Among them was a dashing young man called Yugiri, who had just been elevated to the rank of samurai earlier that day. To celebrate this auspicious occasion, his peers had decided to take him to the local teahouse to drink warm sake. They were all young warriors who had sworn their allegiance to the powerful *daimyo* of Omi province, Lord Ii.

Each of them took turns to recount the most horrific story he had ever heard, trying his best to outdo the other. Towards the end of the story-telling session, one of the samurai suddenly said, “Have you ever heard of a bridge called Agi no hashi? It’s located right here in Omi province. People say that the bridge is haunted so nobody uses it anymore!”

Another samurai who had also heard stories about the bridge, said, “It’s true! In the past, people used to cross Agi Bridge all the time. However, some years ago, people started disappearing; they never came home after stepping foot on the bridge!”

“That’s right! They say a frightful *oni* is lurking on the bridge!” added the first samurai.

At this point Yugiri, who had perhaps a little too much sake to drink, interjected, “That’s just an old grandmother’s tale! Anyway, I don’t care what kind of *oni* is lurking on Agi Bridge! I wager I can ride across the bridge and back without any trouble, even at the hour of the rooster!”

He paused and then added quickly as an afterthought, “That is, as long as I am riding his lordship’s best horse, the roan!” The roan was a magnificent animal and reputed to be the fastest horse in the province.

For a moment, everyone was silent, too surprised to say anything. Then they all started talking at the same time. “You’re a bold one to talk, aren’t you?” “Alright, let’s find out what kind of samurai you are!” “Are you mad or just plain stupid?”

One of them remarked, “Clever of you to specify his lordship’s roan since he never allows anyone else to ride it!” The group started egging him on and became quite boisterous and rowdy.

At that moment, Lord Li himself happened to pass by the teahouse on his way to his villa. He stopped his retinue to find out what the commotion was all about. His *hatamoto*, a trusted household retainer, went into the teahouse to investigate, and reported the wager to his lordship.

The *daimyo* was not impressed with Yugiri’s good sense and commented, “It seems to me that our young samurai is a trifle impetuous. Agi Bridge is a dangerous place and it is foolhardy to try and cross it, especially at sunset!”

“However, I have no objection to the use of my horse for

the wager if the young man decides to go ahead with it. Please inform the gathering about my decision,” he added calmly before continuing on his journey.

The message was immediately conveyed to the gathering. Everyone was delighted, except for Yugiri who was flabbergasted. He had never really expected the *daimyo* to loan his prize horse for such a reckless wager. “This is madness! I’m sorry I ever mentioned crossing the bridge!” he exclaimed.

However, the group of young men had reached a state of drunken frenzy and shouted at him, “Coward! Shame on you! Are you going to back down now?”

“It’s not that I’m afraid to cross the bridge!” Yugiri protested. “It’s just that I’m deeply ashamed if I seem to covet his lordship’s horse,” he tried to explain. In the end, he had no choice but to see it through. The gathering finally broke up and each returned to his quarters to rest for the night.

Yugiri had a restless night and woke up well before sunrise the next day. His comrades were occupied with their day-to-day routine, which involved honing their skills in horsemanship, swordplay and archery. A samurai had to be ready to go into battle in the service of his *daimyo*, a de facto warlord, at a moment’s notice. However, Yugiri had been excused from his duties to prepare for his wager. After his meal of rice, seasoned fish and seaweed washed down by green tea, Yugiri decided to meditate. This was difficult, as he had a lot of restless energy. However he felt it was important to try, as the practice of Zen

was as much a part of being a samurai as swordplay was.

Yugiri's attempt at meditation was interrupted by the stable boy, who had arrived with the roan. The young samurai turned his attention to the horse and felt a sense akin to awe at the sight of this magnificent animal. The mare's glossy deep red-brown coat shone like silk in the sunlight; beneath the coat, powerful, lean muscles were clearly delineated. But Yugiri had other plans—he smeared the horse's hindquarters and tail with grease to make them as slippery as possible. The coat was not as attractive as before but at least no demon would be able to grab hold of it.

Then Yugiri washed his hands and changed into his riding clothes and leather jerkins. He hair was tied into a neat ponytail under a headband. He decided to take his short sword with him and thrust it under his sash. Normally a samurai carried two swords, a short sword called a *wakizashi* and a magnificent long sword called a *dai katana*; in fact, the *katana* was an emblem of the samurai for only a samurai was entitled to carry a *katana*. But Yugiri decided that he would only carry a *wakizashi* today, and wore his hunting coat, as he wanted to be as light and agile as possible.

Before mounting the horse, he cinched the saddle on tight and slipped his wrist through the loop of the whip handle so that he would not drop it. Yugiri rode the horse around the courtyard to familiarise himself with its rhythm, being careful not to tire it. He was an excellent horseman; his boast about crossing Agi

Bridge was not mere bravado. He knew that if anyone could best the bridge and its demon, it would be him. Finally he was ready and rode out of the fortified courtyard of Hikone Castle, the abode of Lord Ii, and into the countryside.

By the time Yugiri reached the bridge, the hour of the rooster was fast approaching. The sun was just touching horizon but he had to cross the bridge quickly to return to the castle stronghold before nightfall. Some of his comrades from the night before were already waiting at the foot of the bridge to see him off. They cheered as he galloped towards the bridge.

Once on the bridge, he galloped at a furious pace. His heart was pounding as he fully expected a frightful apparition to pop up at any moment to bar his way. But to his surprise and relief, he reached the other end without any incidents whatsoever. Yugiri began to feel much more confident about himself; turning his horse around, he got ready for the ride back. By now, the sun was fast slipping below the horizon. As the horse was beginning to tire, the ride back was somewhat slower. Yugiri had the odd feeling that the bridge seemed much longer than before; in fact time itself seemed to be slowing down.

A woman, dressed in a green robe patterned with strange violet flowers, suddenly appeared on the bridge. She was leaning against the wooden post as if exhausted. Yugiri felt deep apprehension and mistrust towards her. However, as he drew closer, he noticed that she was slender and graceful. The woman was holding her elegant sleeve over her mouth, as

if in distress; only her huge dark, limpid eyes were visible.

Ever the gallant samurai, Yugiri slowed down his horse and the woman lowered her sleeve and smiled at him—she was wistfully beautiful. For a moment, he felt an overwhelming desire to stop and ask her if she was all right, and he very nearly did so. However, a voice at the back of his mind warned him that there was no reason for a woman to be alone on the bridge at that time of the evening! He steeled himself and rode on, looking straight ahead.

The woman was clearly upset when he rode past her without stopping and shouted at him in a shrill voice, “Stop! How can you be so heartless? Aren’t you at least going to stop and offer me a ride to the nearest village?”

He looked back at her and noticed with horror that her long, smooth black hair seemed to be alive; it was changing colour, swelling and thickening until it resembled a snarl of waterweeds. Her smooth pale skin was turning scaly and green, and her huge dark eyes were turning yellow. The worst part was her mouth, which was a wide red gash on her face, parted to show sharp, pointed teeth. She was shrieking at him, “Stop, you coward!”

His heart racing with terror, Yugiri whipped the roan to make it run faster. Then the horrid *oni* started to run after him, her kimono flying in the wind! Despite the tremendous speed of the roan, the creature almost caught up with the horse. But the horse’s tail and rump were too slippery for the demon to hold on to and Yugiri whipped her ugly clawed hands mercilessly

whenever she tried to grab his leg.

The demon suddenly made a leap and managed to grab hold of the bridle! In a heartbeat, Yugiri dropped the whip and drew out the *wakizashi*. He sliced off her hand with a single stroke of the sword; he did not even notice the black blood spilling out and the demon screaming in pain.

With his heart pounding in his ears, he galloped wildly until the end of the bridge was in sight. The demon stopped screaming and shrieked after him, “You may have escaped me this time, but I will surely eat you the next time!”

The samurai who were waiting for him saw Yugiri galloping down the bridge towards them at breakneck speed. They had not seen anything amiss as the setting sun was in their eyes, and cheered, “Banzai!” when he approached. They were astonished when the young samurai rode past them without stopping, his face white and his eyes wide with fear.

Gripped by wild panic, Yugiri did not stop until he reached his lord’s villa. Exhausted and trembling, he just managed to climb down from the horse and drag himself indoors. Delirious and still in shock, he had to be taken to bed and tended by his lordship’s servants. The *daimyo* left instructions that the samurai was not to be disturbed until he had fully recovered from his ordeal.

However, later in the evening, the *daimyo* called his stable boy to find out how the roan was doing. The stable boy reported that the roan was exhausted but in good condition except for some sharp scratches on its flanks. The boy had also brought an

item with him, wrapped in a rough cloth. When he opened it, Lord Li was shocked to see a green-skinned clawed hand inside.

A few days later, Yugiri was well enough to have an audience with the *daimyo*. As was customary, Lord Li was seated cross-legged on a cushion on a low platform and dressed in a formal black robe. On his head was a tall, black headgear. Yugiri sat on his heels on a kneeling cushion. The young samurai was impeccably dressed in a deep blue kimono; a patterned sash held his two swords in place. The *haori* he wore on top of the kimono bore Lord Li's own crest: a stylised orange blossom in a circle.

The *daimyo* started off by admonishing Yugiri for risking his life over a mere wager. Yugiri bowed low and asked to be forgiven for his rash actions. The *daimyo* then asked him what had happened and the young samurai recounted his harrowing experience on the bridge. The *daimyo* commented, "It appears there is an *oni* on Agi Bridge after all, or should I say a *nushi*, from your account. I have heard that the *nushi* are able to disguise themselves as beautiful maidens to waylay unwary travelers!"

He was asked to take several days leave and return to his mother's villa. Before dismissing him, Lord Li said, "However, a brave samurai, even a reckless one, deserves a good horse. I am therefore giving you the roan."

He paused and added, "The stable boy will also give you a box, which you are to burn the minute you reach your home and to bury the ashes."

Surprised and touched, the young samurai thanked him

humbly for such a generous gift. Bowing his head again, he took his leave. Yugiri rode home on the beautiful roan, quite pleased with the gift and the several *koku* of rice he had won from his friends in the wager. He was also carrying the small wooden box the stable boy had given him. When he reached home, he recounted the tale again to his horrified family and servants.

His mother immediately summoned a yin-yang diviner. The man exorcised the house and advised the young man to be especially careful when the anniversary of the day he encountered the *nushi* arrived. On that day, he was to observe strict seclusion and see no one at all. After several days of rest, Yugiri returned to his duties at the castle.

When the day came, Yugiri returned to his home and kept his gate shut to all visitors. He refused to see anyone except his old housekeeper and a trusted manservant. Everything went well until sundown, when Yugiri's brother suddenly showed up at the gate and asked to be let in. Now, it so happened that his mother had gone on a pilgrimage to a shrine a few days earlier, together with his brother. Yugiri refused to see his brother, and told his servant, "As I'm in strict seclusion, please tell my brother that I can only see him tomorrow. Please ask him to find lodging somewhere else for the night."

His brother protested, "But the sun has already set! Where am I going to find lodging? I came here as fast as I could because our mother has passed away. I wanted to tell you myself."

Yugiri was devastated when he heard this news relayed

to him by the housekeeper. He broke down in tears and asked the servant to let his brother in. His young brother entered the house, all dressed in black. He was first given a chance to rest in the verandah, and had some hot tea served to him. Then Yugiri came to greet him. They both wept and sat down to talk on the mat. The housekeeper sat behind a screen, which separated the verandah from the house proper.

While inquiring about his mother's death, Yugiri suddenly noticed the whip marks on his brother's hands. When he asked about them, his brother's voice changed to a snarl and he spat out, "It's your fault you, useless cur! Where is my hand? Give me back my hand!"

Yugiri recognised the voice at once, in a heart stopping moment: it was the *nushi* from the bridge! Before he could react, the demon pounced on him. Fortunately, Yugiri's instincts for self-preservation took over and the two grappled on the floor. Yugiri finally managed to get the upper hand and holding his assailant down, shouted to his housekeeper, "Get me my sword!"

However, before she could do anything, the *nushi* got the upper hand and rolled on top of Yugiri. The demon's lower jaw dropped, revealing a cavernous mouth and sharp pointed teeth. It was about to bite Yugiri's head off when the housekeeper rushed out and struck the demon sharply on the face with her fan—it was the only thing she had on hand. The fan left a livid red mark on the demon's face.

Snarling in pain, the demon released Yugiri and turned

towards the matronly housekeeper. The *nushi* shrieked at her, “Where is my hand, you stupid woman? Return my hand to me!”

The housekeeper struck it again across the face with her fan. This time the fan left a burning red brand on its face. The demon howled in pain and ran out of the verandah towards the gate and escaped into the darkness.

The very next day, Yugiri’s real brother returned home together with his mother, who was very much alive. They were extremely anxious, as news of the attack had spread like wildfire throughout the province! His mother examined the housekeeper’s fan carefully to find out if there was anything special about it. It was just an ordinary paper and bamboo fan except for the fact that the paper had charms and prayers written all over it. Apparently, the devout housekeeper had written them down on the fan to help her remember her prayers.

The housekeeper said, “My lady, the *nushi* was looking for something—she kept on screaming about a hand... and I noticed one of her hands was missing...”

Then Yugiri remembered the small wooden box the stable boy had given him a year ago. They searched all over the house until they located the box; the housekeeper had kept it in a large wooden chest. Yugiri had forgotten all about it together with Lord li’s instructions to burn it. He carefully opened the box with a cloth and found the *nushi*’s clawed hand in it, caked with blood. They took the box and its awful content into the forest and burnt it until there were only ashes left. Then they buried the ashes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tutu Dutta is a writer of children's and young adult books. As an undergraduate at Universiti Putra Malaysia, she was awarded a scholarship by Japan Airlines, to attend summer school at Sophia University in Tokyo. Japan's folklore treasure trove inspired her to delve deeper into her Malaysian and Indian cultural heritage.

She is the author of eight books, including *Eight Treasures of the Dragon*, *The Jugra Chronicles* series and *The Magic Urn and Other Timeless Tales of Malaysia*, published by Marshall Cavendish. Her first picture book, *Phoenix Song*, published in 2015, is her first book to be translated into Malay titled *Lagu Cenderawasih*. *Nights of the Dark Moon* is her ninth book.

Her non-fiction work includes a paper on Asian Folklore presented at the Asian Festival of Children's Content, Singapore in 2013. She was also one of the judges for the Scholastic Asia Young Writers Award 2014.

Also by Tutu Dutta:



The Magic Urn and Other Timeless Tales of Malaysia
978 981 4771 160

Bringing together 12 legendary stories, with one from almost every Malaysian state, these collected stories are told in vivid detail and lavishly illustrated. The folktales transcend time and echo the motifs of good versus evil, nature versus nurture, and appearance versus reality.