

# Fanny Brawne: John Keats' Bright Star

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## STAR LITERATURE DESK

The ring in the picture is the one that John Keats gave to his beloved Fanny Brawne as engagement ring in the Autumn of 1891. The stone is a garnet – set in gold. An inexpensive piece of jewellery, it reflects the financial condition of a poor poet struggling to make ends meet.

Critics and admirers of John Keats have maligned Fanny (Frances) Brawne for many years because apparently, she showed little interest in Keats' poetry while he was alive, and second, she chose to marry after the poet's death. Few know that Fanny mourned Keats for six years and continued to wear the ring till her death in 1865. She left it to her daughter Margaret, who then passed it on to her niece Frances Ellis, who made a gift of the ring to Keats House in Hampstead.

These star-crossed lovers met in the autumn of 1818, a time that was very difficult for the young poet. His poetry was not appreciated, but more importantly, his brother Tom was critically ill with tuberculosis. He had just returned from a tour in Scotland with his friend Charles Brown when the latter had rented out half of his double house Wentworth Place to Mrs. Brawne. The widow lived there with her three children and eighteen-year-old Fanny was the eldest of them. While not exactly beautiful, Fanny was high-spirited and also somewhat coquettish. John Keats was attracted to her even though he often lamented that she reminded him of Criseyde, an infamous flirt of Chaucer.

But whatever his first impressions were, Fanny and John fell in love. The young lover would often stop his serious pursuit of poetry and write sonnets like "Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art" for Fanny. According to some critics, the mysterious seductress in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is also based on the character of Fanny Brawne. While that is still a conjecture, Keats wrote some really beautiful and moving letters to his beloved with sentences like, "Love is my religion – I could die for that – I could die for you. My Creed is Love and you are its only tenet."

People around them, however, were not



very happy about their engagement. Even though Keats was a well-disposed, cheerful young man, he had little prospect in earning enough money to settle down soon. Fanny's mother was worried about her daughter's future and Keats' friends were dubious about the depth of Fanny's attachment to Keats. In 1820, when he was seriously ill and coughing up blood, Keats proposed to her to break off the engagement, but she refused.

During their last months, they were separated, and there were often quarrels and suspicions on part of Keats who knew he was not physically getting better. And Fanny was not a typically docile woman. In spite of everything, the letters exchanged during this time reveal that they cared for each other deeply. Keats died in Rome on Friday, 23 February 1821, and it took three weeks for the news to reach home. Fanny wrote about

his death to his sister Frances: "I have not got over it and never shall." She continued her correspondence with Frances for quite some years.

During her lifetime, Fanny herself had witnessed the growth of her old flame, but she never claimed herself as his muse, nor did she ever tell her husband Louis Lindon, about her engagement to the young poet. However, she did defend the Keats a few times when others tried to defame him for personal gain.

Fanny had kept her lover's books, over three dozen of letters and other mementos and often showed them to her three children. She died in 1865 and her husband in 1872 and only then did their children come forward with the tale of the romance of Keats and Fanny and the letters. By then, twenty-five years had passed since John Keats's death and he was quite a celebrity.

## And yet love is a darkened menu to date

### IRAZ AHMED

Your city, an ex-lover of sunshine  
A lizard incapable of moving, despite its desire to mate  
As if it's in pursuit of the intolerably sultry, a wailing.

Did you never think the ducks were dead?  
When you saw the doors to the government  
godown of ducks locked

They were dead as any of your senile lovers –  
Didn't you even consider the countless plumes  
that fluff  
Around their skinned bodies  
Were attending their carcasses.

Yet love is still a shadowed menu.  
A menu devoid of rice, of wheat  
Of the hurried, bloody imprints of newly dead  
ducks.

In the city that's the ex-lover of sunshine  
Some people still use their names to show the  
distance,  
Affinity remains a locked den,  
The rusty metal hoops swing the locks,  
And maybe some ardent letters slot,  
Letters written from Shyamgram.  
Who are those that love still?  
Who loves all these perplexities?  
The two pin plug dies suffering the electric  
tyranny,

Only the stories of short-circuit  
overwhelm the rooms.  
Love literally is a shadowed menu,  
You know what you are in for,  
don't you? Antara?

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## FICTION

# The Lord of the "Galores"

### SANJEEDA HOSSAIN

My mother was a house maid in a rich, village household. The master of the house was my father. When I was recovering from measles, she managed a bowl of smoky, warm rice and six little crunchy *puti* fish for me.

After a week of gulping down mere rice water, those fish were like scrumptious treasures for me. I sat by the *dheki* and stared at them with hungry, greedy eyes. With a pinch of salt, I arranged the fish in a row with my skeletal fingers.

I was just about to devour my first loaf of rice and fish, but I felt a kick on my face. Two of my baby teeth fell out. The stable boy kept kicking me on my face until blood spewed on the mud floor.

The mistress tied me with a rope. I was tethered with the giant mango tree until my mother was set free from her work to attend her ill, brutally beaten son.

What was my fault? I was a bastard and bastards are forbidden to move around the *dheki*, the machine that removes the husks from the paddy and produce rice: the staple food.

My mother held me tight in her lap. She grabbed my hands in the evening, and we walked towards the canal. She caught an eel with her mere hands, flayed its skin off and cut it into pieces. She made fire and cooked some hotchpotch.

In the morning, we discovered that we had devoured a snake, and the snake lord came to get the one who had killed his general. My mother kept on pleading and wailing as he took her away.

He looked at me for a while and promised that my mother will return after her penance. He gave me five boons, what he called "Galores," for he was the Lord of the Galores. He assured mother that these Galores would take care of me. He also bestowed on me the gift of staring; anything I will look upon, will become whatever I wish.

"The Galores"  
I was crying alone in our dark, dilapidated hut. The stable boy discovered me. He threw millipedes over me: a handful of them. I screamed at the top of my lungs and he giggled.

He kicked me straight on my chest and I lost consciousness.

When I woke up, I felt the millipedes



coiled around my feet. In an extreme bout of hunger, I stared at them. They looked like jackfruit seeds. I put one of them inside my mouth and chewed. I ate until I was full.

I wrapped a torn *saree* of mother around me, and she appeared beside me.

"Why don't you command your Galores?" she asked, "They will fulfill your wishes."

She was glowing like the moon. She was so powerfully and magically transformed that it seemed all her words were true.

Hugging her I summoned my Galores and asked for the stable boy's retribution.

The next morning, I saw a crowd around the *dheki ghor*. The stable boy was screaming, for the millipedes went through his ear holes and laid thousands of eggs overnight. They were devouring his brain. He was stomping on the heavy wooden pestle of

the *dheki*, for it temporarily stopped their creepy, tickling movements inside him.

The mistress pulled his head by his hair in disbelief, but the scalp along with the crown of the skull came out and so did the hundreds and thousands of millipedes. They fell upon the *dheki* and scattered all over the mud floor.

From that day onwards, I was treated with fear. I fueled their frights, the fright regarding the unnatural, the fright associated with the guilt of wrong doings.

I was not alone. I had a herd of Galores as my associates who gave me innumerable power to survive in that hostile, cruel house.

### The Daughter

It was mid-autumn, and the barn was filled with the aroma of the paddy. It was the festival of *pitha* making. Women in the house soaked the rice overnight in water to make *pitha*.

This year, the age-old process was interrupted. The *dheki ghor* was sealed. Rice was crushed by the machine for the first time.

I went to the kitchen, and stared with my hollow, starving eyes. I spread my hands and demanded whatever they were preparing. The eldest daughter of the master handed me a bowl of sweetened rice cakes, prepared with coconut and milk. I stared straight into her eyes.

She arrived at my hut at midnight. Her mother hated her. She hated all her daughters because they were not sons. Her apparently baseless hatred led the daughter to hate her mother as well. So, their hatred was mutual and reciprocal. She nodded and agreed when I asked her to be my companion.

Her family was a happy and perfect one on the surface. My job was to throw pebbles over that seemingly smooth surface and cause an everlasting ripple, a ripple that will eventually transform into a wave and drown all their happiness.

### Twelve years later

My Galores have increased in numbers. They huddle compactly inside my little hut. But I can sense that they want a bigger house to spread around.

Galores are made of smoke. They are also shape-shifters, and can take any form they want. They breed faster than humans and feed on what humans are not supposed to eat. The bones of chicken are galore food. Those who devour galore food, earn their wrath.

The master's eldest daughter blooms like a night flower during her regular visits to my hut. Amongst all his children, she is

the dearest to her father. According to her wishes, my father has allowed me to live here.

His wife is pregnant for the eighth time. She had a disturbing dream: a light was coming out of her belly, and the light fell upon the house like a thunderbolt.

I interpreted the dream to her eldest daughter.

The baby is a boy; the first male child of your mother after seven daughters. You have to kill him to save yourself and your sisters. She believed me.

"Put a red rooster in a cage, and hang it in an open space. A week later, twist its neck. Extract the bones from it. Spread the bones under the mid-day sunlight. Within a short while, two women in *burkha* will appear. As soon as they start smelling the bones, call up your mother."

The girl visited my hut after a week. The job was done.

"When I screamed, mother came out of the house. She shooed the women in *burkhas* with a broom. Within a moment she complained about a sharp pain in her lower back. She fell down grabbing her waist. Now she is bleeding profusely. The village doctor has given her up. She will be taken to the hospital in the city tomorrow morning." Good.

### Reclaiming My Honour

The next day, her mother died along the baby inside her, before reaching the hospital. A son it was, eight months old.

The next day, my mother returned as a comely potted woman, with a basket of clay pots on her head. My father's eyes fell on her. He conjectured that his house needed a mistress, his motherless daughters needed a mother, and he required a companion to share his sorrows.

He married my mother in poise and pomp in a week. Upon reentering the house, she informed him that his eldest daughter was carrying a child.

To avoid scandal, that daughter was married off to a jobless, lazy man. This man followed some awkward principles and held an apathetic view of life. His family thought a wife would change his mind.

Within a month, her sisters were sent to various relatives' houses; after all, a girl's true house is the house of her in-laws. Indeed, one after the other, they will eventually get married and settle down within their own houses.

Instead of occasional appearances, the Lord of the Galores finally implanted himself inside my mother's husband's frame. And we lived together, happily ever after.

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