

**INTERVIEW**

# WOMEN IN PUBLISHING

Women writers, publishers, booksellers, and academics comment on the state of the book trade in Bangladesh

ISHRAT JAHAN AND SELIMA SARA KABIR

The publishing and literary world in Bangladesh have considerable visibility of women: some are authoritative figures in the literary and academic world, some run their own establishments and bookshops; others occupy senior positions in many of the local publishing houses and literary committees. However, like the systems and society we currently operate in, this industry is also influenced by the larger patriarchal structure.

"A representation of whether women face gendered experiences in the industry can be found in the fact that I am the only female member to sit on the board of the Academic and Creative Publishers Association", says Mahrukh Mohiuddin, Managing Director of UPL Publications. Other than Mahrukh, the 21 other executive committee members are men.

Critical barriers emerge when one attempts to explore these gendered experiences, because the industry itself is riddled with structural challenges including lack of funding, high production costs, lack of industry best practices and guidelines, and lack of readers, all of which contribute to its slow growth in comparison to counterparts in the film or television world. The pandemic has only added to it thus far.

"There is an overall lack of structure", says Amina Rahman of Bookworm Bangladesh. "Books may come out, but what happens next? A strong review process or review platform is critical to the life cycle of books."

As a result of these vacuums, there are hardly any databases to guide researchers or journalists trying to find out about the inequalities or power imbalances operating in the industry for specific groups. Despite this, all the writers, publishers, and entrepreneurs we spoke to highlighted issues of professional limitations based on gender.

**On access to publishing platforms**

"Challenges as a woman author comes down to the issue of conformity", says writer and development worker Farah Ghuznavi. "The freedom to sit and think, to experience flexibility in household roles or social obligations is crucial. [But] women are expected to be self-effacing, they face a lot more scrutiny than their male counterparts about the kind of time they invest in their creative process".

These gender biases translate into visible limitations with regard to promotional pathways and support from institutions or publishing houses.

"The entry points [for new talent] have become blurred", Sabrina Islam, co-founder of Charcha bookstore and publishers, tells us over a phone conversation. "We have moved away from the magazine-based approach of hunting out new talent. So it is harder for both writers and

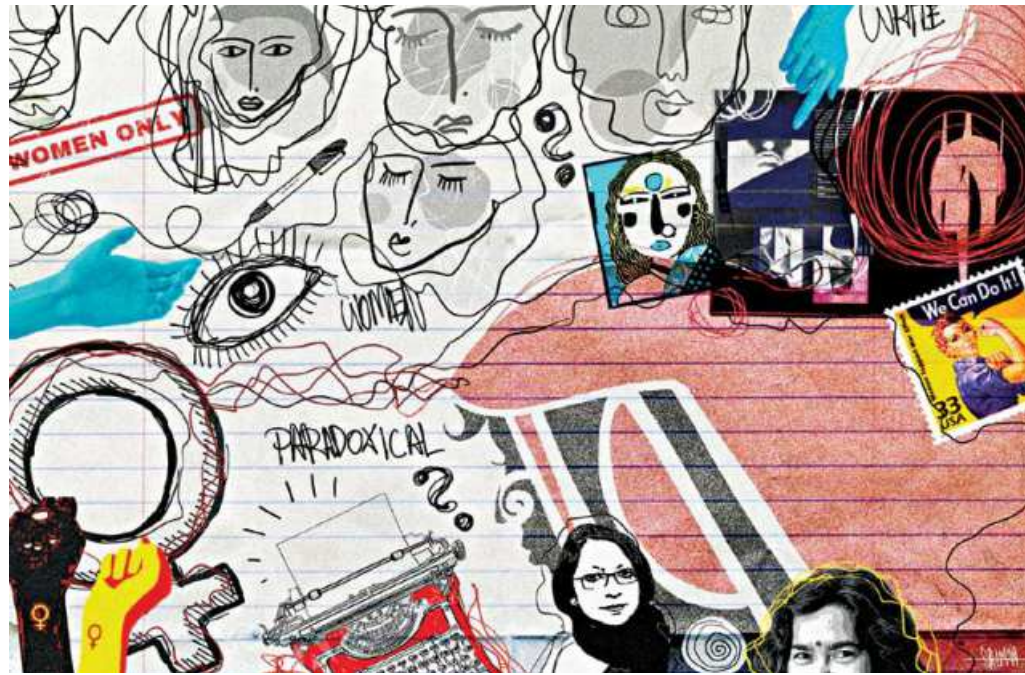


ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

publishers to find each other to begin with."

To this, author Shaheen Akhtar adds, "When it comes to publishing as a new writer, women have had to put in more work than men. She has had to prove that she can write. This situation seems to have changed for the better now, but I think everyone who is an established writer today has faced problems printing or publishing books in the beginning".

As in other sectors, Shaheen Akhtar points out, women writers are often paid lower royalty rates in a field that already has low and erratic patterns of payment for authors.

**On the politics of "women's writing"**

Too often, narratives written by and about women—accounts of love, family, personal identity, abuse—are all lumped into the category of "women's issues", as if they do not concern the rest of the population.

Farah Ghuznavi, whose short story collection *Fragments of Riversong* (Daily Star Books, 2013) engages with themes of women's freedom to practice art and which was reviewed positively by both men and women critics, unpacks the politics of what women can speak out about: "Writers can, in theory, write about whatever they want. But the fear of criticism for speaking out, for example on the unequal power relations in society, can lead to self-censorship".

Jannatun Nayeem Preity, an award-winning feminist author known for defying social

norms through her writing, shares horrifying experiences. "I received rape threats and was told on social media, in explicit terms, how I would be physically mutilated", she says. "My family is supportive, but when you realise that your activism is putting your family at risk or under stress, you have to fear being published".

"However, I don't write as a woman when I write—particularly when I write male characters in my novels. It is society that views my writing as 'women's writing'", she asserts.

Dr Niaz Zaman, literary academic and publisher of *writers.ink*, echoes this sentiment. "Women's writing is often perceived as trivial, while stories by male authors are said to be grand, exploring 'worldly' issues and politics," she says. "[But] the creative mind is androgynous, and to write male and female characters, writers need to get into the psyche of both genders. A woman's and an author's identity is bigger than just her feminism."

When asked how the state and society can address these issues, Shaheen Akhtar concludes, "Basic rights like healthcare are so neglected [in this country], *shahittiya toh ekta shokh er kaaj!* Of what use is literature to society? I am asked this question often. It seems our society is not yet ready to understand the value of literature".

Ishrat Jahan and Selima Sara Kabir are early stage researchers who write in their spare time.

**THE BOOK REPORT**

# The case of the missing girl: Where are we in Bangla children's literature?

AANILA KISHWAR TARANNUM

It wasn't until my 20s that I realised I had read less than 10 Bengali women authors in my childhood and adolescence.

The problem, I found, doesn't quite lie in the absence of female characters. Some of it lies in the way these stories are told, but most of it stems from the many faults in our publishing industry—from overreliance on a few male authors to lack of innovation in the genre to the absence of formal editorial practices and critiquing mechanisms.

I spoke to a few people who are still in their childhood, and from those conversations, I recalled that children enjoy reading, but not reading between the lines. For them, reading is about devouring one story after another.

"Have you read *Tuntuni o Chhotachchu*? It has a fun [girl] protagonist", 14-year-old Shamayla told me. "*Meyetir Naam Narina* and *Brishtir Thikana*, too. I also like Shahriar Kabir's books. I loved reading about Abir, Babu, Loli, Tuni", she added.

Shamayla is right. To their credit, Muhammad Zafar Iqbal and Shahriar Kabir actively tried to incorporate female protagonists in their adventure novels upon hearing complaints from readers about representation, and Kabir, undeniably the more mature writer of the two, did well to portray the joys and woes of adolescence without stereotyping girls in his works, a practice that might have been well ahead of its time.

But as—to digress—Mr Peanut Butter tells Bojack in the final episode of *Bojack Horseman*, "Yes, women are involved. But it's never really about the women".

It takes just this one line to understand why underrepresentation is not the final boss in this fight. In *Nitu ar Tar Bondhura* (Anupom Prokashon, 1999), a book that appears to have been heavily inspired by Roal Dahl's *Matilda* (Jonathan Cape, 1988), Zafar Iqbal does not once describe what Nitu looks like. One of her friends is described as "golgual, forsha"; another is "shiyamla, mishiti".

This is a trend in most of Iqbal's works. One of my favourite books, *Bachcha Bhoynkor Kachcha Bhoynkor* (Anupom Prokashon, 2006), begins with a detailed description of Rois Uddin in Iqbal's signature subtle Bangla humour, but we never get a detailed description of what eight-year-old Sheuli looks like. The same can be seen for the protagonists of *Brishtir Thikana* (Somoy Prokashon, 2007) and *Rasha* (Puffin, 2010). Tushi from *Kabil Kohkafi* (Maola Brothers, 2006) gets one descriptive—she's "kalo, kucchi"—and the relatively newer character of Tuntuni

from the *Tuntuni o Chhotachchu* series (Parl Publication, 2014-2019) drives the story forward, but her being a girl adds nothing to the plot.

Iqbal doesn't precisely stereotype girls, nor does he treat his women characters with disrespect. The issue is that the adventure-fantasy genre is the only kind of popular children's literature we have in Bangla, and these books do not tell stories of womanhood, nor do they explore the trials and tribulations of going through puberty.

It wasn't until I started reading women writers from the West that I could finally relate to the characters as a young girl. In Meg Cabot's *The Princess Diaries* series (HarperTrophy, 2000-2018), Mia Thermopolis' favourite underwear is branded with Queen Amidala prints. That little detail adds nothing to the story, but it adds a lot to Mia's geeky personality. *Princess Diaries* is about a young girl's personal growth throughout high school, and it exists as



ILLUSTRATION: TANIMA UDDIN

a contemporary piece of entertainment that allows readers to feel less alone by talking about periods, teenage heartbreak, sexual consent, homework, family pressures, and more.

This genre of YA fiction for girls is missing entirely in Bangladeshi children's literature. My Gen X parents read Shahriar Kabir and Muhammad Zafar Iqbal during their childhood in the 1970s and '80s, and so did every other generation after them. While that is a testament to the writers' skills in creating stories that last, it is disheartening that there have been no new writers, especially no women, who have managed to rise to that level of popularity.

An extended version of this article will be available online.

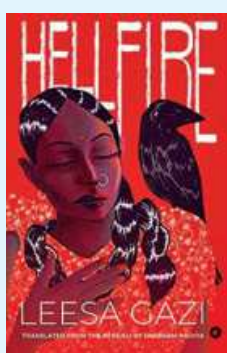
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**THE SHELF**

## Five novels with strong women protagonists

**MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE**

It is a truth universally acknowledged that books shape ideologies and play a major role in creating societal changes. The lives of women, their struggles and advocacy for equality have been a common theme in the works of many notable authors, be it in *Austen's Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or *Rokeya's Sultana's Dream* (1905). These five books explore the lives of women with nuance and compassion—fitting choices for the occasion of International Women's Day (March 8), 2021.



**HELLFIRE**  
Leesa Gazi  
(Westland Books, 2020; trans. Shabnam Nadiya)

*Hellfire* is at once a book about patriarchy and the toxic strand of matriarchy that supports it. Through the lives of sisters Lovely and Beauty, both kept from socialisation and even attending school deep into middle age, the novel captures near perfectly the convoluted blueprint of life for South Asian women.

**WITH THE FIRE ON HIGH**  
Elizabeth Acevedo  
(HarperCollins, 2019)

Revolving around the Afro-Latina, Emoni Santiago, the novel presents a wholesome recipe of life by way of a teen mother. Unexpected motherhood does not stop Santiago from chasing her dreams as she continues to create her magic in the kitchen. What would normally be a cautionary tale instead highlights the free-spirited nature of women and the one proudly independent girl who defies societal norms.

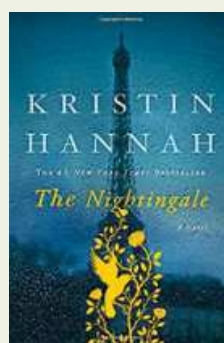


**CIRCE**  
Madeline Miller  
(Little Brown, 2018)

Miller's inventive second novel is an upended retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*, bringing to the foreground the women who were otherwise kept to the back. Its title character, a minor character in classical antiquity, is a witch, an outcast, and the perfect vehicle for Miller's brilliant feminist reframing. "Humbling women seems to be a chief pastime of poets", says Circe. "As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep".

**THE NIGHTINGALE**  
Kristin Hannah  
(St Martin's Press, 2015)

Set in German-occupied France during World War II, this historical novel follows the lives of two sisters, Vianne and Isabelle, and their journey of endurance against Nazi invasion. While Vianne continues to persevere for the sake of her family, Isabelle carves out a path of her own. What makes this novel beautiful is the powerful representation of persistence, strength and grace.



**SHATKAHON**  
Samaresh Majumdar  
(Ananda Publishers, 2004)

Set in Kolkata, the book focuses on the life of Deepabali, a rebel from within. By connecting her life with the circumstances prevalent in a newly independent India, the novel describes the various struggles of a woman far ahead of her time. Deepabali is rightly regarded as one of the most popular feminist protagonists, representing the strong-willed nature of women, undefeated by life's atrocities.

**READ ONLINE**

## Is science fiction really not a woman's genre?

RASHA JAMEEL

Last week, I decided to pen a tribute to my favourite authors of science fiction, a love letter, really, that has long been in the pipeline.

I started off by listing my favourites. Premendra Mitra. Muhammad Zafar Iqbal. Begum Rokeya. Satyajit Ray. Humayun Ahmed. Jagadish Chandra Bose. Five men. One woman. Professor Shonku, Ghanashyam Das, Misir Ali, and a Sultana from a feminist utopia. The internet said there were many more male pioneers of the SF genre here in Bangladesh, who had won not just hearts, but also accolades. But, what of the women?

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