

FEATURE

The comfort of books amidst wedding lights

Reflections and recommendations for this wedding season's brides and grooms-to-be

ISHRAT JAHAN

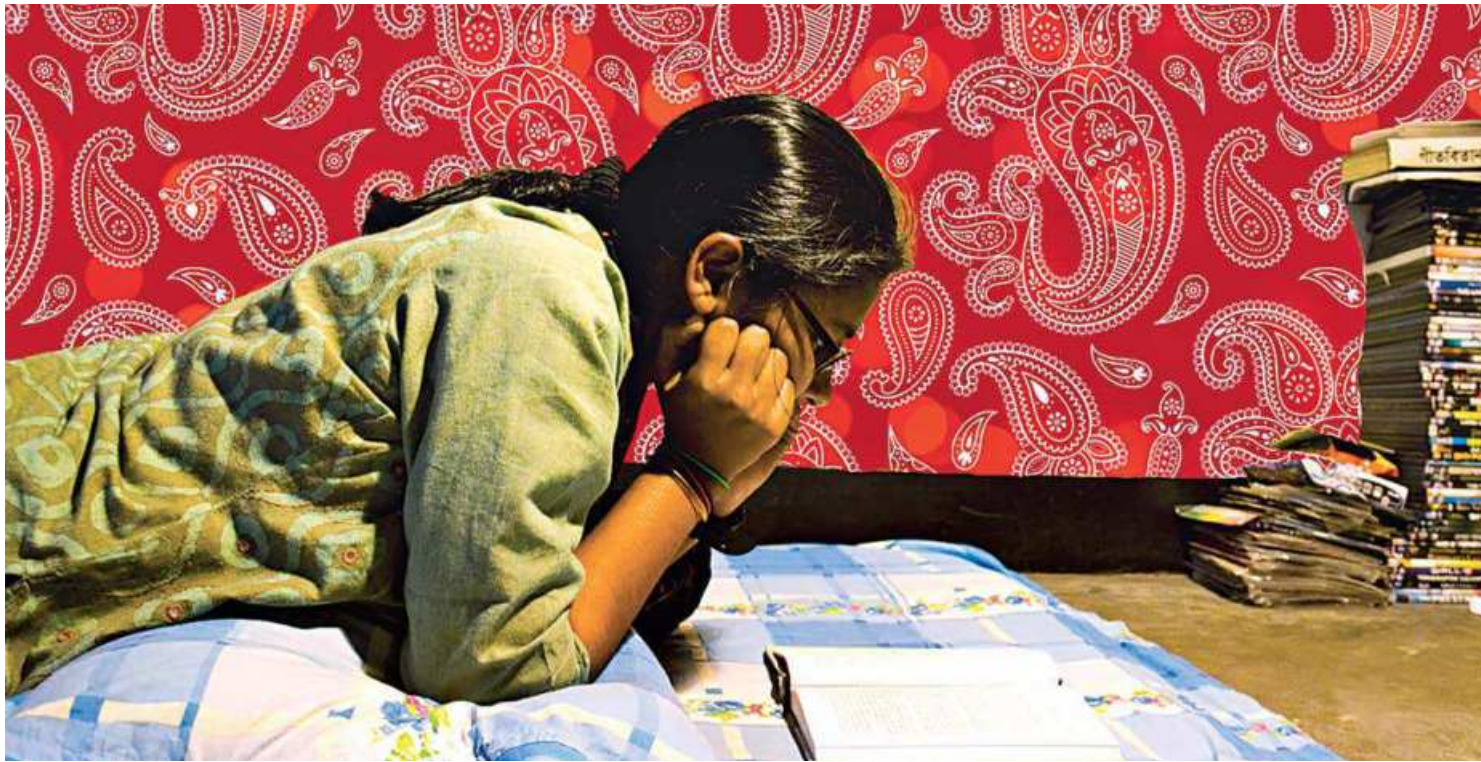
It is December again and as evenings set in, Dhaka becomes brighter than it has been in the past few months. At every alternate street, fairy lights glitter and lanterns float against a dark night—the wedding season is here. Yet, admiring the lights from a distance and being in their midst, in the eye of the storm, are two different worlds. We reached out to the local book-reading community on social media to ask brides and grooms-to-be (of the past and present) how books provided them with comfort and insight while confronting such a major change.

Inhabiting this role often comes with the mental and physical strain of planning a wedding—from deciding the colour of the tiniest cufflinks to overseeing guest lists and venue decorations. Doito Bonotulshi, 27, who is currently in the midst of organising her upcoming wedding events, finds herself reading her childhood favourites on her commutes to shopping malls. “I have been reading Humayun Ahmed and at times Jafar Iqbal because of the ease of language and flow of writing. The characters seem like people I know in real life.”

It is while standing at this exciting turning point that many find themselves unpacking what goes into a marriage. Even in the midst of the chores and chaos, there is a need for introspection.

“More importantly”, she adds, “I always know where the story is heading, even if I don’t remember the exact endings after all these years. So, there is a sense of comfort and control to be found.”

The looming presence of “what if something goes wrong?” waits at the turn of every shopping trip and venue tour, especially amidst



COLLAGE: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

PHOTO: SAZZAD IBNE SAYED

the ongoing pandemic. But with the help of friends, families, and books, there is a sense of relief and happiness to be found when things come together eventually.

Beyond the pressures of organising, one also stands at the precipice of personal changes that will impact all aspects of their lives—from sharing their space with another person everyday, to learning about a new family’s habits and dynamics. Wahida Mashrura, a Bangladeshi marketing and business professional living in New York who got married in 2018, shares the books that she would seek out at the time: *The Blue Castle* (1926) and *Anne’s House of Dreams* (1917) by Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Good Wives* (first published in 1869) by Louisa May Alcott, and

Golpo Guccho by Rabindranath Tagore.

“*Golpo Guccho* is one of my favorite books”, Mashrura shares, recalling with particular fondness short stories like “Hoiomonti”, “Megh o Roudro”, and “Moddhobortini” among others. “For me, the stories reflect how humans and their motivations interact, and it shaped my expectations and tolerance for other people’s perspectives. Marriage brings new people into our lives and as a general rule, accepting that people are different, helps”, she adds.

It is while standing at this exciting turning point that many find themselves unpacking what goes into a marriage. Even in the midst of the chores and chaos, there is a need for introspection. Upoma Rashid, 28, a development professional based in Dhaka who

shared the knot earlier this year during lockdown, shared her experience in searching for more practical advice from books.

“My then fiancé/now husband and I have completely different personalities. I was looking for assurance that despite having so little in common, it’s possible to build a wonderful life together. A bit of browsing directed me towards books by co-writers, John M Gottman and Nan Silver, and I picked up *What Makes Love Last?* (2012). Despite dealing with a topic that can get overwhelming and which has so many factors to account for—because no two relationships are the same—it felt easy to read, provided insights on issues of communication, intimacy, etc.”

Upoma’s reflection points out the

importance of not only remembering to focus on our relationships but also to carve out time to understand, to navigate the changes and challenges of a relationship that is transitioning—be it a love or an arranged marriage.

Getting married comes with a burden of intense social scrutiny—the choices and decisions of a bride and groom-to-be are rarely their own. Looking back at my own experience of getting married, I remember reaching out to books when I felt exhausted by the social expectations of acting and looking like the “perfect” bride. I found myself reaching out for poetry anthologies; I knew that in between verses I would find that inexplicable sense of hope and love, which had led me and my partner to marriage in the first place. Chris Riddell’s illustrated anthology, *Poems to Fall in Love With* (Pan Macmillan, 2019), is one such varied set of poems. It talks about the universal experiences of love, a collection where classic Shakespearean verses sit along with modern ones.

So in the spirit of reaching out for comfort at a time when life visibly rearranges and changes around us, I leave you, dear readers, with a verse. I hope you find joy both in between these lines and in between the celebrations and bittersweet change:

Because there are things you cannot know before you experience them.

Because no study can prepare you for the joys or the trials.

Because nobody else’s love, nobody else’s marriage, is like yours, and it’s a road you can only learn by walking it, a dance you cannot be taught, a song that did not exist before you began, together, to sing.

- *All I Know about Love*, Neil Gaiman

Ishrat Jahan is an early stage researcher who writes in her free time. You can follow her on Twitter @jahani620.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Neutrality is an illusion in Katie Kitamura’s ‘Intimacies’

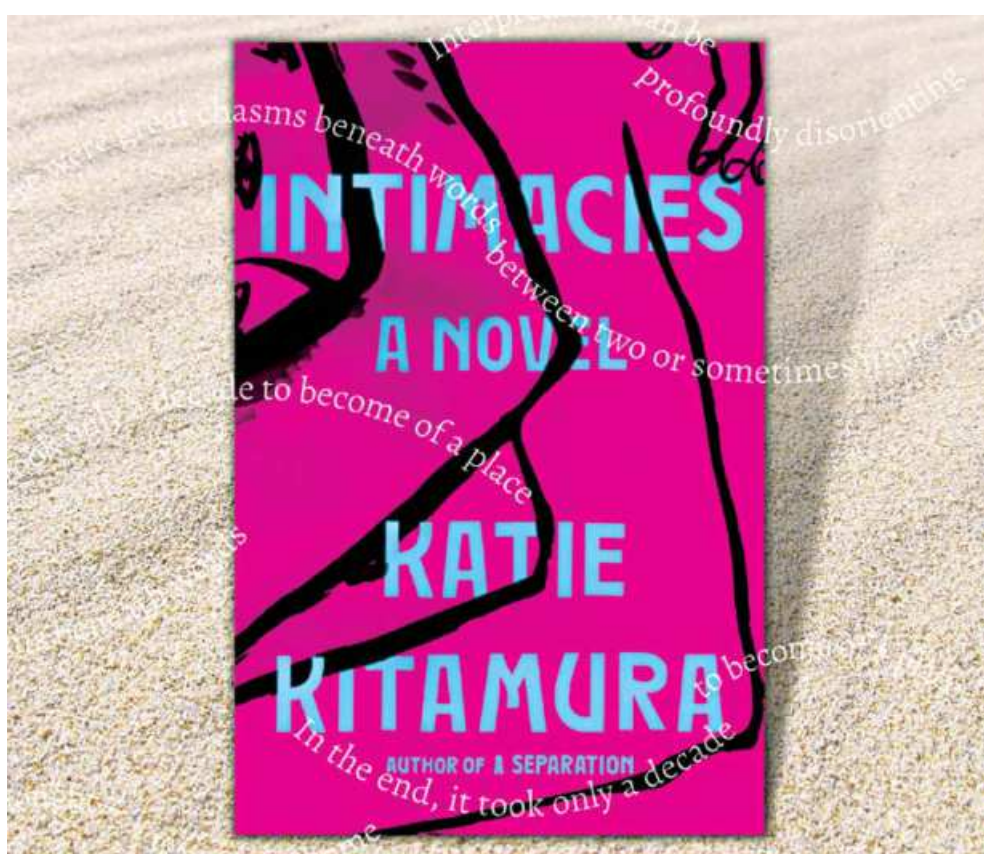
JAHIN KAISSAR

Katie Kitamura’s latest novel, *Intimacies* (Riverhead Books, 2021), is a stunning follow-up to its critically acclaimed predecessor, *A Separation* (2017). In *Intimacies*, Kitamura, once again, shows herself to be psychologically astute, focusing on the moral quandaries that arise from the intimate and intricate relationships that one might have with language, with other people, and with one’s own emotions.

In the wake of her father’s death, the unnamed narrator moves from New York to The Hague, where she takes up a year-long contract as an interpreter for the International Court. Soon after arriving in her new city, she is forced to navigate a series of disquieting situations in her personal and professional life. For instance, she finds out that her Dutch boyfriend, Adriaan, is married. Weeks pass with no words from him once Adriaan departs for Lisbon to divorce his estranged wife. In his absence, the narrator displays quiet interest in the truth behind the violence inflicted upon a newfound friend’s brother, a victim of a brutal street crime. Meanwhile, her professional responsibilities become more demanding and emotionally draining. She is assigned to a high-profile case that requires her to interpret for a former West African president who stands accused of ethnic cleansing and other war crimes.

Kitamura’s main thematic concerns are the power of language and the complexity of interpretation. When the narrator translates in court for a witness testifying about the former president’s war crimes, there is a slippage, a shift in perspective—her “I” merges with the “I” of the witness. In this crucial moment, the act of interpretation becomes achingly intimate, causing the narrator to ponder the moral implications of channeling the voice of someone else. Kitamura also depicts moments outside of the courtroom—at an art gallery, a small dinner party, or a business lunch—when the narrator is forced to interpret the words, demeanour, and intentions of others. Although the narrator’s ability to interpret is her strength, it can prove pernicious, especially when she starts spiraling.

Other themes go hand in hand with the act of interpretation: neutrality and complicity. As a conduit for language, the narrator is required to be neutral. However, over the course of the novel, she realises that neutrality is an



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

illusion. In a flyer that she receives from a demonstrator, she reads: “This was the true face of neocolonialism, this apparatus of Western imperialism, this Court.” Kitamura thus sheds light on the hypocrisy of the Court and raises profound questions: why is a western judiciary meddling in the affairs of an African country? How can the narrator be neutral if she is working for a biased institution? As a person who works for the Court and as a person from “a country that has committed terrible crimes and atrocities,” is the narrator herself complicit?

The most intriguing aspect of *Intimacies* is the way in which the role of the interpreter is foisted not only upon the narrator but also upon the reader. In describing her job, the narrator states: “Interpretation was a matter of great subtlety, a word with many contexts, for example it is often said that an actor interprets a role, or a musician a piece of music.” Interpretation, then, is not a mechanical, word-by-word translation. It is less a linear process

and more a circuitous journey, made difficult by false turns and dead ends. The tricky nature of interpretation is reflected in the style of Kitamura’s prose: intimate yet distant; subtle yet powerful; sparse and digestible, yet full of insightful observations. Moreover, her deliberate defiance of grammatical conventions—the prolific use of commas and the absence of quotation marks for dialogues—turns reading itself into an interpretive act.

Despite being beautifully written and emotionally searing, *Intimacies* falls into a pit common to slim novels. Kitamura makes subtle and thought-provoking comments on infidelity, gentrification, violence; but many of these ideas remain under-explored.

The novel is, nonetheless, nothing short of a masterpiece. Within a relatively short page count, Kitamura writes an engrossing tale that is interpretive, interior, and intimate.

Jahin Kaiissar is a contributor. Reach her at jahinkaiissar@gmail.com.

BOOK NEWS

National award winner Kajol Ibrahim launches her memoir

MAISHA SYEDA

In an intimate ceremony held at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy on December 4, national award-winning dancer, choreographer, and stage performer Kajol Ibrahim launched her memoir, *Nritte Gantha Kotha Mala*, published by Ramon Publishers.

The audience included chief guest, museologist and former Director General of the Bangladesh National Museum, Dr Enamul Haque; and special guests, critic, writer and academic, Dr Syed Manzoorul Islam, and Bangladeshi actor, director, singer, composer, and cultural organiser, Liaquat Ali Lucky, who is the Director General of Shilpakala Academy at present.

The event, organised by Nrityanchal Dance Company in the Studio Theater Hall, commenced and ended with dance performances by young artists, choreographed by Kajol Ibrahim herself. The programme included introductory speeches from co-directors of the school, dancers and choreographers, Shibli Mohammad and Shamim Ara Nipa.

Kajol Ibrahim’s mother, Badrunnessa Abdullah, along with her family were invited to the stage to inaugurate the ceremony. Remembering Kajol’s childhood, Badrunnessa Abdullah amusingly recalled that she had never really seen her daughter hold a pen growing up, so the authoring of the book came as a pleasant surprise.

“It’s not just a memoir, it has become a narrative of her life in the performing

Kantha Math”, a Bangla verse narrative written by poet Jasimuddin; being casted as the lead in a performance with her mentor; working in later years with her co-dancers; memories with her parents; and the picture of Old Dhaka as she knew it.

She is especially grateful to Shamim Ara Nipa, who made sure she remained connected with the world of dancing, as well as her brother and younger daughter, who guided her through the writing process, and the editors who helped compile the manuscript. The author’s only requirement from the editorial process was that her language remain true to her personal style. For her readers and an upcoming generation of dancers, Ibrahim hopes the book will reveal how the government in those days played a vital role in honing the talents of young performers.

At the book launch, Dr Enamul Haque recalled Kajol Ibrahim’s unparalleled contribution to the field of theater throughout the years. “The talent that Kajol has should be utilised by schools and institutions; they need to recruit her in order to educate the next generation of dancers, by exploiting her knowledge”, he said. “It will be a tremendous loss to the performing arts if we are not able to preserve such talent.”

Highlighting his role as an audience member of stage performance, Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam said, “A tradition is created in the future generations of artists commemorating their predecessors. By navigating the harsh tides of our tradition and dedicating ourselves to our art completely, we are able to uphold this tradition and pay the utmost respect to our teachers.”

By representing her life through pictures in her book, Kajol Ibrahim is able to show us her struggles and leave a legacy for the upcoming artists, Professor Islam pointed out.

Distribution rights to the book have not yet been shared. Readers can purchase copies by getting in touch with Kajol Ibrahim personally or through Facebook messenger.

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, and a graduate of English Literature and Writing. She is an intern at Daily Star Books.



PHOTO: MAISHA SYEDA

arts”, she said. “I would like to extend my gratitude to all the notable artists, performers, and literary figures present here today who have inspired my daughter”.

The memoir, Kajol Ibrahim tells Daily Star Books, is a snapshot of her life—her first self-composed performance, at the age of 14, to the dramatisation of “Nakshi