

SURVIVOR’S GUILT

The emotional toll of making it through

ADRN SARWAR

We’ve been through a lot lately; it feels like waking up from one nightmare only to enter another.

From the July revolution to the floods in August, each event has only added to the already struggling lives of the country’s people. Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” resonates strongly in our current situation.

But what about those who didn’t make it through all these ordeals like you? What about the lives they dreamt of and the future they were about to live? These questions have been bothering many of us now, more than usual.

Survivor’s guilt, the feeling of unworthiness for surviving or escaping a traumatic event or experience while others did not, is a common response in such situations. When you come through unscathed while others suffer, one question might repeat in your mind: “Why not me?” Even if you weren’t directly affected by the event, it could still haunt you, leaving you confused and feeling undeserving of being spared when others were not.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, survivor’s guilt is not a diagnosable condition on its own but rather a symptom. It can manifest as part of complicated grief or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), leading to feelings of unworthiness, self-blame, and persistent guilt. Addressing survivor’s guilt is crucial, as it can intensify conditions like PTSD and grief, making recovery more challenging.

Saurav Baidya, Mental Health and Psychological Support (MHPSS) Officer at Handicap International shares his perspective, “When a person survives a tragedy, there is a feeling of guilt, which may be heightened by perceiving one’s actions as inadequate in helping others. This feeling of not being worthy to live and the residual guilt can haunt them forever.”

This sentiment is reflected by Shaikha Azam Ohona, a student at Dhaka University (DU), who says, “In the face of overwhelming events like the Quota Reform Movement and the recent floods in Bangladesh, it’s natural to feel a deep sense of guilt for being safe. During the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, I went to do graffiti. When I heard police sirens there, I ran, and after coming home, I felt suffocated. It felt like the whole world had left me. I started hallucinating and would hear people calling out to me in my sleep, asking me to help and save them. I felt utterly helpless, more so than ever before.”

Survivor’s guilt can manifest as flashbacks or nightmares that take you back to the traumatic event, consuming your mind with constant thoughts of what had happened. Persistent feelings of not having done enough, irritability, and difficulty moving on from the experience are also common.

Rakibul Hasan Sanjer, another student from DU, says, “I was constantly preoccupied with thoughts of what I could have done differently. The guilt over not participating in the [quota reform] protests made it difficult to focus on everyday tasks. I couldn’t relax, not even while reading, which usually calms me. I felt emotionally exhausted and helpless.”

Studies show that survivors often feel responsible for the death or injury of others, even when they have no real control over the situation. Tamanna Mahjabin Anchol, a student at Khulna University of Engineering & Technology, reflects on this, saying, “The recent floods made me feel guilty for living my ordinary daily life while others were suffering and dying due to the lack of basic needs. It made me appreciate what I have. It felt like a privilege to have a roof over my head and a warm bed to sleep in.”

Even when a tragic

situation unfolds far from the survivor, the feelings of guilt and helplessness can still be overwhelming. Events like the ongoing genocide in Gaza or the RG Kar Medical College rape case in Kolkata have triggered deep emotional responses, leaving many grappling with intense guilt despite being thousands of miles away. These feelings can manifest in unsettling ways, as Shaikha Azam Ohona shares, “The day I heard about the RG Kar Medical College rape case in Kolkata, I couldn’t sleep. The news weighed heavily on my mind, and I began hearing voices at night. It felt as though someone was knocking on my window, filling me with a sense of dread and helplessness.”

Survivor’s guilt often leads to a decrease in self-esteem, as Baidya explains, “They feel they did not deserve to survive, which negatively impacts their self-esteem. This guilt is almost always linked to PTSD.”

A similar concern is shared by Nayeema Islam Antora, a psychologist, who adds, “The ongoing emotional distress often increases depression and anxiety, making recovery more challenging. The internalisation of guilt can become a pervasive barrier to achieving a sense of well-being and normalcy.”

This guilt can also damage relationships, leading to withdrawal from others. People may assume that others blame them for what happened, just as they blame themselves. Nayeema further explains, “Common misconceptions about survivor’s guilt include the belief that it is a sign of weakness or a lack of resilience. There is a mistaken notion that time alone will heal these feelings or that those affected should simply move on. In reality, survivor’s guilt is a complex and deeply rooted emotional response that often requires professional intervention and support for proper healing. Understanding and addressing these misconceptions is vital for providing appropriate support to those affected.”

Coping with survivor’s guilt involves more than just time; it requires active efforts to heal. In addition to seeking professional treatment, there are coping mechanisms that can help manage these troubling feelings.

Regarding effective self-care strategies, Nayeema Islam says, “Mindfulness and self-compassion practices can help in managing guilty feelings. Mindfulness can help individuals stay present and reduce the impact of intrusive thoughts. Self-compassion involves treating oneself with kindness and understanding, which can counteract feelings of self-blame. Engaging in physical activities, maintaining a balanced lifestyle, and seeking professional support are also essential for overall well-being.”

“Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can help to challenge and change guilty thoughts,” says Baidya. “Techniques such as eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) allow traumatic memories to be ‘worked through’ and integrated into memory.”

Survivor’s guilt is a silent burden. It is not a weakness. With the right support and strategies, it’s possible to move forward and find peace.

References

Centerstone.org. (May 07, 2024). *Understanding & Learning How to Deal with Survivor’s Guilt*. BetterHelp. (June 11, 2024). *Understanding And Overcoming Survivor’s Guilt*. Healthline. (March 12, 2021). *Survivor Guilt: Symptoms, Causes, Coping Tips, and More*

BookTok and dark romance: What’s wrong with it?

ANICA BUSHRA RAHMAAN

The emergence of BookTok around 2020 appeared to be a promising endeavour: a space dedicated to explore newer literary grounds, to engage in passionate discussions, and allow the love for words to soar. However, soon, BookTok revealed its challenges.

In the world of BookTok, tropes such as “enemies to lovers”, “fake dating”, etc. hold a higher appeal than actual plots. To satiate the demand for these popular tropes, authors tend to repackage the same stories to an ever-growing audience, creating an echo chamber of the same ten books. If you are looking for diversity on BookTok, you will have to carefully curate your algorithm to find your preferences.

Another problem with BookTok is that it fosters a culture of overconsumption. Rather than reading a specific book because you simply want to, you are left striving after yearly book goals because every other person on the platform is doing the same, taking away the inherent pleasure of reading.

Despite all these issues, the most pressing concern surrounding BookTok is its rising emphasis on dark romance books. Interested readers gobble it up because these books are easy to consume and entertaining. As these books gain prominence, the serious implications it imposes on the younger readers are overlooked.

Dark romance books are a subgenre of romance, encompassing darker and more intense themes along with mature content. In a nutshell, in the majority of these books, the female protagonists fall for men who engage in predatory behaviour such as kidnapping and stalking. Such portrayals are not only normalised but also romanticised in some cases.

As BookTok’s user-driven content allows viral trends to emerge across diverse genres into one’s algorithm, currently, dark romance is taking the BookTok

community by storm. Consequently, younger readers may inadvertently encounter content that is not appropriate for them. The lack of regulation on the platform does not help matters either.

About a quarter of TikTok users in the US fall within the age bracket of 10-19 as per a demographic study. Imagine the vast number of young readers exposed to such mature and inappropriate themes. And that is just taking one country into consideration.

While adults have the intellectual and emotional capacity to distinguish fiction from reality, the same cannot be said for the younger audience. What message do dark romance books convey to them? These books will inevitably set dangerous

Despite all these issues, the most pressing concern surrounding BookTok is its rising emphasis on dark romance books. Interested readers gobble it up because these books are easy to consume and entertaining.

precedents for these young readers about the kind of treatment they should tolerate from a partner.

Promoting such stories in the guise of romance can prevent them from recognising when they are in abusive situations or even acting as abusers themselves. It could even push them to pursue partners exhibiting toxic traits. Such narratives imply that the suffering caused at the hands of their partners (literally) is a deep sign of love, a form of protection, and that controlling and manipulative behaviour is not just acceptable but desirable. Such characters should not be labelled as “book



ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

boyfriends,” no matter how captivating they are rendered to be.

Due to their sensitive nature, dark romance books now almost always have a list of trigger warnings at the beginning, often across two or three pages. However, the trigger warnings tend to deviate from serving their actual purpose and instead are added to the shopping cart by those wishing to dabble in such taboo topics because it’s their “guilty pleasure”. Of course, it can be fun to read about darker themes and twisted, morally grey characters but not at the expense of romanticising sexual assault and deeply problematic consent.

So, what exactly is the solution? Firstly, dark romance books should not have misleading covers with cutesy, dainty undertones, disguising the mature content within with the facade of a light, wholesome read. Age limits and trigger warnings should also be presented on the covers of the books so as to better inform the young teens as well as their parents.

Most importantly, authors and BookTokers should sell the book for what it is. Instead of saying that this is a book for girls who like villains, it may be a better idea to remind the audience that the material is not appropriate for younger readers, the depictions in the book are only possible in fiction, and should never be normalised.

This is not a call to discredit BookTok. Even with its problems, BookTok actively inspires more people to read, brings emerging authors into the spotlight, helps readers discover their new favourite book, and a lot more. Yet, it is possible to cultivate an inclusive literary community while considering the well-being of the younger generation. Ultimately, everyone has their roles to play in ensuring something as precious as books is not tainted and continues to be cherished.

Reference: Exploding Topics (June 12, 2024), *TikTok User Age, Gender & Demographics*

The role media plays in creating space for people with disabilities

MAHPARA FAATIN

Just last year, *Twinkling Watermelon* had taken social media by storm, with fans raving about how heartwarming the Korean drama was. But, the show had also set off a unique spark: people across the globe were learning sign language to recreate scenes from the show, which was refreshing to see in a world where sign language tends to be limited to the disabled and their immediate social circles.

Films and TV shows have had

a long history of creating compelling depictions of disabilities, which, in turn, have positively influenced the way society perceives them. Bollywood itself has given us many memorable movies starring characters with disabilities like *Taare Zameen Par*, *Hitchki*, *Barfi!*, and *My Name Is Khan* to name a few.

Arguably, some of the most impactful of these representations are those targeted towards a younger audience. DC gave us Barbara Gordon in a wheelchair while Disney gave all young dyslexic Percy Jackson fans a chance to claim themselves as Greek demigods. Disabled characters in *Barbie* and even Mattel’s line of Barbie Dolls with Disabilities all play a role towards creating a friendlier environment for those who live with disabilities.

In a society where individuals with disabilities are often ostracised, the necessary reforms required to make

their lives more comfortable are often not prioritised. Thus, the influence of media remains of utmost importance since it holds the ability to break through negative perceptions commonly held against people with disabilities and allow individuals to highlight the lesser-discussed struggles and perspectives.

Kim Hye-yoon, in *Lovely Runner*, tugged at our heartstrings by exceptionally acting out the pain and desperation of a girl losing her ability to



walk. But is exceptional acting a good enough representation?

Popular singer Sia’s film *Music* about a person with autism was criticised for being offensive and for casting a neurotypical actress. Disney’s upcoming *Snow White* live-action is currently under fire for using CGI to depict the seven dwarfs instead of real actors with dwarfism.

From the abundance of movies of this genre being produced, only a handful are played by disabled actors. Sure, Daniel Day-Lewis in his 1989 movie *My Left*

Foot was so dedicated to his role that he suffered two broken ribs, but couldn’t they have cast someone with cerebral palsy to begin with? One may argue that there aren’t a lot of disabled actors but that couldn’t be far from the truth.

Netflix, surprisingly, was the one to do it right by casting blind actor Aria Loberti to star in the film based on the Pulitzer Award-winning novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*. Furthermore, we cannot forget Millicent Simmonds, who played Regan, a character who is deaf in the

horror movie franchise *A Quiet Place*. Her interview with CBS Mornings bears testament to how big of a stepping stone her casting was where she said, “Never did I think I’d become a professional actor. We don’t see that, you don’t ever see people like me on the screens... I want kids out there to see themselves represented on the screen. They can be the ones to save people, they don’t have to be saved.”

As actors with disabilities are not given the opportunity to play a wide variety of roles, it seems extremely outrageous to cast able-bodied actors for the few roles that do exist which depict disabilities. What is even more outrageous is insensitive representation, like that in *Music* or in all the films that have used people with speech impairments for comic relief or the ones where they showcase the disabled as pitiable characters.

Representation is important but holds no value if it isn’t meaningful.

