

ESSAY

Romance and unfulfillment in the past and the present

The escapism provided by romance novels may be a means to recuperate. Seen in this light, we can see why certain romance tropes become prevalent in certain areas.

ALIZA RAHMAN

Much like most media geared toward women, romance novels have frequently received flack for its supposed shallowness, absurdity, and flamboyancy. The romances I'm talking about here include the ones certain people would call escapist. This is a criticism, because it means that according to the criticising individual, it doesn't bear semblance with real life. But if we are to criticise this genre or its readers well, we have to ask, what are readers of romance escaping from? This article therefore starts with a stereotype, not about the genre itself, but the women reading the genre.

Janice Radaway in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984) interviews a group of women who enthusiastically read romance novels. Their answers were illuminating. Some consider it a "special gift" after a hard day's work, others that it is one of the few highly private activities one can do, and for some, it is that attention doesn't need to be split up on more than one task. For the brief moments of reading, these women are able to exist in a world where the needs and emotions of others don't have to be catered to. Husbands of the women reading express discontent at their readings at various times not because of the content, but because they want their wives to engage in an activity with them such as watching tv, or as one woman explains, "I do think men feel threatened. They want their wife to be in the room with them. And I think my body is in the room but the rest of me is not (when I am reading)".

The statements made about romances, the derogatory and the callous, are many. That aspect isn't new of course. Fears about new mediums of communication and expression range from Plato fearing writing will result in forgetfulness to parents in 1980s America being convinced that *Dungeons and Dragons* would possess their children. The scrutiny and hysteria is more astute when the primary audience for a show (or what we assume to be the primary audience) is anyone who is NOT an adult male. The long propagated idea of rationality being a man's domain and irrationality and childlikeness being a woman's attributes has a history that goes far back. No reason then for romance to escape such a fate of being labelled unworthy of critical examination, and even by some as a waste of time.

There is a different kind of enjoyment derived from watching or reading romances than in independent or art cinema or literary fiction. Romance is placed firmly in genre fiction as it is seen as providing entertainment rather than



ILLUSTRATION: ALIZA RAHMAN

education. This matter of enjoyment is brought up by several of the scholars I have mentioned. Kathleen Gilles Seidel's chapter, in the book *Dangerous Men And Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance* (1992) edited by Jayne Ann Krentz, is called "Judge me by the Joy I Bring". The name itself is vital, because it highlights not only what a primary purpose of the romance novel is but that enjoyment by itself is a good enough purpose. The chapter discusses prejudice against the genre, a prejudice that has come from even women feminists. Many times, the reaction to anything seeming overly "girly" has been an overcorrection or an attempt to expend energy into disproving a patriarchal stereotype they themselves (i.e., women critical of the genre) had found limiting, suffocating and untruthful. But all this leads to being blind about the many sources of pleasure and power in the romance novels. Seidel writes how, no matter what hardship the heroine is

facing with the hero or on her own, in the end, all is alright. Therefore the choice to read romance itself is an act of agency as the reader is choosing to shield herself from the dark possibilities that exist in the real world for a few moments of mostly unblemished joy that can be rejuvenating.

In NPR's *All Things Considered* podcast episode posted on Valentine's Day 2023, it is mentioned that despite the overall decline of book sales, the romance genre is still thriving. For anyone who has heard of BookTok or browsed the catalogue of popular stories in online or physical bookstores, the problematic elements in many of these romance novels is old news.

The toxicity in the romance novels that are popular isn't new. My own dive into *Twilight* as a child and K dramas as an adult has run into the undeniably complicated and admittedly creepy territory of centuries old supernatural beings falling in love with human women who haven't been alive for even

three decades. I don't see my enjoyment as a reflection on my character, I see it as a way to smile and feel lighter, especially when I am navigating difficult not-swiftly-solved situations.

Deep, long-lasting despondency that renders one incapable of executing roles they are expected to, can be a rational response to a world designed to exhaust certain individuals. The escapism provided by romance novels may be a means to recuperate. Seen in this light, we can see why certain romance tropes become prevalent in certain areas.

Diana Palmer writes in *Let Me Tell You About My Readers* that her readers include teachers, factory workers, women divorced and widowed and women in nuclear families taking care of household chores with or without an office job. What is common in all these women according to Palmer is that they all "know what love is" because it is what they give their family day in day out.

It is not surprising then that one of the most common ideas of what "romantic" is constitutes making dinner, a nice bath, chores being completed, assisting with groceries, or anything that removes one from the mundanity of daily life. Seidel explains this perfectly when she writes, "No one takes care of Mom, except when Mom decides to take care of herself by reading a romance and becoming, for that time, a countess".

Romance is freeing. Sandra Brown in her essay *The Risk of Seduction and the Seduction of Risk*, the same book Seidel wrote for, writes that the fantasy element in romance allows one to "climb into somebody else's skin" and "play mental dress up". Speaking from her position of being from a conservative background and also the eldest of five children, she discusses how villains provide a way for her to look into the darker aspects of her nature that she may not have had the chance to explore otherwise.

However, it is not just what romance provides for readers, but what is also avoided in romance that shows a different aspect to the readers, and subsequently, the societies they inhabit.

In my readings, one of the most incredible lines I came across was from sociologist Eva Illouz. Her words in *The End of Love* (2019) illuminated a dark alley that even those most cynical about the genre of romance might have missed: "a culture that has so much to say about love is far more silent on the no-less-mysterious moment when we avoid falling in love, where we fall out of love, when the one who kept us awake at night now leaves us indifferent, when we hurry away from those who excited us a few months or

even a few hours ago".

We therefore have to ask, what happens when romantic love, instead of metamorphosing, is gone, and an ending is the best path forward? Does the end of years-long relationships simply erase all that was experienced? And does such a choice indicate a personal lacking in the very core of what makes a human being decent?

It does not. This aggressiveness and hostility to the idea of a breakup and starting anew with someone speaks to a fragility, not just of men, but everyone. As people of different socioeconomic classes are suddenly privy to lifestyle choices made by those with conditions and freedoms they may not have known of or imagined, the choices of those who believe differently can cause shock to those of a conservative bent, even if the conservativeness is not overt or fully realised as a part of one's mental makeup. The truth of the matter is that love involves a gamble with the ever-present possibility of searing hurt always lurking in the corner. It may be why *500 Days of Summer* remains piercing and unforgettable to this day. Is it then almost not a duty of the genre of romance to teach how to move on and ahead?

What is considered romantic in a day and age is another way of examining not just current desires, but also what is lacking in one's life and society. If billionaires, werewolves and overwhelmingly popular celebrities (see *After* series) are all the craze, what are modern women really missing and wishing for in their lives?

Romance is no more nor less than any other genre; it is simply another kind of story. The women who read fiction, regardless of race, class and abilities, are diverse. They include mothers in upsetting marriages, women wanting to escape the demands of a breakneck workplace, and human rights lawyers who need Colleen Hoover to end the day because it is all that they have energy left for. The audience itself is a window into the conditions of women we may perceive as entirely fine, without a crack in the veneer we are expected to have in public, but who have innermost needs that are unmet.

We therefore have to admit that romance is revelatory, not just of the women reading them, but the society they are living in. The truth is, most consumers of romance novels are aware and conscious of the fantasy in them, and yet choose to indulge in them. The question we have to keep asking is why.

Aliza Rahman wants to know what you're reading, in excruciating detail. Tell her at aliza.hridula@gmail.com.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

POETRY

Silent Keys

HASAN MARUF

For eons piano keys unmoved
Lay silently asleep
Until touched by supple fingers
Moved with emotion
Musically mused with
Poetic flows in my imagination
Long silenced between sealed pages
Unloved by open eyes
As the breath of your song
Blows across the stubborn cover
Your winsome ivory smile
Casting a prism-inspiring light
Where ebony shadows
Once masked their deeper meaning
Beneath the midnight lace dress
Fit to caress your stunning silhouette
Erupting in vibrations
Stirring words and notes
To achieve apogee
Becoming a tornado of sound
Pulsing to the rhythm of
An unleashed heart

In sync with an old soul
Released pounding hammers on this
claviature
Eighty-eight black and white
Playmates searching for their lost key
Harmonically tuned with the
The natural pitch of this treasure chest
Sealing out drafts
While holding something precious
within
And now you have patiently taught
My fingers sing
Demanding that I not stop
In the middle of an aural duet
To perform upon the
Vertebral column a delicate refrain
Into an ascending crescendo
Until silence cries out to begin again.

Hasan Maruf teaches English in DPS STS School, Dhaka. What influences him to lift the pen is not only his adoration for creative writing, but a need to seek spiritual salvation.

FICTION

A Born Reader

FARAH GHUZZNAVI

Surveying the decorated wall now vibrantly alive with Winnie the Pooh and Harry Potter characters, Sarah allowed herself a satisfied grin.

Most people might find it crazy that her thoughts upon discovering her pregnancy so quickly went to bookish nursery decor, but as a voracious lifelong reader, she had always longed to share her love of books with her future children.

She could still recall her excitement when she first saw those two coveted pink lines finally show up on one of her countless pregnancy tests. After numerous efforts to conceive during their decade-long marriage had ended in failure, she and Zahid had almost given up hope.

It was only what Zahid termed Sarah's bloody-mindedness—the sheer grit carrying her from a Bangla-medium education to a full scholarship at Princeton—that had enabled her to endure the physical discomfort as well as the repeated letdowns.

Not to mention the richly-textured humiliation that came with being a thirty-something, thus-far-childless woman in Bangladesh. Everyone from opinionated family members to nosy strangers in doctors' waiting rooms felt entitled to ask questions and provide

unwanted, often scientifically dubious advice.

It was only after the first trimester had been safely completed that Sarah considered telling anyone. Even her parents had been kept in the dark, ostensibly to avoid disappointment if anything went wrong.

When she was finally able to relax, she put all her energy into

screen time can inflict on children's developing brains? Anyway, she'll be a real bookworm, a born reader. I'm sure of it!"

Unfortunately, Sarah was wrong on all counts. Their son, Zoad, was nothing like they had expected—let alone what she had assumed. Difficult as a baby, he grew into a child prone to tantrums.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

choosing inspiration from her favourite children's books for the baby's room. There would be no Disney characters for this well-read child!

Zahid teased her about it mercilessly. "But what if he doesn't like reading, darling? What if he's a movie buff instead, like me?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Sarah retorted. "Do you know the damage that too much

But if Sarah had thought the initial stages of motherhood were challenging, things worsened considerably after Zoad started school. His teachers complained continuously about his lack of attentiveness, and—in one particularly ferocious critic's words—Zoad's "vehement resistance to learning".

Zahid blamed outdated teaching methods for being part of the problem, but Sarah simply

doubled down, dedicating her own time to supervising Zoad's homework. Their conflicting approaches to the problem deepened the distance between them. There was no question of trying for a second baby.

After a particularly stressful few months, they finally agreed that their son might need professional help with his studies. Zoad was sent to a Child Specialist for an assessment.

A few nights later, Zahid returned home to find Sarah screaming at their seven-year-old. "Just read the page, Zoad! Why do you have to make everything so difficult?"

Wordlessly, he offered Sarah the file containing the specialist's report.

Zoad had ADD and severe dyslexia.

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator and development worker. Her work has been published in 11 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and the USA. *Writer in Residence with Commonwealth Writers, she published a short story collection titled Fragments of Riversong (Daily Star Books, 2013), and edited the Lifelines anthology (Zubaan Books, 2012). She is currently working on her new short story collection and is on Instagram @farahghuznavi.*