

REFLECTIONS

TRIGGER WARNING

Agency, autonomy, and female smoking

The predicaments of being a nonconformist woman in Bangladesh

MAISHA SYEDA

A month ago, as I waited for a friend in Banani, I decided to grab a packet of cigarettes. I'm not good at calculations for loose change and the vendor, old and seemingly disoriented, was having a hard time too. A middle aged man, an "innocent" bystander, decided to come to our rescue. Taking the opportunity to do God's work, he asks me: "Meye manush hoye biri khao ken?" I look at him, smile, and don't say anything. He presses on: It doesn't look good in a Muslim country that a young girl buys cigarettes in front of everyone in broad daylight. And this is terrible for a girl's body. A simple thought struck me. "Oh, lok der shorirer jonno kharap na? Why do you smoke?" I ask him. He starts to form excuses I've heard a million times already, along the lines of how he's a man and older, so "eshob manay". I tell him, "You're self admittedly much older than I am, you'll die sooner. At least I'll have a fighting chance."

What does this tell us? Cigarettes affect women's bodies *more* and *differently* than a man's because even those little sticks have more autonomy—and prejudice, apparently. You'd think, at the very least, it would be your choice what mode of torture you put your body through. *You're a girl, don't smoke; get married. And then try to have a successful career. Oh and don't forget to have at least two kids...* If not the physical and psychological stress, the toxic commentary society will spew at you if you falter in this balancing act will kill you anyway. Ergo, you won't just be a "bad girl" if you don't conform to the "normal" timeline decided for you, you're essentially bad at *being* a girl who should be able to do it all and be the "shanto shobbho meye" society expects to see.

How many times have we seen or heard of women getting sexually harassed and physically abused for the most trivial things, like wearing a tip, having short hair, donning a saree, and smoking in public?

I remember the girl who was assaulted at the Narsingdi railway station for wearing a crop top and jeans. She, along with her two male friends, would've been beaten to death because she was "dressed inappropriately" and her friends tried to defend her. What came as a shock was that the abuse was instigated by a woman. An argument can be made for how this happened because it was on the outskirts of Dhaka, but does that mean people deserve to get beaten up over what they choose to wear, and other people can



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

just snatch away a woman's right to choose? Society claims that women shouldn't smoke because it affects her reproductive health, but they are free to make that decision for her because collectively, they feel entitled to that body and its so-called wellbeing? And when a little girl is abused by a woman much, much older as a warning, the only one who loses their "maan-ijot" is society—at the hands of internalised misogyny.

Under these circumstances, how will women in our actual society stand up for themselves, let alone exercise their agency? So, we veer towards women in fiction, and particularly towards the women in Bangla fiction.

I'm reminded of a popular female anti-hero in classic Bangla fiction who shows considerable power and agency: the ghost/skeleton from Tagore's "Konkal". In the story, the narrator tells of having to spend a night in a room with a skeleton whose unnamed ghost wants to tell him her story. He refuses her, but the ghost starts telling him anyway about her husband, whom she feared like death, and how he conveniently died not

too long after the wedding. Given the time, the bride came to be known as inauspicious because she was a widow and yet, she goes on to say that she knew she was one of the most beautiful women alive. This story shows us how even the smallest of women's claims to agency can be ignored and trivialised and eventually how, by committing these "minor" offences repeatedly and for long enough, society can drive women to extreme and sometimes unhinged (but honestly, understandable) courses of action.

Then the widow, after being led on by a doctor who used to tend to her late husband, finds out that he is getting married to another woman because he stands to receive a large dowry. Even though they were not really having an affair, the man made it look like he was interested. Thus, she feels betrayed and confronts him. When he indicates to her that he doesn't really want to get married, but "has to", she mixes poison with his drink, the same way he had mentioned to her in a fleeting conversation earlier about how to kill a man. I digress, but poetic justice or what? Because it is okay to flirt with a widow but god forbid a man considers *this* woman,

whose image is tainted in society because her husband died, for marriage.

Unfortunately, though, this exhibition of agency by wanting to defy the man rather than staying quiet and waiting on divine intervention (because we do that as women), is what casts her in a villainous light. Time and again I've wondered what the man who wrote this character, Tagore, wanted to imply by portraying such forthrightness, because it's not like we can emulate this in our society. Like my boss rightly pointed out: rule breaking is permissible in fiction, but not in real life. Also, there's no ignoring the fact that these characters are written by men, no matter how nuanced or seemingly realistic.

There is a more contemporary, and somehow more plausible example, in Humayun Ahmed's short story "Djinn Kofil". Here, an educated, city dwelling girl named Latifa, succumbing to familial and societal pressure after marrying a man below her social class for love, suffers a psychotic break and murders her own children. Despite Latifa's rich parents' initial admiration for

the humble and reserved Imam shaheb, when their daughter chooses him as her life partner, their minds change and they emotionally abuse both Latifa and Imam shaheb because the man doesn't come from wealth or suit their social standing.

This story, apart from being a commentary on classism, also reflects what happens when women are subjected to psychological and emotional torture just because of their inherent right to choose. Latifa leaves her parents' house without a word and lives a life of poverty in a village—but after a few months of repressing her frustration, she develops a psychological disorder that unknowingly makes her kill her two infants from the guilt of defying her parents. Yet, this somehow does not seem like an extreme scenario, does it? We have heard of incidents like this happening around us.

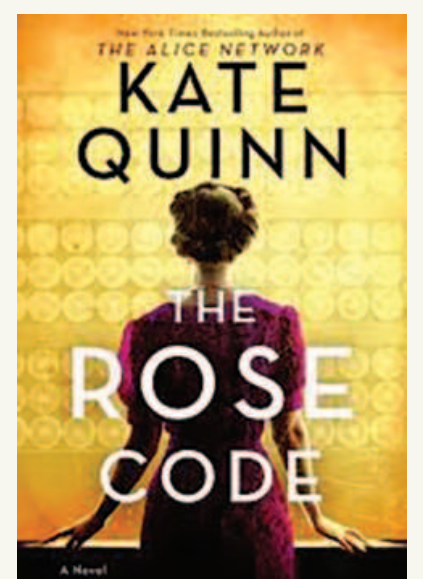
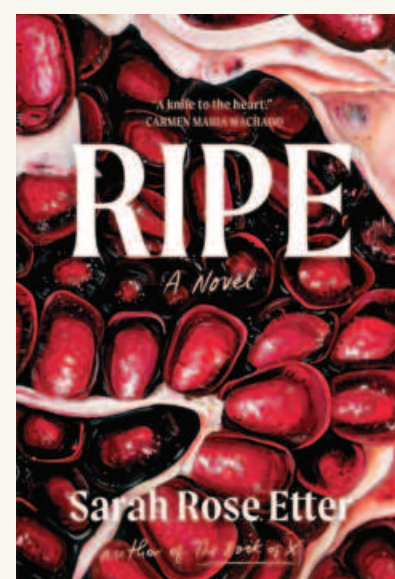
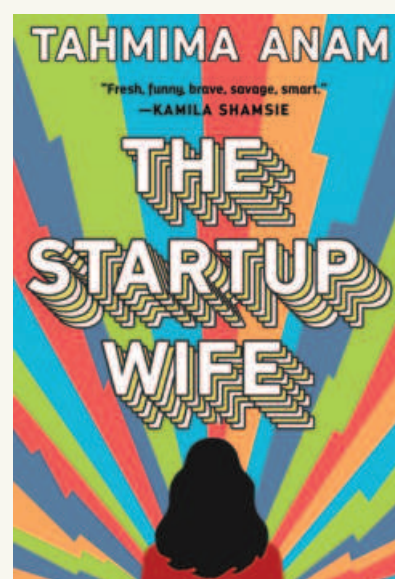
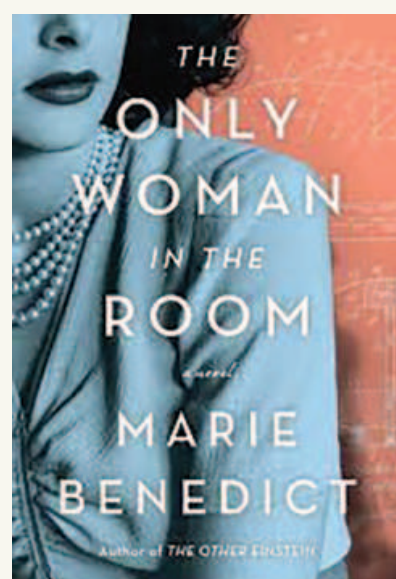
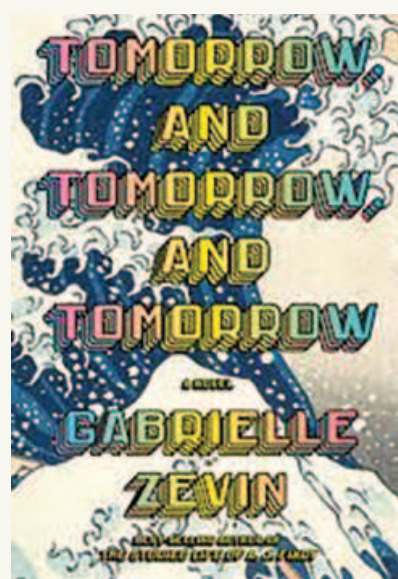
Women, whenever they make a choice—no matter how inconsequential, like choosing how they want to dress—that doesn't abide by social conventions, or is against their parents' wishes, or what their husband or in-laws "won't allow", face severe consequences. In these so called modern times, we'd still find ourselves shocked and dumbfounded by some of the things men say to contain us. And rather than exercising our agency—or rather, not being able to do so—we choose not to confront the oppression; we remain silent and accept our fates. Why? Because we "must accept that as a woman, you need to make certain sacrifices"? But here's a thought: what if you didn't? What a lot of us fail to see is that even the classism that pervades society, much like fiction shows, is also gendered. Parents will decide and expect their daughters to marry the perfect man deemed right for them but completely disregard their daughter's—a human being's—right to choose. When the roles are reversed, the scenario is very different.

I'm not saying you have to be the ghost from "Konkal" and poison the men or be pushed to the point of killing your children, but how about we channel a fraction of the madness in objection? Women have become more independent and self sufficient and confrontational, there's no overlooking that. But perhaps we need more explicit outcries of protest and retaliation in the face of repression.

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, lecturer, and Sub editor of Star Books and Literature.

THE SHELF

5 fiction books featuring women in STEM



With tomorrow being International Women's Day, 8 March, it becomes increasingly important for us to not only identify and acknowledge, but also actively work towards alleviating the stark gender gap in STEM fields and the lack of representation of women in STEM.

MASHIYAT NAYEEM

Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow
Gabrielle Zevin
Knopf, 2022

Starting off with one of my favourite books of all time, *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*, at first glance, is a story about friendship and creative collaboration. But at its core, it's a story about love—love in all forms. Spanning from the 80s to the early 2000s, the novel follows two childhood friends, Sam and Sadie, who, once bonded by their love of playing video games and then estranged by the passage of time, have a chance encounter in a train platform in Cambridge, Massachusetts while attending university. The fateful day leads to a partnership in game design which ultimately thrusts them into stardom and the business of technology.

Through Sadie's character, Gabrielle Zevin subtly but masterfully captures how women tech founders,

especially in the video game industry, receive little recognition for their efforts and are questioned about their technical credibility.

The Only Woman in the Room
Marie Benedict
Sourcebooks Landmark, 2019

Most people know Hedy Lamarr as the beautiful, glamorous actress of Golden Age Hollywood, but very few know she was also a brilliant scientist and inventor who laid the foundations for today's WiFi, Bluetooth, and GPS technologies. The book is a historical fiction chronicling Hedy's rise in Hollywood, her marriage to an Austrian arms dealer, and the period of World War II where she helped develop a communication technology with a fellow male scientist to fight the Nazis.

In real life, Hedy Lamarr was overshadowed and her contributions were not recognised until much later. The book tackles some of these themes and touches upon the sexism shown towards her intellect. If you love reading about inspirational

women, check out Marie Benedict's other books, all paying homage to some of the brilliant STEM minds of history.

The Startup Wife
Tahmima Anam
Scribner, 2021

One from Bangladesh, Tahmima Anam's *The Startup Wife* is a witty, satirical take on modern relationships and tech culture. It follows Asha, a computer scientist at MIT, and her whirlwind marriage to her high school crush, Cyrus. Together, with Asha's algorithms and Cyrus's ideas, they develop a social media app that becomes the buzzy new startup. The skyrocketing fame puts their marriage to the test and pushes the already marginalised Asha to the sidelines.

The novel not only deals with the issues of being a woman in a male dominated field where taking ownership of your work is a constant battle, but also explores what it means to be a woman of colour—another important layer to the gender gap in tech in Western countries.

Ripe
Sarah Rose Etter
Scribner, 2023

We glamorise a position in the corporate world so much that we often forget that the dream job can lead to burnout once you start living it. The novel follows one such woman, Cassie, who, despite having a coveted tech job at a startup in the heart of Silicon Valley, is miserable. Throughout the novel, Cassie is followed by a black hole, always growing and shrinking but never leaving her, but tries her best to keep up with the soul-crushing, hyper-capitalist, cutthroat work culture of San Francisco. When her job starts demanding more of her than she can take, physically and ethically, and past trauma starts to resurface, she grapples with the idea of whether it is all worth it or not.

Ripe is a tale of late-stage capitalism and glittering cities, where poverty and misery lurk in the shadows of the night—a modern day dystopia. Through first-person narration, the author manages to portray the bleakness in a way that makes the

dread seeps into your soul. If you are suffering from depression or severe existential dread, you might want to save this book for happier times.

The Soulmate Equation
Christina Lauren
Gallery Books, 2022

The list would not be complete without something for fans of light-hearted romance fiction. Jess is a data analyst and a single mother. She lives and breathes numbers and statistics, so when a dating website claiming to make matches based on DNA pops up, she's determined to finally find her soulmate. The catch? She is matched with the obnoxious founder of the company himself—a 98% match. When the company offers her compensation to try the match, she is forced to fake date the man. But can Jess rely on the numbers and science to find her soulmate?

Mashiyat Nayeem is a woman in STEM moonlighting as a starving artist. Reach her at mashiyat.nayeem@gmail.com.