



My father as a person

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I had never thought to question what it meant to be a daughter. In the way that roles settle around us before we are old enough to name them, mine was inherited. I learned very early to step into my mother's shoes when she was not there to fill them herself. In a South Asian household, familial duties are not so much assigned as observed, I believe.

With that "doing something unquestioningly", I forgot to observe my father as a person.

I was the one to learn to serve the men of the house. My mother is a wise woman, always managing work and her home in ways I see as exploitative, but I believed in anatomy is destiny as a girl groomed by the status quo. One does not need to quote Marx, Engels, or Fromm because these are felt when you have little to leverage on. Theories came much later in life, but 15-year-old me could understand the jargon quite easily thanks to my role as a "good daughter".

Even though the two are often conflated in

our part of the world, I quickly understood the difference between being a good father and a good husband. This comes as no surprise when my father always focused on putting food on the table, even though my mother put the same amount of food on the same table, but also had the duty of being a good homemaker. She, just like me, never questioned it, nor did my father, because why would he? He occupied the sweet spot of modern manhood—progressive enough to "allow" his wife to work, traditional enough to expect warm meals waiting for him at the end of the day. It was a winning arrangement, at least for one of them.

See, it is incredibly tricky writing about a man who is both loved and implicated. My father is not malicious; he is kind, generous with affection, and funny. He surprises me with things I love to eat, he makes me tea some days, he makes jokes when I am bummed but when I observe him as a person who is a husband to my mother, I have to see him from a different light. The tenderness he shows me does not undo the comfort he has enjoyed for years in a marriage that has asked more of one than the other. It is a strange, dissonant thing to hold someone close and still see the ways they benefit from a system that has kept another you love in its debt.

I ask my mother what she likes about her husband, but she lists things he does as a father. The reliability of fatherhood is mistaken for the affections of a spouse. I suppose this is

how it is for many of our mothers: they marry men and stay for the fathers.

When I was little, my mother never said a word about my father. But my adulthood opened something in her, and now the sorrow comes in drips, like a leaking tap that has stood the test of time. Little shards of memory, not loud, not angry, just quiet things like the burden of never being appreciated for the things she brings to the table, sometimes as a working woman, and sometimes as a homemaker. Grief in teaspoons, not tumults. A woman's sadness, served gently.

But little does she know that I noticed her sadness well before she held out her little hands to me.

My father sees my mother's labour as breath, as weather, as something that arrives without asking and will never leave. He does not name it, does not thank it—why thank the sun for rising? The hours she works outside the house and then inside it crumble into one long, invisible shift. He believes himself a good man—better than most—because once, he cleared the table, and once, he cooked rice and left the kitchen glowing with his own virtue. But he forgets: these were choices he made, little gestures seeking applause. For my mother, there were no choices.

My friend, whose mother is a homemaker, told me this story about his parents that still makes me sad because much of it resonates with my life. So, his dad, freshly retired and full of what I can only call "breakfast ambitions", casually announces he'd like fresh parathas every morning from now on. Now, here's the kicker: everyone knows his mom has to be out the door early for work, and making fresh parathas is no quick microwave fix.

My friend found the whole request, frankly, a bit absurd. Who asks for something so time-consuming without thinking about the logistics? He told his father this, protesting on his mother's behalf, but you could see it—the poor guy was genuinely bummed. Like, breakfast without the perfect flaky paratha just wasn't going to cut it. The funny thing is, his mother still got up early to make parathas for breakfast, unthanked.

So, yes, my father is not malicious. But he is inconsiderate in ways that chip away slowly and wear a person down without ever raising his voice. He does not thank her because it does not occur to him that thanks are needed. He thinks he is a good husband because he ate the food he did not enjoy, because he sometimes does the smidgen and expects it to count for more. But he forgot what it means to be a partner. His wife, my mother, bore it all in silence, her love turned into labour, her days a long line of things he did not notice.

It used to be very difficult to see him as a product of patriarchy because he spoke the language of my discontent. Maybe he is a funny person because he did not have to worry about dinner, never had to rush home with a mind already full of tomorrow. Seeing my father as a person truly revealed my fear of becoming like my mother as a wife (should I choose to be one someday). So instead of being an agreeable daughter who has to fill in my mother's shoes, I choose to throw the shoes away because they give me the same blisters they gave my mother.

The growing chasm of BookTok

SILWAT QUADER

Although there had been a readers' community on YouTube and Goodreads, where people from all across the globe reviewed and shared recommendations of all types of genres of books, it did not garner nearly as much attention as the community on TikTok, otherwise known as BookTok. What worked for the community was its short videos, which created a fast-growing forum where readers and writers came together to connect over the shared love of books.

Not only did BookTok captivate readers to pick up titles based on the short videos but it also played a significant role in reviving the publishing industry, which had been witnessing a steady decline with fewer book sales. Readers found renewed interest in each content that they consumed, while many others continued to join the community. With a new flock of readers to cater to, authors were also compelled to write and publish new works.

During its early rise, BookTok had positively influenced both readers and writers alike – quantified through millions of views, trendy challenges, visually appealing montages, reviews, and recommendations. However, like all chapters, no matter how beloved, the glory days of BookTok too, is beginning to come to an end.

Despite its soaring success, criticism from critics has been levied against the sub-community – with many accusing it of enabling overconsumption, promoting anti-intellectualism, and normalising problematic tropes.



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

The influx of content featuring beautifully illustrated book covers that particularly cater to the visual aspect has led many to buy books exclusively for aesthetics. As a result, more books with eye-catching covers have been printed and sold compared to simple or "mundane" ones, inciting a performative reading culture.

The impact that BookTok has had in rejuvenating the industry is undeniable. Nonetheless, it has adversely skewed the market by heavily promoting a narrow range of genres, especially to a younger audience. For instance, young adult (YA) books exploring mature themes featuring content that may not be age-appropriate are falsely advertised to an underage audience.

Additionally, books with explicit themes are marketed under the broad label of romance. While young readers may not be the target audience for these books, it still remains accessible to them. The increasing demand and popularity for this particular genre itself isn't the issue. Rather, it is the fact that some writers tend to weave in themes of trauma, violence or abuse through a romanticised lens. This is not only a gross misrepresentation but also deeply harmful to impressionable young readers.

Some writers have incorporated such attributes out of fear that refusal to conform will curtail their publication chances, while others followed suit more willingly. In fact, authors are pushed by publishing houses to keep generating these tired, clichéd dark romances, as they bring in most sales.

What used to be a space where readers could share individual ideas and opinions has now transformed into an echo chamber. Criticism or perspectives that differ from the general view are mostly dismissed, leading many to distance themselves from their once-cherished BookTok community. Moreover, the oversaturation of similar genres published and marketed reinforces the lack of diversity on the platform, which is yet another reason readers are taking a step back.

BookTok has also come under scrutiny because of the promotion of recycled tropes that deliver little literary depth. As a result, the consensus is that readers are not gaining any substantial value and are missing out on the enriching experience that literature is meant to offer. Change in the reading culture with time and age is inevitable. And literature should evolve and transform accordingly. However, it is not evolution if the changes actively take away from the wonders of reading.

When a child is their parents' second chance

Do your parents see you as individuals with your own choices, or do they see you as extensions of themselves?

HASIB UR RASHID IFITI

Bangali parents are perhaps one of the most complex species to exist. No two are ever quite the same. Yet, if you squint hard enough, you might notice that most fall into two broad camps: those who see their children as individuals with own choices, and those who see them as extensions of themselves.

Both kinds have the same parental fears that all parents have had since time immemorial – concern about kids' safety, their future, and their security in life. But it's the way in which they approach these insecurities that makes these two groups so vastly different.

The first group of parents respects their child's individuality and acknowledges them as a separate entity with their own choices. They don't always agree with the decisions their children make, but they allow room for difference. There are arguments, of course – sometimes loud and chaotic – but the arguments happen because voices are allowed to exist. The child is allowed to hold opinions different to their parents and there are conversations regarding the difference rather than the parent refusing to hear it out in the first place.

Then there's the second group – the one whose love comes with invisible strings. Here, parental concern



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

morphs into control. While it might originate from parental attachment, it slowly grows into a parasitical branch grasping over every single aspect of the child's life. Not just academic or career choices, the control slowly transforms into micromanaging the daily life and absolute control over the child's emotions. Sadness is met with impatience. Anger is punished, not explored. But where does this parental trait originate from?

Most of our parents grew up in post-independence Bangladesh – scarred by uncertainty, defined by struggle. For many of them, life was about survival: moving to cities with empty

pockets, working jobs they didn't love, sacrificing dreams they couldn't afford to chase, and so on. Their fight was to provide us with what they never had: stability. Chasing stability and growth, they had to let go of aspirations, ambitions, and their own self-interests. They simply couldn't afford to risk it all.

With time, they were able to provide their children with the financial backup that they didn't have. Thanks to their sacrifices, most of us have a place to land if or when we fall. But in the quest to make sure we never fall, many forgot to let us fly.

Here lies the paradox: If financial

stability was the dream, and we now have it – shouldn't we be allowed to dream beyond survival? What good is security if we must live the same life our parents did, minus the hunger? What is even the point of financial stability if the child has to pursue the same mediocrity its parents had to while battling financial instability?

The truth is, many of these parents do want their kids to succeed. But they want that success on their terms: the right degree, the right job, the right life. Too often, the kids are cast in unfinished stories – asked to chase dreams that were never theirs to begin with. With the security the children have been provided with, the parents want them to complete whatever incompleteness they had in life. A more prestigious institution, a bigger job, a grander title – the kids end up chasing goals the parents had defined for them, living someone else's incomplete life.

And perhaps the greatest tragedy? So many of us are strangers to the very people we call family. Parents might see their children every day without the slightest idea of who they actually are. So, here's the question: If we trade away our dreams for someone else's definition of success, even if it's wrapped in love and sacrifice, are we really living or just existing?

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