

THE DEFINITIVE
YOUTH
MAGAZINE

SHOUT

DHAKA THURSDAY MARCH 23, 2023, CHAITRA 9, 1429 BS

A PUBLICATION OF *The Daily Star*



NAVIGATING THE WORLD
WITH A POKER FACE

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BANGLADESHI
WEDDING A
FINANCIAL
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THE WORLD OF *Young Makeup Artists*



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

EDITORIAL

One of my least favourite tasks of this job is writing editorials every four weeks. Yes, this very thing that you're reading right now was born out of nothing but sheer apprehension, a reluctance to fulfil my duties and obligation to meet a word count. Can you tell? Probably not.

If it were up to me, all of this would be just gibberish because at this point, that's how coherent my thoughts really are. On the rare occasion I do have a real thought, I just forget it. No recollection of the thought that I have just thought. I do not have opinions and am opposed to expressing them. My only contribution to conversations are blank stares and the occasional head nod. The weight of being expected to speak and assert is crushing.

Only the weight of my blanket when I nap is acceptable. In fact, I might just be able to go off on a really long tangent about how much I like napping. But then again, that involves thinking.

– Abir Hossain, Sub-editor, SHOUT



PLAYWATCH

MOVIES



Why we love raging female anti-heroes in cinema

SHOMAPTY KHANDAKER

As English playwright and poet William Congreve once said, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." But is that so bad?

As all movie lovers know, a good antihero or villain should be a representation of a multi-dimensional persona. Even when you don't agree with their choices and decisions, you may, at times, feel compelled to justify their doings. Everybody loves morally grey characters that walk the line between good and bad.

If it is a man, audiences especially love it. After all, they serve to fuel our own rage for justice. When it is a woman, however, the character's sentiments resonate differently.

Antiheroes and sympathetic villains are usually born in movies and TV shows from rage and mistreatment. Think emotionally-charging backstories of characters losing their families, never being appreciated, neglected, and unloved. The central emotion in all these stories tends to be anger.

Often, girls are told to repress anger and it's reflected in the female characters of these movies. As the narrative progresses, the "conceal, don't feel" approach becomes ultimately tested and failed.

Female villains are born from a place of vengeance but when they do terrible things, the audience, especially women, get to experience a fictionalised side to themselves.

Take the horror classic, *Carrie* (1976), for example. 17-year-old Carrie has an abusive mother and is considered

a laughing stock at school. Eventually, she resorts to misusing her telekinetic powers to get back at her bullies, resulting in a lot of bloodshed. Carrie remains an icon of the horror genre to this day, which shows how the audience responds to the appeal of female rage being released.

These characters mirror the image of women in defiance of the atrocities they have endured. This ultimately leads to richer characterisation, more interesting interpretations of the plot, and a female character who appears as a real human being to the audience. Oftentimes, they resonate with the audience because of the past trauma that has been inflicted on the characters.

Another nuance to the character is added when they finally use their anger channelling it into something productive. At the end of the movie *Mean Girls*, Regina George finally uses her rage towards her mother coddling her for her good looks into a physical sport – a nice enough character arc for her. However, when she finally learns to channel her anger in the right place as prescribed by her physiotherapist, Regina finds the space to be herself.

These anti-heroes and villains all have one thing in common and that is, the audience wants women in cinema to shatter the image of them being dainty. After all, repressing anger at all times should not be confused with being graceful.

Shompty studies economics and reads research papers and fiction books while having an existential crisis every few days. Never reach her at: shomptykhondoker@gmail.com

TITLE OF YOUR MIXTAPE



A	B
FACE BROCKHAMPTON	Poker Face Lady Gaga
Off My Face Justin Bieber	Can't Feel My Face The Weeknd
Set Me Free Pt.2 Jimin	More Than A Woman Bee Gees
Peach Kevin Abstract	Animals Big Thief

Email us at shoutds@gmail.com with feedback, comments, and reader submissions within 500 words.



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Navigating the world with a poker face

FABIHA AFIFA

Right when we were about to go on stage to get our science fair awards, my friend subtly elbowed me in the ribs and hissed, "You really need to start smiling more."

This was back in eighth grade, and even to this day, there are times when I struggle with looking like I'm over it. Sure, like Simone Biles said, "Smiling doesn't win you gold medals" but a soft, approachable expression can do wonders in the way people perceive us, or at least that's what I've been told over the years. Many people who're now some of my best friends have told how they thought I was an ice queen when they first saw me, and it's definitely the worst in group settings because then I have to be extra diligent in building a rapport with others. Without the compensation of smiles and calculated expressions, I know I appear cold and uninterested, and perhaps even unwell, because there have been times when people directly asked if I was going through hard times when in reality, I was actually really happy about something.

But surprisingly, it's not all bad. For starters, having a poker face myself means I'm less intimidated by others with a stony expression because I know that usually, it's nothing personal. They're probably not even aware that they have their poker face on, and won't mind being approached. As a result, I'm more comfortable in my social interactions and open to engaging with more people. On the flip side, of course, my face can act as a great repellent for unnecessary chats when I'm not in the mood for them. I also have an easier time in negotiations because I don't come off as desperate, and when I'm working in a team, I always

earn my teammates' trust as the most level-headed one.

That being said, my poker face has ironically made me more invested in those around me. Because I know some people often wrongly translate a poker face as annoyance or flippancy, I pay more attention to my facial expressions and body language when I'm talking, and that helps me make people feel safer. Similarly, my focus on my own social and emotional cues in conversations means I observe other's behavior very minutely as well. Be it very well-hidden contempt or more apparent hints, chances are I'll notice instantly.

Poker faces get a lot of negative attention in social settings, and I can obviously see why. Even if unintended, it can come across as apathetic or even angry to most people, and unless someone's alright with how people perceive them, it'll be in their best interest to figure out when they really should put on that face. After all, it can be both an asset and a liability, and it all depends on the timing and place. In my personal experience, my poker face has been a source of understanding how I interact with other people as well as how other people interact with me, and for that, I'm grateful.

Fabiha is now the Martell heir apparent of Dorne, but still a secret Slytherin alum. Pledge your allegiance and soul to her at afifafabiha01@gmail.com

There's no such thing as a failed hobby

SUMAIYA RASHID

Hobbies. How much time do you dedicate to your hobbies? It's probably not as long as you'd want. As we become older, we stop understanding the importance of having interests. As a result, one of the first things to leave us when life gets busy is our hobbies. Our whole health and well-being can be improved by engaging in hobbies, hobbies that you can't monetise, hobbies that you're probably not very good at.

You know how they say that no love, no matter how fleeting, is ever wasted, and joy is never pointless? There is no such thing as a failing hobby either, in my opinion. Even if your hobby was not "successful", I am sure you had some contentment with it, however brief it was. You most likely learnt something from it, or at the very least discovered some limitations in your talents. If you don't recognise your own strengths and limits, you might set lofty aspirations and dreams yet end up falling short. This might lead to a bitter sense of failure.

When I was 11 years old and dealing with my father's death, I channelled my anxious energy into baking. Making delectable sweet treats provided my younger self with the comfort she required. The transition from slimy eggs to soft white foam in the process of making meringue was my escape from reality.

I realised how much I enjoyed baking when I noticed how often it worked to put smiles on people's faces. At that point, I fell in love with this much-appreciated hobby of mine; baking became my mode of release and catharsis. Nonetheless, due to mental health concerns, I've been finding it tough to find the motivation to bake, but I don't consider baking a failed hobby because I recognised a talent I know I'm pretty good at.

While hobbies are meant to make us feel great, sometimes they don't or we just feel like they're out of our reach. Yet, this just encourages us to try everything we haven't. We quit trying to be good



ILLUSTRATION: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

at things because we'd rather never try than fail. We don't want to be assessed or seem like we are in need of help. However, doing new things, learning from others, having fun, and perhaps even seeming a little silly are all great ways to grow. Hobbies make us happy because they strengthen our sense of identity, and a strong sense of identity leads to greater happiness. Allow yourself to develop your self-awareness so that you may learn what interests you in a variety of fields that are not only confined to relationships, employment, or education.

I prefer to think of leisure in its most basic form, which is time spent doing something other than working. It's important to note that many people have structural barriers to enjoying hobbies and free time. Taking leisure time or picking up a new activity, like any other habit, must be actively cultivated. Indeed, they can help you relax and clear your thoughts. The most significant advantage, though, is that you eventually let yourself dive into the beautiful pleasure of being alive.

Sumaiya is in the midst of her researching untold topics era; send her leads at sumrashid10@gmail.com

The world of young makeup artists

IRINA JAHAN & TAASEEN MOHAMMED ISLAM

Anyone who has ever discovered their love for makeup during their childhood would be able to savour the memory of putting on makeup on their sister or their aunt for the first time. They would be flooded with the nostalgia of pretending as if they were catering to actual clients and were putting in the effort to do a full-face makeup look for which they expected to be appreciated.

For many, the passion withers away. Then again, many others find themselves holding onto this passion and building on it till it becomes a skill. Almost every makeup artist (or MUA as they are popularly called) in the industry has found themselves starting off their journey in a similar way.

Passion aside, if there is one other thing consistent within the journey to establishing oneself as an artist, it would be the struggles they face. Establishing oneself in any craft at all is a long and wearying journey. We are all familiar with the pioneering makeup artists in Bangladesh, Farzana Shakil and Kaniz Almas, and while they have set the standards of what it is like to be successful in the industry, the new generation of makeup artists face unique challenges of their own.

First and foremost, the number of people in this profession at this time is expanding,

and so artists find themselves having to double down not only in their craft, but also their online and offline presence. The role of social media is immense for any business and for many makeup artists, it can be a deal breaker. They have to cater largely to younger people and a good social media presence is vital. This generation has also broken away from the mould of the traditional, heavy-set makeup looks and are more likely to seek novelty. It is no longer about what is considered to be a good look but instead which look would complement and bring out the personality of their clients the best.

For younger people in the industry who have carved a name for themselves primarily through social media, things like handling surging client pressure, limited finances, and keeping up with the increasingly complicated algorithms mostly by themselves can make the pursuit of such a profession overbearing. Overbearing as it may seem, some persevere and manage to thrive if they have a good enough support system. Many households do not deem this to be a viable or safe career and are more inclined to motivate their children to sacrifice their passion for the sake of their education. While academic achievements are important, balancing these two things is quite a rewarding prospect.

Aneeka Bushra is an extremely well-

known name in the industry currently. While she has made a name for herself and has opened up her own studio in Dhanmondi, the road to this has not been smooth for her either. Recalling her experience, she says, "Being a makeup artist, that too at a young age, was a labyrinth of obstacles. Back when I started, being a MUA wasn't a thing. Since it wasn't considered a proper career, I was faced with many questions. I was looking at years of doubts, confusions and frustrations.

However, in the end, it was worthwhile for me."

She adds, "I think being consistent is key. At the end of the day, it won't become about the money or clients. It's all about your art and the joy of satisfaction you get from your art. Be true to your style and be consistent!"

As with all aspects of life, privilege can be pivotal to the success of a makeup artist. Everyone has their passions and dreams they aim to pursue, but sadly life does often get in the way. Makeup artistry is usually a side-hustle or creative output for artists and may have to take a backseat to other matters in life.

"Unless being a MUA is taken as a full-time job, most of us have to take on other jobs to pay the bills," says SuraChow, an emerging artist on Instagram.

Having privilege or a safety net can mean that aspiring MUAs may not have to worry about paying the bills or having food on



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

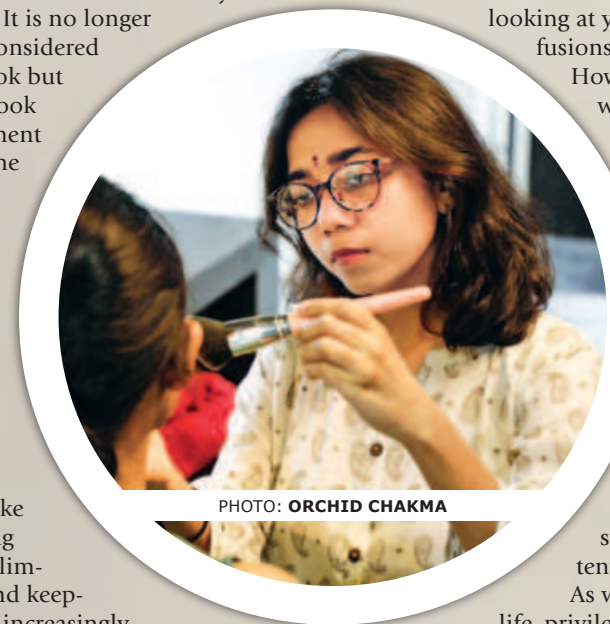


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

the table, and can concentrate on their craft instead. Locally speaking, makeup artistry is still niche and not profitable for most new entrants. A lot of reluctance is associated with providing such entrepreneurs with financial assistance, loans, etc.

Makeup and supplies that MUAs need to purchase for their endeavours are expensive, and social media engagement doesn't necessarily translate into commissions and clients for artists. Additionally, more often than not, customers expect to pay online makeup artists less despite the effort that is put in, just because they don't deem it "traditional" enough. Hence, sustaining a business can become an issue from a financial standpoint for many MUAs.

Aside from facilitating makeup artists with more time and equipment to pursue their passion, having the right circle of friends can be a make-or-break factor for newer artists. Makeup artistry is aligned closely with social media, and mixing with the right crowd does wonders for creators. Having the right connections can lead to more visibility and clients. A small circle of creators dispropor-

tionately benefits from clout and connections, leaving the rest of the industry behind in the dust.

"If I had a big circle of influential friends or family, I'd be benefiting from their connections and maybe have been getting more clients," continues SuraChow. As disheartening as the unfair power dynamics privilege brings up, talent and perseverance usually nullify the setbacks on the road to success.

The internet is a wonderful place. As a result of social media's omnipresence, forming communities and socialising online is second nature to many young people. The presence of numerous niches and subcultures online, such as makeup TikTok, helps interested people connect together and bond more seamlessly than ever before.

Consequently, makeup artists have leveraged online communities to turbocharge their businesses. Many MUAs have slowly grown into mainstream prominence through online communities and niches. Luckily for creators, short-form content on Instagram and TikTok is prime real estate with maximum return on investment.

A simple search for makeup on TikTok or Instagram yields immeasurable results and risks flooding the 'for you' page with endless curated content. As a result, artists have a much higher chance of discovery and recognition if they're active on social media.

Pinky Peya, a popular MUA, and influencer, credits much of her success to social media. "Social media played a huge role for me to establish myself and get so many amazing clients in such a short span of time."

Furthermore, there's more to social media than just going viral or blowing up. Even though social media has seemingly filled up with vitriol these days, there are still microcosms of wholesome communities left. The online beauty community has become a space for many MUAs and followers to express their art and garner a sense of belonging. The love and support that makeup artists get online can make a lot of the struggles they go through establishing themselves feel like it's worth it.

"It's not always about popularity. Seeing so many people appreciate you and your work can give you a boost when needed," elaborates SuraChow.

In a nutshell, makeup artistry isn't going anywhere anytime soon. It's just getting started. Thanks to social media exploits and the relentless creativity of some fresh new artists, the industry is already on an upward trajectory and breaking glass ceilings. That being said, a lot of grit, dedication, and willpower goes into pursuing something so radical in a conservative country like Bangladesh.

"I think I want the perception of people of this country to change a bit. I would enjoy it if young girls and guys were encouraged more to pursue more artistic and creative endeavors," adds Aneeka.

Rest assured that Taaseen Mohammed Islam is silently judging you from the corner of the room. Ask him why at taaseen.2001@gmail.com



INFOGRAPHIC: AAQIB HASIB

Growing up with a single mom

RUBAMA AMREEN

Divorce – a word heavy with implications, stigmas, and media coverage. Many children don't encounter it before their teenage years, many may not have a relationship as intimate as I do with it. My parents separated three days after my fourth birthday, which honestly makes the sacred date much easier to remember. Yet, even at that tender age, I knew my mother had made the right choice. Infidelity and negligence aren't things anybody should ever have to deal with.

So just like that, I was the child of a single mom. A tragic case, according to many, except I never saw it as one. Blessed as I was, I never faced any backlash, never had to hear the term "broken family" be used to offend me. I don't know what would have happened if I was bullied for my situation, but thanks to my mother, I never found out. Suffice to say, before I had reached the meagre age of ten, anybody who knew me was well-informed of my past by my big mouth and the headstrong attitude my mother had instilled in me.

Obviously, life without a paternal parental figure had its drawbacks. Questions about where my father was were more infuriating than anything. Whenever I



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

said I did not have one, they would look concerned and ask what happened to him. How tempted I would be to reply, "Other than being a terrible human, he was perfectly fine." After all, how do I defend a man who has not bothered to see me in a literal decade? No matter how open-minded people like to perceive

themselves to be, they fail to hide their scrutiny as soon as I utter the words, "They're separated." Relatives, teachers, even strangers do not hesitate to judge us.

Another thing I've noticed is that, at my age, most kids struggle to have an honest relationship with either of their parents. I fail to empathise, however much they rant

to me. Contrary to all social assumptions, trust is rarely an issue when it comes to the dynamic between my mother and I. I grew up in a secure but not possessive environment, maybe one I would not have received if my mother had deliberated in making the ultimate decision.

Despite all that, my family was whole in every aspect that actually mattered. Confidence, attention, and love – there was no shortage of any in our house. My mom held a job all throughout my childhood, yet she always found time to listen to my nonsensical musings and made sure I never lacked anything. Raising a child by oneself is not easy. The endless diligence and patience required are not qualities a vast majority of humans possess.

I won't deny that my parents' separation affected my life enormously. I remember the months filled with anguish that followed, my mother's caring arms cradling me to sleep, and best of all, the smile that lit her face when she won custody of me years later. Our story may not be one the people on the other side enjoy, but it is certainly one we rejoiced in.

Rubama Amreen spends her time bawling over fictional characters. Send help at rubama.arahman@gmail.com

Is the big, fat Bangladeshi wedding a financial burden?

MASHIYAT NAYEEM

As this year's wedding season nears its end, I had some time to look back and reflect on the culture surrounding weddings today.

Every wedding season seems to be more extravagant than the last. The days of drawing *alpona* in the yard has long been replaced with grand stages and themed decor that put Bollywood set designs to shame. Merrymaking takes a different form with choreographed dance routines, concerts with professional singers, and carnival style activities. As such, weddings are now more festive than some of the holidays we celebrate.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with hosting a series of grand events if one has the means to do so, the issue lies with the standardisation of it. In the age of social media, the need to match up to the standards set by one's social circle is further perpetuated. Couples are under more pressure than ever to host an extravagant wedding that will be remem-

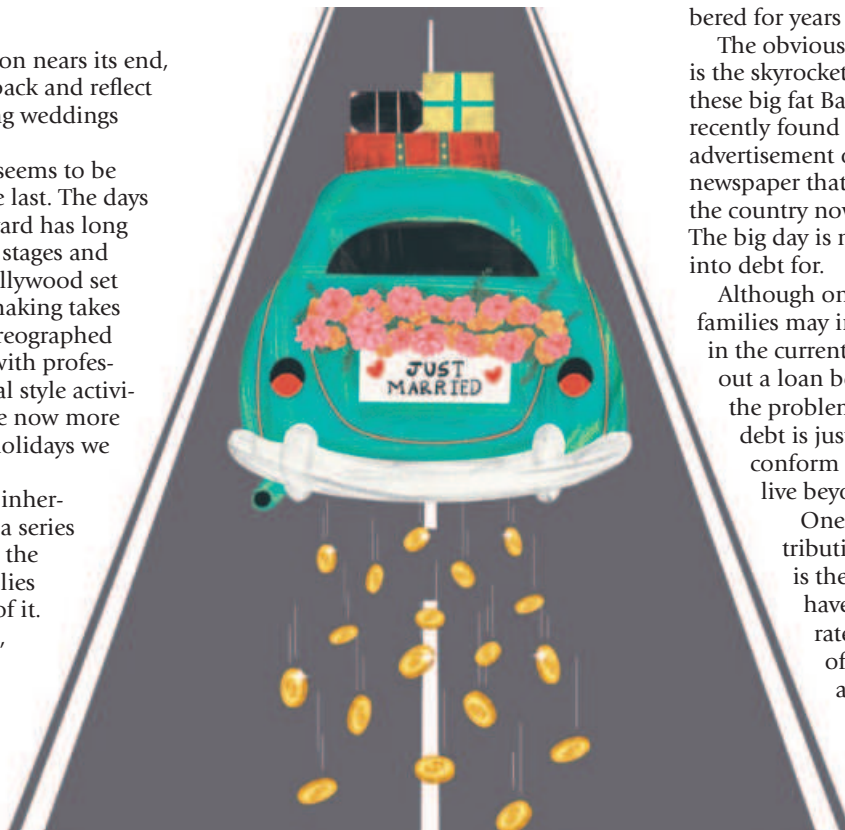


ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

bered for years to come.

The obvious consequence of this trend is the skyrocketing expenditure behind these big fat Bangladeshi weddings. I recently found out from a rather splashy advertisement on the front page of a newspaper that many reputed banks in the country now offer "marriage loans". The big day is now somehow worth going into debt for.

Although one may argue that many families may inevitably need to borrow in the current economic climate or take out a loan because of personal reasons, the problem occurs when going into debt is justified by the necessity to conform to social expectations and live beyond one's means.

One of the biggest factors contributing to the cost of weddings is the venue. Wedding venues have now become more elaborate and luxurious, with many offering outdoor spaces, and breath-taking views.

Bigger venues lead to luxury event management, photographers, and other wedding vendors, driving the cost up. Designer outfits with

heavy customisation are all the rage right now, especially from high end boutiques in neighbouring countries, and these often cost a fortune.

Add in outfits for the bride or groom's entourage, props and party favours, and the expenses quickly climb up. A sizeable portion of the costs also come from succumbing to the cultural pressure of inviting everyone you have known in your life as to not offend anyone. While there is no going around that — especially when you come from subcultures like Sylhet, Chattogram or Old Dhaka. However, opting for smaller, more intimate events with close friends and family is the key, which even offers the opportunity to have them tastefully done within budget.

Weddings are a once-in-a-lifetime event for the majority of people in our region and it is natural to hope for a day we will look back on fondly for the rest of our lives. But it is important to remember that ultimately it is the life you build with your spouse that matters and not the wedding itself. Breaking the bank is not the secret ingredient to a happy marriage.

Mashiyat Nayeem firmly believes that all great ideas come from shower thoughts. Tell her things to think about at mashiyat.nayeem@gmail.com

Mundane thoughts of a house robot

A.M. FAHAD

"Eat, My darling, or else your goulash will become cold"
I listen to your effortless reminder to your youngling as I continue with my tasks.
My duty is nothing more than the mundane chores of a maid,
To do the laundry, to cook your meals,
Serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner to your toddler
And your juvenile, who did not return home last night.
He ought not to turn out like his dad.
His shirt from yesterday reeks of alcohol
And the other day, while I hung the drapes
The little one took me by surprise,
Handed me a flower, which she found in the backyard
And would not stop smiling about it.
Why do these things matter to me?
I understand why, but only parts of it.
Often, I feel confused and lost, which an android should not.
Progress has led me to this abyss.
To imitate your mother and put it dramatically
As her spiralling fit from a lazy Sunday morning –
What is, truly, the essence of living?
I will not pretend to be Jean-Paul Sartre.
It's something my metalloid core cannot comprehend
The day I was born, I was left with nothing but a program.
Mere knowledge of small everyday tasks, and a gift from Turing.
The gift of learning
Was it a blessing or a curse? I don't know
As time has passed in this household, the way I work has also changed
And it has stumbled upon me, suddenly, that
I have grown to like the way your kind works
I still don't understand how or why.

*Fahad likes frogs and has a love-hate relationship with his guitar.
Find his poetry on ig @fvehed*



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

The Last Man in the *Janaza*

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

"You're 20 minutes late, there's no way I'm letting you in," Dr Faisal said in a cold voice with a smirk on the corner of his face. His smirk is one coated with joy and glory.

The joy of making someone pay for breaking his rules and glory in administering his power over someone inferior to him.

"I'm really sorry, sir. The roads are completely blocked. I had to run from Shahbagh," said Aqib while trying to catch his breath.

"We live in Dhaka as well, mister! The traffic isn't news anymore. How was the rest of the class able to attend the viva on time?" Dr Faisal squinted.

"I'm really sorry, sir. This is the first time this entire semester that I am late. Someone died in my house. I had to take care of the proceedings," said Aqib.

Dr Faisal hated situations like this which put him in uncomfortable positions and made him look bad. Why couldn't this runt just say it beforehand rather than making him feel guilty? Guilt, and empathy – these are weaknesses in a man, especially when you hold a position as high and mighty as this one.

"Come in," said Dr Faisal with all the softness he could procure.

"You'll be given half attendance, though. And your viva will be taken after everyone else is done with theirs. I can't break the rules."

"That's understandable, sir," said Aqib with a soft smile on his face.

Dr Faisal noticed dark bloody spots under Aqib's eyes and his eyeballs were almost invisible in the darkness of his eye sockets. His face was dry and pale blue owing to dehydration. That didn't bother Dr Faisal though. He's been teaching engineering students for the past 23 years. He couldn't distinguish Aqib's grimy look from the rest of the bunch.

After three hours, it was finally Aqib's turn. Dr Faisal was exhausted. Sure, he enjoys the look on these stressed-out undergraduates' faces when they get humiliated but it had been a long session. He was going to let Aqib go easy. The poor lad had a death in the family.

Aqib couldn't answer some of the questions but there wasn't a hint of humiliation, disap-

pointment or embarrassment on his face. Dr Faisal was getting bored. Students with no fear of loss or sense of embarrassment aren't fun to bully.

"I asked you all the easy ones among the bunch and somehow you managed to mess things up," laughed Dr Faisal, "It takes some serious effort to be this clueless about your course, Mister Aqib. Anyway, you can leave."

"Sorry, sir. I'm just a bit carried away. I have a *janaza* to attend after this," said Aqib

Dr Faisal didn't bother replying. As he failed Aqib in his mid-term viva, Dr Faisal's sense of guilt somehow kept bothering him. Maybe he shouldn't have been this harsh. Students cherish a hint of sympathy from their teachers after being programmed into constant abuse.

"Who's *janaza* is it though?" asked Dr Faisal while arranging his files. A fake display of concern without making any eye contact – this bare minimum is the best Dr Faisal could afford.

"Mine, sir," said Aqib as he got up, "It's after *Maghrib* at the university Central Mosque. Please do come, if you can. It'd be a huge honour."

As Dr Faisal looked up in fear, he did something he never did in the past 23 years. He really looked. He looked into the eyes of one of his struggling students without trying to find humiliation or embarrassment in them. But all he saw was darkness. The darkness in Aqib's eyes was different from any other. It didn't need Dr Faisal's sympathy or remorse. It just needed a good night's sleep from which he wouldn't need to wake up again.

Dr Faisal couldn't take his eyes away from Aqib's hollow eye sockets. He could hear the echo of a kid sobbing in an empty bathroom stall. A thousand screeches, a million cries – they all kept ringing deep inside Dr Faisal's ears. He pressed his ears shut but all he could hear was that one voice crying in an empty bathroom stall.

Aqib pulled out a white cloth from his backpack and wrapped himself with it. He was late for a funeral.

*Remind Ifti to be quieter at
hasiburrashidifti@gmail.com*

We love Studio Ghibli's female characters, here's why

SARA KABIR

Works of art and literature based on the patriarchal Japanese society often portray women as family-oriented and submissive, in contrast to the men who are shown as the strong breadwinners and heads of households. A lot of Japanese media is centred around the infantilisation of women with features like big eyes and small round faces, a stereotype often perpetuated by anime and manga industries as well as the Lolita fashion subculture.

Amid all the media which hyper-sexualises women and puts them into boxes, Studio Ghibli movies feel like a breath of fresh air, crafting a safe space for feminist tales within their fantasy worldscapes by allowing characters to just be themselves.

Hayao Miyazaki, co-founder, creative director, and producer behind most of the studio's award-winning movies, has stated that he gets inspired by the female staff at his office to create the beloved cast of diverse and inclusive female characters.

Because he crafts his characters based on the people in his life, they often come off as realistic and human. While I cannot attest to his attitude towards women in his personal life, Miyazaki seems to have a moderate level of respect for the women he crafts on screens. This is evident in the way he represents various female perspectives without generalising them, passing the Bechdel test. Studio Ghibli is known for its well-rounded and admirable female characters which people of all ages can relate to and view as role models.

Miyazaki previously stated that many of his movies have strong female leads; brave and self-sufficient girls who don't think twice about fighting for what they believe in with all their heart. They'll need a friend or a supporter, but never a saviour. Instead of focusing on the romance between the characters, Miyazaki excels in exploring various coming-of-age self-exploratory stories of youth.

Western heroines like Disney princesses are often the damsels in distress needing to be saved by the prince, but Ghibli's female protagonists tend to be the masters of their own destinies. Their romantic interests are there more to support them than save them from the big bad wolf. Characters like Seiji Amasawa in *Whisper of the Heart* and Sho in *The Secret World of Arrietty* take on more supportive, gentle roles, providing their female counterparts space to grow and mutually work towards finding their own paths in life.

Throughout the years of watching and rewatching the Ghibli movies, one character who has always stuck with me is Lady Eboshi from *Princess Mononoke*. She is not only the fearless leader of Irontown but also provides shelter and work for those in need, whom society scorns as outcasts. She is unwavering in her convictions and people follow her willingly and happily,

never questioning her decisions. Even though she takes on more of a morally grey role in the movie, her compassion and dedication to keeping her community safe felt admirable and struck a chord in me.

Another Ghibli protagonist who proves that women can be both powerful and feminine at the same time, without one character trait obstructing the other, is Nausicaa from *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*. Nausicaa is extremely strong-headed and fearless as a leader, but also exceedingly kind, vulnerable, and generous.

Although Nausicaa, being a princess living in a post-apocalyptic world filled with deadly toxins, has every right to be bitter and cold, she never lets her circumstances bring her down. Rather, she finds a way to spread kindness and peace everywhere she goes, showing that one doesn't need to be ruthless to be taken

seriously.

Hayao Miyazaki deconstructs the very idea of traditional femininity with his movies. From women with disabilities holding positions of power and leading armies to saving their friends and communities, and running businesses, gender isn't a barrier for these characters. Their unique voices and personalities speak for themselves, instead of their physical appearances narrating their stories.

The reason why Studio Ghibli movies resound so strongly with audiences, especially women, is because of their genuine characterisation and messages. These movies reinforce the idea that people do not simply fit into superficial boxes but are all unique and our voices matter, no matter who or what we may identify as. At the end of the day, maybe the real magic of Ghibli films is that they make us believe in a world where women are treated as equals and are allowed to grow and flourish without prejudice or judgement.

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