

Broken Slippers and Glass Ceilings: Exploring the Romance of Reading Romance

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At the ripe old age of nineteen, I found myself falling for romance novels long after my friends had already journeyed from the whimsical lands of Enid Blyton to the ballrooms of Jane Austen and were already sailing in the tumultuous worlds of Judith McNaught, Julia Quinn, Nora Roberts and many more. My late blooming, which deviated from the natural social pattern of reading romance fiction in Pakistan, stemmed from a desperate need to construct my own intellectual pedestal through hefty literary names. The confidence that I gained from reading all the dazzling literary classics was validated by approving nods from teachers and librarians who praised my ‘sophisticated’ and ‘literary’ choices. It helped me to dismiss my peers’ reading choices as fluff and to prove my worth to the ambitious women in my family who viewed arts education as frivolous. For my mother, grandmother, and two closest aunts, success was measured in degrees—medicine was the top of the food chain with engineering and STEM tagging behind and everything else was officially a failure. To quote the oft-repeated doom declaration of my aunt, “Fine that you do not want to be a doctor. But why do you want to chase students and walk around a university’s corridors in broken slippers when you can be an officer and have servants opening doors for you?” I did not have sufficient courage to highlight the problematic societal images of failure and success to my family or to explore my attraction for all the Sweet Valley High and Mills & Boon books with clinch covers that my friends kept sharing with each other.

So, my pursuit of English literary studies was my subtle rebellion against a society that prescribed marriage as women’s ultimate calling, and against my family’s zealous devotion to prestigious career paths. This pursuit came with the essential flaw of scorning anything remotely popular or mainstream, aka women’s leisure reading material. To consistently prove my self-worth, I didn’t just study canonical texts, but plunged headfirst into their world, soaking in the magnanimity of intellectual discourse in elite literary circles. It was a defense mechanism born from myriad complex social anxieties and internalized misogyny against fellow women’s reading practices. In that phase of literary snobbery, my only concession to popular romance genre came through the works of Barbara Cartland and

Barbara Taylor Bradford, books that were duly sanctioned by all teachers, mothers, and librarians for their demure covers and useful vocabulary, making them acceptable additions to respectable bookshelves of young women.

It was only in the course of my graduate work that my perspective shifted, and I started looking at the more than fifty shades of Anglophone popular romance available in the retail ecosystem in Pakistan and the strongly bonded reading communities of women. It was then that I developed the passion to examine the linguistic and social class-based ambiguous attitudes towards popular romance books, which ranged from scorn to attraction, and to explore the popular romance genre's potential as a lens through which socio-economic dynamics of diverse reading communities can be analyzed. However, a decade ago, the academic landscape in Pakistan, which is far from progressive today, was not receptive to popular romance studies, and it was impossible to advance in this field within the country's higher education system. I faced dismissive attitudes from mentors and a distinct lack of institutional support, which mirrored the general global devaluation of the humanities, economic struggles, and patriarchal structures. My mother was frequently informed by many relatives that her daughter was not interested in building a career for herself and must be married off as soon as possible, and I was informed by prospective supervisors that it was better to leave academia rather than thinking about getting a doctorate in popular romance studies.

While academics worldwide struggle to find spaces in the shrinking job markets, my desire to specialize in popular romance studies in Pakistan faced the additional burdens of the dismissive stereotype that this discipline doesn't really exist and romance reading is merely the frivolous pastime of quasi-dumb women who can afford to ignore financial realities. English literary departments, at least those in the twelve national universities I contacted, were not interested in a PhD proposal firmly situated in popular romance studies. The turning point in my academic journey came when I was awarded a travel grant from the International Association of Popular Romance Studies. The grant allowed me to present my research at their 2016 conference, validating my work that had previously only existed in a void, and connected me to the global community of scholars dedicated to popular romance studies. At the risk of making this essay sound like paid promotional content, which it is not, I must share that my participation in IASPR16 led to the successful obtainment of my doctorate degree from the University of Tasmania in 2022. I shared my struggles with finding an appropriate doctorate program and received so much useful advice, among which was Professor Eric Selinger's recommendation of the name of my future supervisor, Professor Lisa Fletcher. At the time of writing this essay, I hold the only doctoral degree in popular romance studies in Pakistan, and while I recognize that the discipline may never have a future amid the growing regression in the country, I cannot help looking at my own research in the field and the research of my graduate supervisees as an instigation for change. I have received an unexpected interest in my book, *Romance Fandom in 21st-Century Pakistan: Reading the Regency*, across national universities, despite it not even being available for purchase in local bookstores. The best part of conversations about my book with Pakistani university students is the way their eyes light up at the realization that popular romance studies is a legitimate academic field. This enthusiastic reception challenges the traditional dismissal of romance studies through the new generation of Pakistani scholars who are keen to look beyond the highbrow and the global appeal of romance genre. The inherent grandeur of popular romance studies lies in the discipline's power to bridge academic discourse with

widely consumed media and to challenge prevailing assumptions about gender, emotions, and literary merit.

My research in the field so far has explored the two overarching divisions of popular romance reading communities of women in Pakistan, both of which exist in very interesting opposition to each other and oblivious to the similarities of their reading choices. Readers of popular romance narratives written in Urdu, the lingua franca of Pakistan, primarily belong to the lower-middle social class. These women often have lower literacy rates and insufficient command of English as a second language to enjoy anglophone fiction for leisure reading. I have explored how English-medium education in my postcolonial country shapes a unique romantic schema among elite and upper-middle-class women, which is largely influenced by Jane Austen's novels.[1] The "genre worlds," to borrow the term from Lisa Fletcher, Beth Driscoll, and Kim Wilkin[2], of Urdu and Anglophone popular romance fiction readers differ considerably. The digests containing Urdu popular romance narratives are easily available in the urban and rural marketplaces, whereas the visibility of anglophone popular romance novels is limited to upscale neighborhoods in urban centers. I have largely focused on gathering data for my research from the romance reading communities of both Urdu and Anglophone popular romance fiction. My experience of creating a space for my choices in an unfavourable world has led me to value the voices of popular romance readers and to explore the scholarly potential of their opinions while analyzing the fiction that they consume.

It may read as the cliché I advise my research supervisees to avoid, but reading romance genre fiction, in English and in Urdu, has helped me to think about the challenges of everyday existence and the miraculously sustainable promise of a happy ending. I try to find and give meaning to the voices of marginalized romance reading communities of women who do not allow themselves to be sure of, let alone being happy with, their reading choices. My happy ending lies in understanding the innermost fears of the women in my family who love me and did not want me to end up as a poor professor wearing broken slippers, in exploring the richness of texts relegated to academic corners, and in empowering students to pursue research in areas they are passionate about, whether it be popular culture, romance fiction, or other unconventional topics they may question the academic value of. I may never be able to buy fancy footwear, and I will keep struggling to find more supporting environments for research and newer methods of analyzing genre romance fiction, but I do not bear the burden of broken dreams.

[1] Farooqui, Javaria. "Romance, Austen, and English-medium schooling in Pakistan." *Language, Education, and Identity*. Routledge India, 2021. 95-114.

[2] Fletcher, Lisa, Beth Driscoll, and Kim Wilkins. *Genre Worlds: Popular Fiction and Twenty-First-Century Book Culture*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2022.