

# Pixie-dust romances



*The immense worldwide success of the Twilight vampire love series and James Cameron's epic film Avatar have made fantasy a romantic prerequisite. Fangs, love bites, fairy dust and aliens pour out of the Pandora box of magic potions, brewing tales that sell imaginary love to bewitched humans.*  
SITANSHI TALATI-PARIKH finds herself taking love-struck bites

AS HUMANS GET MORE BARBARIC AS a race, romances tend to swirl around a fictional character of an imaginary species. What is it about Pandora and the Na'vi tribe that makes them so beautiful and desired? Or about the blood-sucking undead that makes them the modern version of Byronic or Darcyan romantic heroes? Or what attracts us to a ghost, a spirit or a powerful figment of our imagination? It's not just the fact that their being unreal or non-real, gives me the ability to superimpose the characteristics that I wish to see in the person I love. It is also the fact that by virtue of being unreal, they can be more than we are. Either as humans we are deeply ineffectual at romance; or as people we need, nay we demand more. The inability of romantic

deliverance from a human race appears to send our hearts racing towards the inhuman – in true escapist fashion.

Escapism at one point of time was candyfloss romance – where the romantic hero was kind and considerate and loved you for the woman you were, not the woman he wanted you to be. It was human to be imperfect, it was human to accept these imperfections and it was human to love them. Women have always been suckers for the knight-in-shining-armor story – it is as if, we are still waiting to be rescued if not from atypical danger, then from ourselves, and our deep-rooted insecurities. The age of Feminism masked these things under the coat of smart trousers, shorter hair, and a career. Scratch the surface though,

and you will find a rather unapologetic little romantic girl hidden inside every driven woman. As Vatsala Kaul Banerjee, editorial director, children and reference books for Hachette India, publishers of the *Twilight*, *House of Night*, *Sookie Stackhouse*, *Blue Bloods*, *Vampire Diaries*, *Night World* and other such series states, "Feminism is not, and should not be, exclusive to the idea of love. Not everyone who chooses to love a male or be loved by him, even if occasionally beyond all logic, is a needy little twerp. C'mon, we've all been there – fallen for someone so bad, it's been hard to think of anyone or anything else, including school or friends or family. But eventually, you get real."

What is Edward Cullen, the famous vampire hero of the *Twilight* saga

by Stephenie Meyer, if not a paternal caregiver to the rather insipid heroine Bella Swan? His primary role is in protecting her, because he is that much stronger and more powerful than she can ever be (until she turns into a vampire, that is). As she gets embroiled repeatedly in danger, he appears miraculously to save her – because she means the world to him. When he can't be around, it is the young werewolf Jacob Black, who, again with greater powers, remains her protector. Bella, it appears, is in love with security, and whichever good-looking, charming man who can provide that kind of security to her. It is primarily the love of a teenage girl for an older, stronger man, a benefactor, a lover, and a protector.

With the fact that there is a burgeoning cult of 'Twilight Moms', the notion that this is merely the infatuation of teenage girls is immediately put to question. As some of these 30-plus women grudgingly admit, there is something deeply hypnotising about this romance – which fulfils their own unrequited high-school love. The trials of high-school romances and self-doubts never change – Bella, in her rather characterless state becomes an easy avatar for the reader to identify with. As an avid reader from France in her 20s, Myriam Belkis admits, "We

can empathise with Bella particularly because of her unremarkability." The reader, hopefully a stronger Bella, can morph into a young girl, who just wants the perfect guy to love her unconditionally. And so what if the guy is a blood-sucking, cold-blooded (literally) vampire? The very fact that he finds her blood intoxicating and thirsts for it, fights a moral battle every time he is with her, struggling to control himself to be with her, kisses her and withdraws from her raw passion, is inherently sexy. It is guilt-edged, morally unsound and dangerous desire that leaves the reader panting for more.

What is bothersome is Bella's lack of control and vapidity as a heroine – at least in the first three books. While it may be easy for girls to slip into her character because it's an empty shell, it's rare to find readers rooting for Team Bella. The men superimpose the woman, and despite it being her story, she remains vacuous and annoying at best, irritatingly dependent on a man to make her life credible (except for the fourth book, *Breaking Dawn*, where she comes into her own). 'Even after half a year with him, I still couldn't believe that I deserve this degree of good fortune,' says Bella in *New Moon*. We can't believe it either, because she never considered herself worthy of anyone. On a very superficial level,

her crisis is that of any teenage girl's deafening insecurity and self-doubt; on a deeper level, it is disturbing to see the protagonist in one of the most popular romances of the time behave like a suicidal sacrificial lamb at the altar of love. It makes you wonder if women have come a full circle – willing to do anything for love and for a man – and does that make it endearing or frightening?

Bella is unnaturally attracted to the supernatural, making us wonder if she is inherently other-worldly (they suggest she was born to be a vampire) or if she is battling a normal teenager's rebellious nature with an uncanny curiosity for trouble. Isn't it more likely for Bella's love to be infatuation than the unflinching deep love it is proclaimed to be? As a 17-year-old she takes the kind of hazardous decisions – in the name of love – that a 27-year-old would shudder to contemplate. Belkis confesses that, "At that age you are often reckless, and personally I remember my teenage feelings as the most intense I've had in my life." While its appeal to a teen audience is understandable, its appeal to an older audience is Potteresque – fantasy captures the imagination like nothing else does.

And it asserts the notion of being attracted to the bad guy, and wanting to 'fix' the bad guy. Edward (and later Jacob) try to make Bella believe that they are dangerous and therefore shouldn't

***By virtue of being unreal, they can be more than we are. It is easier to establish perfection in one that is not human.***



The interspecies love triangle between a human, a vampire and a werewolf in the Twilight saga