

ESSAY

BOI MELA 2024

Is this year's Boi Mela a mausoleum of Bangla romance?



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

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Wandering through the bustling lanes of Boi Mela, amidst the cacophony of voices and the rustle of pages turning, I found myself lost in a curious examination of the Bangla love story. It's more than just a literary pursuit, you see. These stories whisper secrets that feel strangely familiar, like forgotten chapters of my own soul. Each turn of the page unveils a kaleidoscope of Bangladeshi life, reflecting not just personal desires, but the intricate tapestry of our culture and society.

Forget the tragic grandeur of Shakespeare or the fiery epics of the West, Bangla love stories are altogether on a different level. They explore love not as a simple connection between two hearts, but as a journey navigating the labyrinth of societal norms. It's about stolen glances across a crowded room, whispered promises under a moonlit sky, and the courage to carve your own path, hand in hand, amidst the complexities of tradition. This unique

perspective, where love's journey is as much about societal dance as it is about emotional yearning, is what sets Bangla love stories apart.

And if there is one person who completely changed the Bangla love story scene, it's Humayun Ahmed, who with his unparalleled storytelling, has left an indelible mark on the genre of Bangla romance. His narratives, rich in emotional depth and cultural insight, have become the benchmark for exploring love within the constraints of Bangladeshi society. Through his works, love is not just an emotion but a narrative that encompasses the broader societal and familial contexts, making his stories resonate deeply with readers across generations and leaving a framework for young authors to work on.

In recent years, the landscape of Bangla romance has witnessed a notable shift. While the themes of societal expectations and familial obligations continue to be prevalent, there has been a gradual inclusion of

more complex issues such as divorce, breakups, and the challenges of modern relationships. This evolution reflects a broader societal change, where traditional notions of love are being reexamined in the light of contemporary realities. Two good examples would be *Poddoja* (Anannya, 2024) by Elma Behrouz and *Tomar Jonno Dariye Chilam* (Anannya, 2024) by Sadat Hossain. These novels, while distinct in their narrative and thematic explorations, collectively underscore the evolving nature of love stories in Bangali culture, resonating deeply with a readership navigating the complexities of modern love and relationships.

Poddoja, a novel that has captured the imagination of countless readers at Boi Mela, is not your conventional love story. It weaves a complex narrative that intersects love, family affairs, and a feminist critique of societal norms. The tale of *Poddoja* and her husband Hawladar, who is revealed to be a male activist with questionable views,

unfolds with an intensity that grips the reader from the first page. The reception of *Poddoja* speaks volumes about its impact. With all five editions sold out, it's evident that Behrouz has struck a chord with the audience. The novel's popularity, especially on social media platforms where it initially gained prominence in 2020, highlights a shift in the literary tastes of the Bangali readership.

On the other end of the spectrum, *Tomar Jonno Dariye Chilam* offers a purer, more traditional take on the love story genre. The enduring appeal of the book is indicative of the fact that, despite the changing cultural boundaries and expectations there remains a deep-seated yearning for stories that celebrate the quintessential essence of love.

The digital age has further influenced this narrative shift. Social media and online platforms, once absent from the traditional Bangla love story, are now becoming integral elements of modern narratives. This inclusion not only reflects the changing dynamics of love in the digital era but also challenges authors to integrate these modern elements while maintaining the essence of Bangla romance.

Tanvir Kabir Shaikat among other young authors argue that this modern perspective on love enriches Bangla romantic literature, pushing its boundaries while keeping the essence of love alive. They advocate for storytelling that moves with the times, ensuring that each generation's voice is heard, preserving the vibrancy of our love stories for the future. Sadat Hossain and Anisul Hoque have emerged as favourites among young readers with thrillers indicating a shift in literary preferences. A decade ago, the concept of love was draped in secrecy and personal sacrifices, where waiting and longing played a crucial role in deepening affections. Love thrived on unavailability, making every stolen moment and every exchanged letter precious. However, in today's digital age, where instant communication has become the norm, the once-treasured sense of anticipation and mystery in love seems to have diminished. Social media platforms have made connections so accessible that the value of patience and the thrill of the wait have largely evaporated. As a result, young readers, now more than ever,

find themselves drawn to the suspense and adrenaline rush offered by thrillers and psychological dramas. These genres provide an escape into a world of intrigue and excitement, a stark contrast to their everyday lives, which, especially in recent times, have been marked by increased periods indoors due to global circumstances. The current literary landscape, as observed at events like Boi Mela, suggests that thrillers, with their capacity to engage and captivate through suspense and mystery, resonate more with the desires of the modern youth, reflecting a broader cultural transition towards seeking instant gratification and novel experiences over the slow-burning romance of yesteryears.

The popularity of translated works and the emergence of new literary genres at Boi Mela have also contributed to the evolving tastes of Bangali readers. This shift towards a more globalised literary landscape does not diminish the appeal of traditional Bangla love stories but rather enriches it, offering readers a broader spectrum of narratives to explore.

Overall, the evolution of Bangla romantic literature, as witnessed in the bustling aisles of Boi Mela, mirrors the evolution of our collective consciousness. It reflects our struggles, our triumphs, and our ceaseless quest for connection in a world that's perpetually in flux. But still, as I pen down the concluding thoughts, I look forward to the future of Bangla romantic literature. I know that we carry with us the legacy of the past, the innovations of the present, and the promise of new tales that will continue to captivate, inspire, and unite us in the shared experience of love. And so, as the pages continue to turn and new stories emerge from the heart of Bengal, we remain tethered to the infinite stories of love—each a thread in the rich tapestry of Bangla literature, each a reflection of our collective soul. In this endless journey of exploration and discovery, we find not just stories, but reflections of ourselves, our culture, and the timeless quest for love that defines the human experience.

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REFLECTIONS

The lack of fantasy at Boi Mela

In Boi Mela, seeking out innovative Bangladeshi fantasy stories can often feel like a lost cause. After hours spent browsing bookstores over the span of an entire weekend, my findings for books that may be considered fantasy or of a tangential genre ended with only a handful of names to look into.

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With Ekushey Boi Mela now in full swing, the excitement surrounding the discovery of new releases should be hanging palpably in the air. After all, there is no other part of the year that sees new releases popping up at such high rates. But the world of genre fiction, particularly fantasy, can be a difficult field to explore in Bangladesh. With fantasy, we find a genre that is left largely untapped—the brilliance of fantasy, especially when explored with Bangladeshi culture in mind, can open new avenues of storytelling. So now the question is, where is all the Bangla fantasy?

In Boi Mela, seeking out innovative Bangladeshi fantasy stories can often feel like a lost cause. After hours spent browsing bookstores over the span of an entire weekend, my findings for books that may be considered fantasy or of a tangential genre ended with only a handful of names to look into. Horror seemed to fare much better with the crowd, with a new horror book (typically a collection of ghost stories) showing up in almost every store, ready to give the readers (most of whom tend to be children) a scare. Science Fiction, too, has been a beloved genre for quite some time now. However, with fantasy, there seems to be a barrier to entry that is too high to cross. But not all hope should be forsaken, as some stalls most certainly house these stories that evoke wonder in impossible worlds that manage to feel all too real through mere words.

In that regard, *Rajkahon* (Benzene Prokashon, 2023) written by Aminul Islam was one of the first fantasy novels to catch my eye. The book, despite its

release last year, has remained a top seller this year for the only stall to house it. The story falls neatly under the medieval fantasy category and has elements of magic and mythical weapons that feel rather strongly inspired by western fantasy—almost to a fault, given how strong the influences can feel to a reader. And yet, with a lack of fantasy that feels decidedly 'Bangali', be it in the presentation of culture or style of storytelling, this is not entirely unexpected.

Towards the side of historical fiction, one new release that caught my eye was *Parishundori* (Kingbodonti Prokashon, 2024) by Sohel Amin Babu. While not quite in the realm of fantasy, the book certainly scratches a similar itch with the way it sets up its world. The story takes place in 1859, when colonial rule had tattered the landscape of the subcontinent and the characters' lives. With a darkly imaginative setting like this, the book—alongside many pieces of historical fiction—has seen some interest from readers.

Another book that falls squarely under a science fiction/fantasy umbrella is *The Old World* (Anindya Prokashon, 2024) written by Mostaque Ahmed. Set in the near future where much of civilisation has been laid to ruins by ant-like creatures known as the 'Ridilin', the story follows a small host of characters and their journey through this debilitating world. Even from reading the synopsis, it becomes clear that the pandemic from COVID-19 may have had a role to play in inspiring the story. The story is structured almost like an adventure, however, and fans of Hollywood films with similar settings may find



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

themselves an engrossing read.

While fantasy itself may be unpopular, genres like science fiction and horror get significantly more attention. With Science Fiction titles like *Chayapoth* (Afsar Brothers, 2024) compiled and edited by Siddique Ahmed and Salman Haque featuring numerous popular authors now flying off stalls, it is clear that there is a desire from readers for stories featuring vibrant worlds and fantastical concepts. And yet, why is it that fantasy does not attract the same readership?

According to readers, the reasons, though manifold, generally boil down

to the same thing: there simply has not been a culture of reading fantasy amongst their peers or even their family. Some talk about the distaste fantasy has among older family members. Parents who introduced children to reading never quite approved of reading fantasy—thus they never quite developed a taste for it. Others talk about translations—and how great fantasy stories are already present in Bangla if one is interested in picking up a translated work. While translations are undoubtedly important, they can't exist to make up for the lack of original work in Bangla. And on top of that, translations

cannot capture the cultures and mythologies—of which there are plenty—in Bangladesh and South Asia at large. Only original releases can do that, and fantasy is nothing but a genre to allow for the expression of those very stories. While some may discard fantasy as 'unserious', there needs to be an acceptance that all genres have stories that range in seriousness, and all genres deserve celebration for the new angles in which they can tell a story.

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