

ESSAY

# BETWEEN TRADITION AND TABOO: The arranged marriage trope in Bangla dark romance literature

The arranged marriage trope in dark romance frequently serves as a clash between traditional values and contemporary desires. Traditionally perceived as a means of securing familial alliances, arranged marriage takes on a different dimension in dark romance—becoming a battleground for power struggles, forbidden desires, and intense emotional conflict. This tension resonates strongly in South Asian contexts, where marriage is often seen as a duty rather than a personal choice.

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In a packed room at Bookworm Bangladesh on January 11, 2025, an unusual literary discussion unfolded, marking a significant shift in Bangladesh's conservative literary landscape. The event, "Trigger Warning: Dark Romance", organised by Sister Library in collaboration with Bookworm Bangladesh and Star Books and Literature, brought together diverse voices to explore the emerging world of dark romance literature.

While the panel—featuring dark romance author Shanjida Nushrath Ali; Dr Nazia Manzoor, Editor of Star Books and Literature and Chair of the Department of English and Modern Languages, NSU; Dr. Kaiser Huq, academic, translator, and poet; and literary critic Shahriar Shaams—explored various aspects of the genre, one particular element stood out: the transformation of traditional arranged marriage narratives in contemporary dark romance.

Unlike traditional romance, dark romance delves into themes of obsession, coercion, and psychological danger, often blurring the lines of consent and exploring morally ambiguous characters. Erotica, on the other hand, centers on intimacy and desire. While it may share elements with erotica's focus on intimacy and desire, dark romance distinguishes itself through its complex narrative structures and moral ambiguity. This evolution in romantic fiction is finding a growing audience in Bangladesh, as noted by Bookworm's owner, Amina Rahman, during the event. This growing appetite signals a shift in reader preferences, with many seeking narratives that push boundaries.

In this evolving landscape, authors like Shanjida Nushrath Ali are pushing the limits of mainstream fiction by introducing bold themes previously unexplored. Except for a handful of examples like Humayun Azad's *Pak Sar Jamin Sad Bad* (Agamee Prakashani, 2004), which actually somewhat had dark romance and erotic elements, historically, Bangladeshi eroticism has existed largely in the underground choti genre—short, mostly explicit fiction often circulated informally. However, unlike choti, which prioritises physical encounters over storytelling, dark romance incorporates psychological depth, intricate power dynamics. Choti often focuses solely on physical encounters, frequently lacking the character development and narrative sophistication found in dark



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romance. This difference is crucial, as dark romance uses its exploration of desire and power to delve into complex emotional landscapes.

During the panel discussion, Dr Manzoor highlighted a crucial aspect: "The reason why dark romance draws you is because it often deals with female desire. When women want to take control of their desire, and it is in the shape of darkness, what stories can you find then?"

The arranged marriage trope in dark romance frequently serves as a clash between traditional values and contemporary desires. Traditionally perceived as a means of securing familial alliances, arranged marriage takes on a different dimension in dark romance—becoming a battleground for power struggles, forbidden desires, and intense emotional conflict. This tension resonates strongly in South Asian contexts, where marriage is often seen as a duty rather than a personal choice. While not dark romance per se, Humayun Ahmed's work often explores the psychological impact of forced relationships and the suppression of individual desire in traditional marriages. For example, in *Shonkhonil Karagar* (Khan Brothers, 1973), the character of Bilkis, though betrothed in an arranged marriage, harbours a deep longing for a different life and love. While not explicitly erotic, the undercurrent of her repressed desires hints at the psychological complexities that arranged marriages can entail. Similarly, Selina Hossain's *Hangor Nodi Grenade* (Anannya Prokashoni, 2003) portrays the complex power dynamics within arranged marriages through Jamila, showing how women

in such setups often navigate complex emotional landscapes, hinting at both resilience and suppressed desires, even in dire circumstances like wartime. These examples, though from mainstream literature, illustrate the existing tension between tradition and individual agency, coercion, power imbalance, and emotional conflict—tensions that dark romance explores more explicitly.

A hallmark of dark romance is the presence of dominant, often morally grey heroes. In arranged marriage narratives, this translates to a protagonist bound—willingly or unwillingly—to a powerful, often dangerous partner. This fuels stories of coercion, psychological tension, and reluctant attraction. For example, Cora Reilly's *Bound by Honor* (2014) explores an arranged marriage in the mafia, blending themes of loyalty, passion, and danger. These narratives often begin with mistrust but evolve into dark, intense love—a defining element of the genre.

The forced proximity inherent in an arranged marriage setting often fuels the slow-burn passion characteristic of dark romance. The genre thrives on tension, drawing characters together by obligation while simultaneously forcing them to resist their growing attraction. This push and pull between duty and desire amplifies the emotional stakes, creating a compelling narrative dynamic. For example, a dominant hero might initially exert control, but the heroine's resistance can lead to a gradual shift in the power balance, adding another layer of complexity to their evolving relationship. This forced proximity psychological interplay is

evident in novels like *The Kiss Thief* (2019) by L.J. Shen, where the protagonist initially resists her arranged marriage, only to find herself entangled in a complex web of power, control, and reluctant attraction. The gradual shift in power dynamics and the deepening emotional stakes are what make dark romance distinct from both traditional romance and pure erotica.

Bangladesh, too, has a complex relationship with erotic literature which sometimes reflects a broader cultural tension between tradition and modernity; explicit discussions of desire, consent, and power have remained largely absent in mainstream fiction. This lack of representation created a gap between reality and literature, as themes of passion and coercion were often softened or ignored altogether. This self-censorship in mainstream fiction revealed not just literary boundaries, but deeper societal resistance to confronting these themes openly and sometimes with consequences.

The recent emergence of dark romance, however, represents a potential shift, not just in foreign literature but also in Bangladeshi literature, welcoming discussions on previously taboo topics. The panel discussion at Bookworm Bangladesh also emphasised the need for open dialogue around these narratives—not as a means of sensationalising them, but to acknowledge the realities of power imbalances and emotional complexity in relationships. Without addressing these themes, literature risks failing to fully capture the depth of human experience.

How does dark romance fit into Bangladeshi literature? Can arranged

marriage narratives in dark romance bridge the gap between tradition and modernity? These are complex questions. Dr Kaiser Huq, a notable voice in contemporary Bangladeshi literature, observed that genres like dark romance challenge traditional literary boundaries, offering fresh perspectives on social structures and relationships. This observation is the key. Dark romance, by its very nature, pushes against established norms, forcing a re-examination of traditional power dynamics within relationships. For instance, the arranged marriage trope, when explored through the lens of dark romance, can expose the underlying power imbalances inherent in such arrangements. It can also explore the often-unspoken desires and frustrations of individuals trapped within these structures. Therefore, dark romance, while controversial, has the potential to offer critical commentary on traditional practices, prompting important conversations about consent, agency, and the evolving nature of relationships in modern society. It can bridge the gap by exploring the unspoken undercurrents of tradition, bringing them to the forefront in a way that sparks dialogue and challenges conventional thinking.

Yet, the persistent taboo surrounding dark romance in Bangladeshi literature reflects a broader cultural reluctance to engage with themes of desire, power, and agency—particularly within the context of traditional institutions like arranged marriage. But as evidenced by the growing readership of both translated dark romance works and emerging Bangladeshi online fiction, there is a clear appetite for narratives that challenge these boundaries. As Bangladeshi literature embraces bolder storytelling, will local authors rise to the challenge of reinterpreting this trope for a South Asian audience? As mentioned, since the demand is there—perhaps all that's needed is a writer willing to take the plunge. The potential for this transformation rests with a new generation of writers, poised to redefine both the genre and the landscape of Bangladeshi literature. This growing openness to host such conversations, combined with the rising generation of writers who are increasingly willing to explore these themes, points to an exciting evolution in Bangladeshi literature—one that might finally bridge the gap between traditional storytelling and contemporary desires.

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## EVENT REPORT

# Celebrating diversity and language at “BHASHA UTSHOB 2025”

BASHIRAH TAHREEMA

Gulshan Society held a two-day language festival at the Gulshan Lake Park, curated by Sadaf Saaz and Jatrik. The event took place over the weekend of 21-22 February that saw discussion panels, original musical performances, and poetry recitations, surrounded by an array of book stalls and food courts.

The opening ceremony began with a poetry recitation celebrating our different languages. Many talented poets of different ethnicities bared their souls to the audience with original pieces of poetry in English, Manipuri, and Garo language based both on the Language Movement of 1952 and their personal experiences with their language. After hearing from poets Adrita Zaima Islam, Mithun Raksam, and Maibam Sadhon, the event followed with a panel discussing "Language of Resistance" with artist and curator Shehzad Chowdhury, artist Dhruvani Mahbub, and Assistant Professor at the Department of

Bangla at Dhaka University and author Rafat Alam, moderated by Nazia Manzoor, the Editor of Star Books and Literature, *The Daily Star*, and Assistant Professor and Chair of the Department of English and Modern Languages at North South University.

Nazia Manzoor prompted the conversation by asking "Can art itself be a form of resistance?" to which Dhruvani Mahbub replied "I think art itself is a resistance. Rebellious is its nature. We artists will always strive and fail to find happiness because we are always protesting against unfairness caused by people in power." She continued, "However, I believe, I am alive and I am capable



of love and that is also an expression of art." She ended by saying "We all owe something to each other, as artists, as humans, as Bangalis and that is love."

The event followed with a discussion, "Crafts and confessions: A deconstruction of flash fiction" led by Sabrina Fatma Ahmed

and Abak Hussain, founder and director of Talespeople respectively, discussing the flexibility of approaching flash fiction as a writer and the inauthenticity of AI writing. They also spoke of the lack of individuality and intimacy in AI writing, reassuring how humans will never be short of stories to tell.

In addition, another conversational panel followed, "Other Tongues: Immersed In Translation" with Kaiser Haq, Rifat Munim, Mojaffor Hossain, Srabonti Datta, and Noora Shamsi Bahar discussing the diversity of different languages in our culture and the importance of engaging in translated works. The panel challenged the overrated notion of prioritising English literature while emphasising the need to embrace translated works by authors from diverse backgrounds.

During the event, attendees explored the wide variety of books and food stalls. Next, a riveting hour 'Jiboner Saathe Golpokotha' with Shayan was followed by the all-female indigenous band, F minor, who entranced the audience with singing in different languages of Bangladesh, and covers of songs inspired by the language movement. There were then recitations of classic Bangla poetry by veterans Dahlia Ahmed and Shimul Mustapha, and the day ended with the book launch *Da Vinci Club*, a thriller by

Mohammad Nizamuddin.

On the final day, 22 February, several more panels were held throughout the day, including an inspiring 'In their own words' panel. One of the most interactive sessions was "The Art of Reading and Writing", featuring Farah Ghuznavi, author of the book *Fragments of Riversong* (Daily Star Books, 2013). She encouraged the aspiring writers in the audience to draft out their ideas as much as possible and emphasised the importance of building a relationship of respect and familiarity with readers. Following this, an insightful discussion was held on fiction writing with author Saad Z Hossain discussing struggles of storytelling in politically sensitive climates. The event concluded with an engaging performance by Warda Ashraf.

*Bashirah Tahreema is a poet chasing a life in STEM where her dream is to live in a falling apart castle in a forest that is probably cursed, and watch reruns of Modern Family forever.*