

ESSAY

# Sad girl lit and trivialising women's writing

**Determining whether a traumatic incident is severe enough to warrant behaviour that might be described as messy and childish at best, to petty and repulsive at worst is a contentious issue, not least because the usually thin, white, middle class protagonist is insulated from the myriad systemic issues poorer women of colour are not.**

ALIZA RAHMAN

When I read the title of Charlotte Stroud's article "The curse of the cool girl novelist" and the accompanying description of said type of novelist, I had a solid image of what she was referring to. Stroud describes "cool girl novelists" as "depressed and alienated", "incurably downcast", and "terminally sad". It had similarities with "sad girl" literature, a supposedly new genre captivating readers and publishers alike.

Sylvia Plath, Otessa Moshfegh, and Sally Rooney are the names that commonly come up when you think of this aforementioned genre. Type 'sad girl novels' into Google, and a string of articles will turn up. I came across a post on Reddit which asked if the "hot/sad girl" is a new genre. In the comments to that post on r/books, a remarkable amount of diversity could be seen in the content of the books being mentioned. They ranged from addicts, depressed women, 'a friend who is a serial killer' to tradition bound parents pushing for marriage.

As might be evident from this article even being written, I have issues with this label of the sad, mad, or cool girl novelist, because the term "sad girl" works to erase, exclude, and distract. It is a term that flattens and shapes perceptions before one has read the work.

A mere cursory look at blurbs and reviews of texts by the authors Stroud mentions shows the sweeping generalisation placing women writers talking about Grenfell, inequality, racism, colonialism, substance abuse, and romances with power imbalances, under one category, as if one commonality in their works renders the rest of the work unworthy. In what I felt was one of the most telling parts of the article, Audre Lorde is included without any further caveats with Sylvia Plath, as if the writings of these women can be compared with ease. Additionally, think for a moment, what the reaction would be if *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) were called "sad boy novels". It would be scoffed at, and rightly so.

This is not to say that there is no validity to the feeling that there is a tonal similarity in the novels recently being published. In a 2023 article in *The Guardian* by Sarah Manavis, authors who could be categorised as writing "sad girl" literature point out the flaws themselves: the protagonists are often privileged, white, middle-class, millennial women; the issues faced are never "truly sinister"; the assumption that there is a "general female trauma" that underlines life as a woman.

A 2019 article by Leslie Jameson also considers this issue. In it, the very valid problem of seeing happiness as lacking depth is mentioned, and the issue of writing about suffering as if it's only individually experienced is also discussed.

The supposed sad girl novel might seem repetitive, and in a world where our senses have been dulled by an endless onslaught of audiovisual content, seeing the same kind of books being pushed by publishers can strike a nerve. But we must look at why sadness is so pervasive in novels



ILLUSTRATION: ALIZA RAHMAN

about these relatively comfortable and often relatable characters.

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Stroud, who notably veers off from others criticising this genre by including authors who are women of colour, ends her article writing, "Everyone's tired of your turmoil." It made me think as to what expressions of sadness we were willing to deem exhausting, and I kept thinking of the Bangla word most often directed at young women: "dhong."

Online discourse frequently coalesces Gen Z

and millennials, leaving out the vastly different experiences with new technology those placed in the two groups have had. I grew up without reaping the benefits of the massive push to destigmatise mental health issues that many younger Gen Z—a group which I belong to—have benefitted from. And so I grew up hearing the word "dhong" when I expressed vulnerability without realising the function this word served. Much like Stroud's assessment of the cool girl novelist, "dhong" refers to a pretence, suggesting that the expressed vulnerability is an act meant to garner attention and sympathy and hence should be shut down and ignored. In trying to understand this reaction, what I have found particularly useful has been the description of pain as a signalling device. If sadness is being expressed, what is being indicated, and what is being revealed?

These dismissals of sad girl novels result in a refusal to see, listen to, or understand women. It is a convenient bulwark that allows for the easy avoidance of inconvenient truths regarding women who, despite their privilege, are at odds with the modern world. It is as if there is an underlying discomfort at what is being indicated by these sad/cool girl novelists—that the present world continues to induce suffering, even on the comparatively privileged people we can relate to, people not in unfathomably inhumane situations such as those shown in breaking news coverages.

The situation is very much akin to what Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) lacked, but also crucially revealed through its inclusion of only unhappy white women. Its selection of only the society's norm and also ideal laid bare the many problems of long cherished beliefs and institutions such as marriage and motherhood we so strenuously enforce as the norm. We therefore have to ask: is the sad girl novel doing the same for some other strongly held belief? In many ways, the alienation and disaffection so common in sad girl novels with comfortable white protagonists can be read as manifestations of living an atomised life under late capitalism. Does the "sad girl" novel then reveal the exhaustion that comes from such a system? And does it further reveal the more uncomfortable reality that the more privileged have become docile in the face of such an existence? When the self-help industry has ballooned to US\$ 41.2 billion, is the sad girl novel the other side to this phenomenon where happiness seems elusive?

Sara Ahmed in her examination of happiness, and subsequently unhappiness, writes, "The freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness, wherever that deviation takes us. It would thus mean the freedom to cause unhappiness by acts of deviation". Seen in this light, sad girl novels can be read as a rebellion, even if a meek one, against culturally entrenched ideas of what we ought to do.

**Aliza Rahman has problems keeping her work short and fully acknowledges it. Give her tips at [aliza.hridula@gmail.com](mailto:aliza.hridula@gmail.com).**

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

# Aimless in Morisaki bookshop

Review of the Bangla translation of 'Days at the Morisaki Bookshop' (Harper Perennial, 2023) by Satoshi Yagisawa

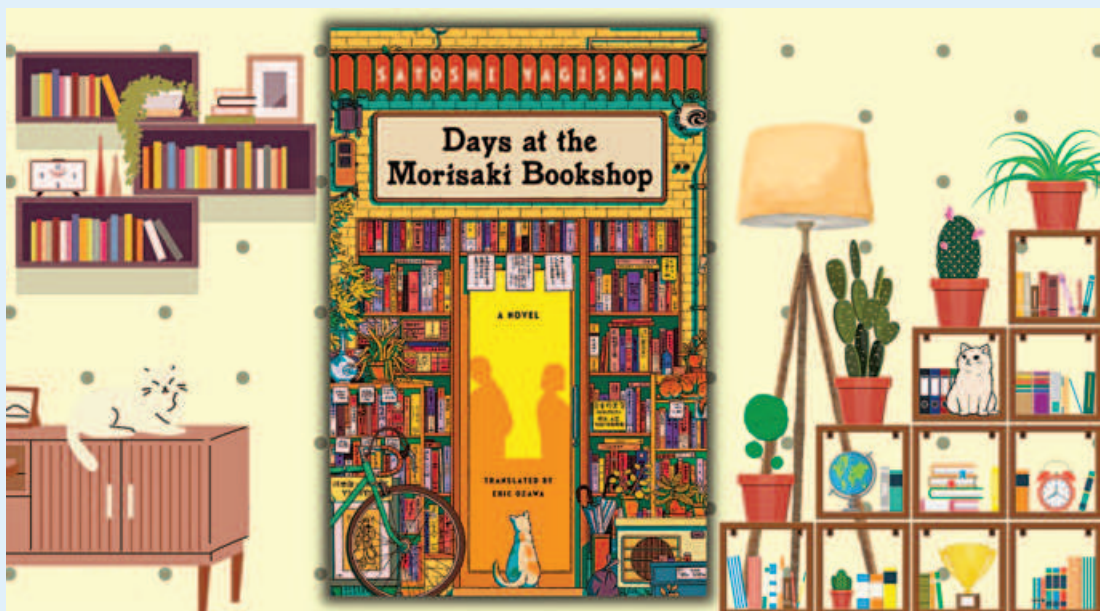


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

NAFIS ANWAR

My introduction to the Bangla translation of Japanese books happened during my visit to Baatighar Chittagong. It was there that I encountered the Bangla translations of works by one of my favourite Japanese writers, Haruki Murakami, back in 2021. Then last year, I found myself enchanted with the promise of *Morisaki Boighorer Dinguli* (Abosar Prokashona, 2023); the allure of the black edition of the book boasting

ebony pages and stunning artwork had me yearning for the book months before its scheduled release.

One thing that I noticed when I opened the book first was the dedication. Salman Haque, the translator, dedicates it to the second hand bookshops in our very own Nilkhet. To me, it felt like a beautiful rhyme between the work of Satoshi Yagisawa about second hand books and the second hand books heaven we have here. Reading this slice-of-life narrative in my native

language brought about a distinct charm—it felt like a journey into the familiar; the book effortlessly traverses boundaries of countries, traditions, and languages, creating a universal connection. The traits of the characters and the journey they go through feel very personal and familiar, even though the context and the setting are much different than that of our country.

While at first sight it might seem like the whole book revolves around one Morisaki Bookshop, an entire street that is filled with second-hand and pre-loved books stores, cafes, lush greens, and people who have a genuine appreciation for books fill up the pages of the story. The book is divided between two chapters and each could be a book in their own right.

The first chapter of the story focuses on the life of Takako at a time when her life is turned upside down upon learning that her boyfriend is soon to get married to someone else. Takako, not being able to stand working in the same place as her ex, leaves her job and decides to spend a few months at her uncle Satoru's second-hand bookshop in Jimbocho, Tokyo. She is initially resistant to the idea of residing in the Morisaki Bookshop but gradually embraces the enchantment of this space. For someone in love with the world of books and literature, the backdrop of this story filled me with whimsy. When Takako first went into her room

filled with piles of books, a profound yearning to trade places with her washed over me.

As the narrative unfolds, we delve into the backstories of various characters, including glimpses into Satoru's youth—a time marked by the uncertainty and aimlessness that often accompanies early life. As a bilingual reader, I often tend to compartmentalise complex emotions in a foreign language to create a sense of distance. However, reading about these anxieties in my native tongue made them more palpable, more real.

In many ways, the second chapter rhymes with the first. While we are still experiencing the book from the point of view of Takako, she is not the main focus anymore. The emphasis is now on the relationship of Satoru and his wife Momoko. While in the first it was Satoru helping Takako turn a new leaf, in this one the roles are reversed—Takako helps Satoru reconnect with his wife. We learn more about how Satoru and Mokomo met in Paris, how their love began, and what led to their separation and eventual rekindling.

The simplicity of Satoshi Yagisawa's writing is very appealing to me. Showing the quirks of the characters was a very effective way to flesh them out, adding depth to the narrative. One such quirk is how Mokomo expresses her affection by pinching the cheeks of her loved ones. At one point of the story we see that Takako

is opposed to it but by the end, she not only expects to be pinched but anticipates it with eagerness. This simple act becomes a powerful symbol, subtly conveying the shift in attitudes and the deepening bond between these characters.

In the end, the plot of the book is short and rather simple but it reveals so much about the human struggle of these universal anxieties. The setting and the environment does a lot of heavy lifting, elevating the book. For me, the allure of Japanese literature, especially in the slice-of-life genre, lies in its effortless prose. It is so matter-of-fact, offering a glimpse into the lives of its characters. Salman Haque masterfully captures the same feeling in this native translation as well. The world of Morisaki bookshop feels lived in, as if the characters have lived in it for years and will continue to live through long after the story is over.

I want to leave the readers with a few lines by Yagisawa (translated to English by Eric Ozawa): "The Morisaki Bookshop stands alone at the corner of a street crowded with used bookstores. It's tiny and old and really nothing much to look at. There aren't many customers. But there are people who love this store. And as long as they're devoted to it, then that's enough."

**Nafis Anwar is trying his best to come up with a witty author bio.**