

# WORDS THAT HEAL

The comfort of literature in times of mental duress

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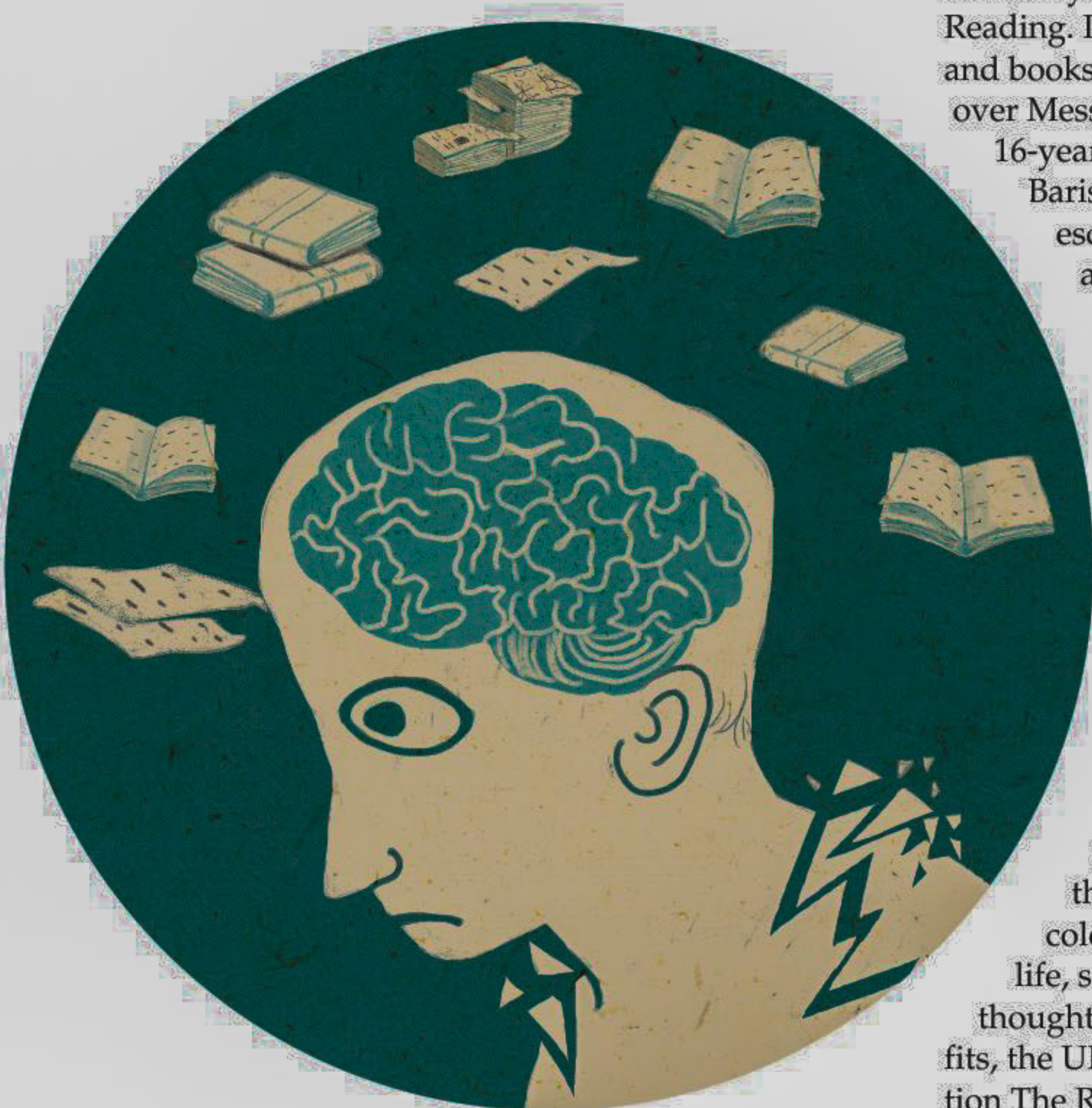
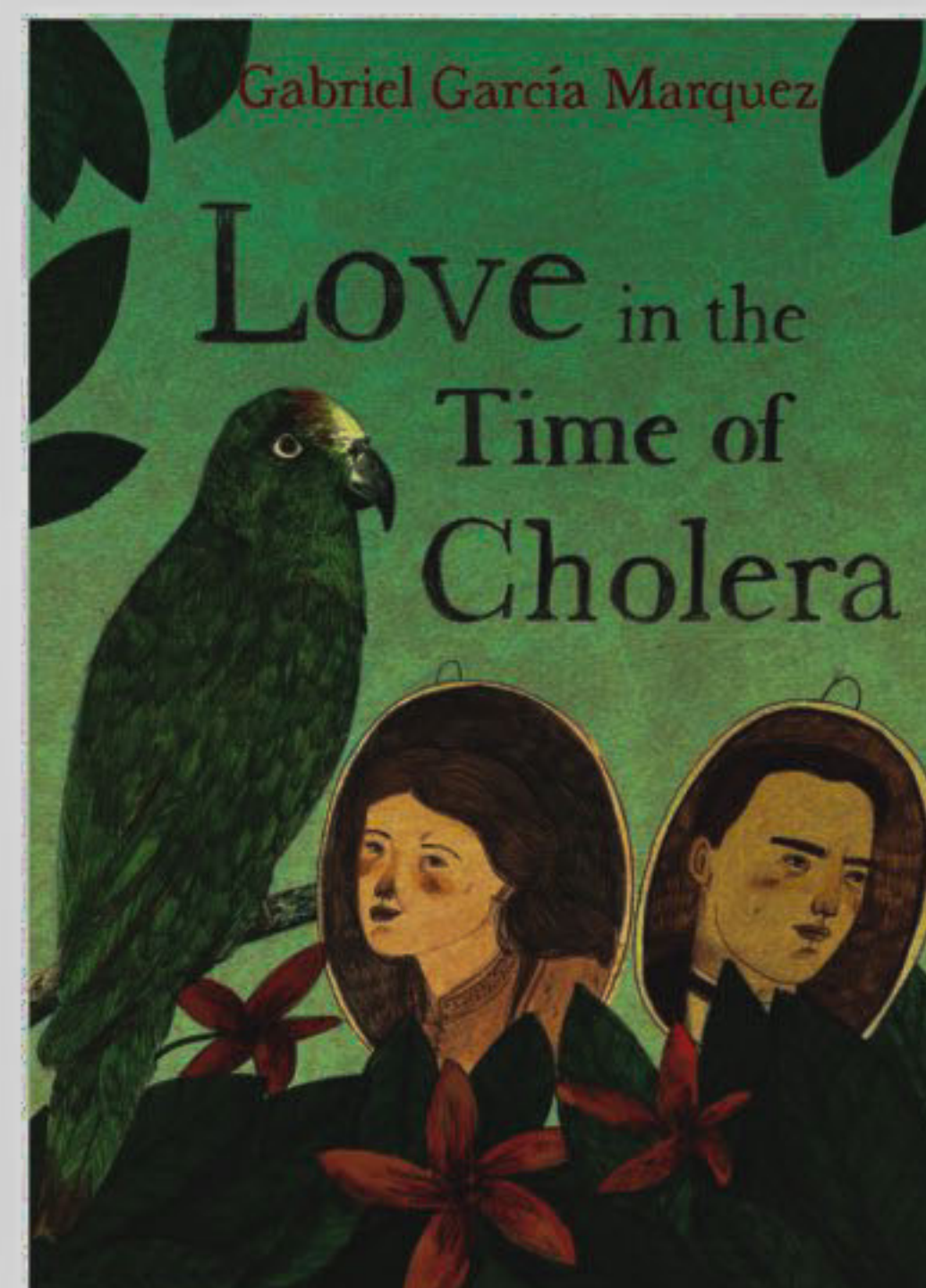


ILLUSTRATION: NAFIA JAHAN MONNI

"I was in Class 6 when my parents got divorced. I took it normally, because it was something I had wanted from when I was much younger. But our society is a horrible place for single mothers, so my sibling and I decided not to talk about our feelings at home to spare her the stress. I reckoned I'd be fine because I had many friends. But on the first day that I attended class after the divorce, everyone stared at me as if I had come from a zoo. There I was, dying to talk to someone, but even the people who wanted to talk to me about it were hesitant. Then one day, someone asked me 'Tomader chole kibhabe?' and I froze. That's when I realised how miserable I was. I shut myself up, stopped talking to my friends, and asked myself what I'm good at. Reading. I would be okay with books and books only," Abontee said to me over Messenger earlier this week. A 16-year-old SSC student from Barisal, Tasneem Taj Abontee escaped completely into literature to deal with her parents' divorce at an impressionable young age.

The funny thing about reading is that it's at once a private and a communal activity. You may pore over a book in solitude, and choose not even to discuss it with anyone else. Even in that escape from your own reality, you're connecting with another person, another reality on the page; it's an act that colours other parts of your life, seeping in through your thoughts. Recognising these benefits, the UK-based charity organisation The Reading Agency conducted research on how reading impacts mental health.

Reading for pleasure or as therapy—bibliotherapy—boosts self-esteem and relationship skills and helps combat depression, anxiety, and stress, they found out. After consulting both health experts and people suffering from various mental illnesses, they created a "Reading well for mental health" list this year that covers grief, anxiety, shyness,



and insomnia, among other issues. The titles include *Reasons to Stay Alive* by Matt Haig, *A Manual for Heartache* by Cathy Rentzenbrink, *The Boy with the Topknot* by Sathnam Sanghera, and *A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled* by Ruby Wax.

Abontee didn't suffer from any mental illness while growing up, per se. But she faced her parents' divorce at an age in which it could have left deep scars on her psyche. Bottling up her misery both at home and at school certainly seems like too heavy a burden for a 6th grader to bear alone. She sought comfort in the works of Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, and Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay.

"Have you read *Ami Topu* by Zafar Iqbal?" Abontee asked me. "Topu had serious family problems too, and he had to overcome them. Also, *Kajoler Din Ratri*. These books helped me stay calm and decide that I'm not going to change myself for others. I used them as 'friends' to face my reality," she recalled. Over time, strengthened by the support offered by these books, she managed to come to terms with her circumstances. If her friends weren't comfortable reaching out to her, she would reach out to them, she decided. Looking back on it all, Abontee expressed the impact of literature on her mental health in a way that I've never heard before.

"They say a good book listens. These books really listened to me,"



she said.

This connection with fictional characters, especially those suffering from the same plights as oneself, is perhaps the most reassuring part of reading for pleasure. Imtiaz Ahmed\*, an editor at a Bangladeshi newspaper, found a similar kind of comfort after ending a long-term relationship in college. He locked himself up in his room, shut his doors and windows and didn't talk to anyone. For ten whole days, he drowned himself in darkness. But he finished 11 books during this time, reading on his cellphone. He read, and fell in love with, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* before stepping back into the world.

"Mental well-being isn't just about being crazy or sane," he told me as we sat discussing the catharsis of books in his office cubicle. "The flaws in my [past] relationship made me stop believing in the good things at the time. However, every other line in *Cholera* made me smile," he recalled.

I asked him if it was the language, the characters, or the story that helped him feel better. "It was the amount of love in the book," he seemed to almost think out loud. "Maybe my faith in love wasn't rekindled, maybe I didn't recover completely at once. But it made me realise that the problem lurked in my dynamic with my partner and not in the concept of love itself."

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## BAGH NAMA

