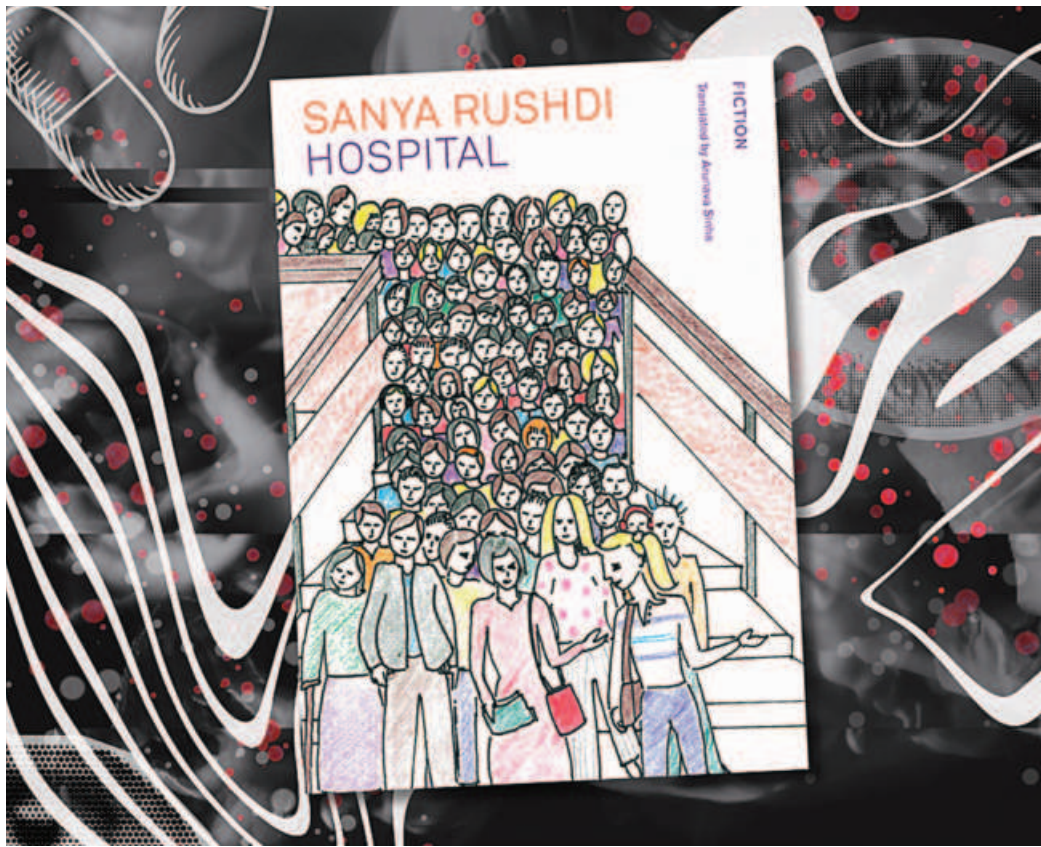


BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Meditations on sanity in 'Hospital'

Review of 'Hospital' (Giramondo Publishing Co, 2023) by Sanya Rushdi



ILLUSTRATIONS: AMREETA LETHE

the illness struck." Yet, over the course of the book, we see her often making trips to the library to study on her own. Her account of events is often patchy, full of erasures that strengthen the anxieties documented in the novel. It results in a slippery prose that whisks the reader to surprising falls of shock, dismay, and surprise. Rushdi's language in itself is violent in a way, which is perhaps fitting for a novel that wishes to show the violence of an individual surrendering her agency to the institution. We see one of the doctors maniacally howling out "Lithium! Lithium! Lithium!" when Sanya tries to reason with him.

Often the discomfort is brought on by the very people who are supposed to help Sanya. The man in uniform in the library's security office, to whom Sanya tells of her plight, wheedles her into getting on an ambulance and deserts her in the waiting room outside the Emergency. When she tires of waiting and returns home, she finds cops over her house to take her away, "Give your mother and sisters hugs", they command. One understands the unreliability of Sanya's version of events, but the author's adept use of ambiguity here makes for surreal reading.

Arunava Sinha, in his part as translator, has retained all the suspense that an overthinking patient such as Sanya would bring to the reader. In the actions of Sanya's family, particularly when her father reads the Quran to calm her, there are traces of Bangali mannerisms, a potent silhouette of the original behind an English version that masterfully stands on its own.

All talk of Sanya's condition aside, Rushdi's novel is at heart

a story of loneliness. During her spell in the hospital, we see Sanya smitten with another patient, Ivan, who in a hurry wears his jeans inside out. Sanya sees the label "Made in Bangladesh" and wonders: "Did he know everything all along, that something would develop between us?" Early on in the book, Sanya uses this same jarring line of reasoning to believe a boy on Facebook had been sending her cryptic signals through his own posts. Sanya explains it to a doctor: "When we talk to each other, the tone we use, the words we choose, the grace with which we express ourselves, all point to something different. A meaning that is not directly contained in what we say". Ivan is later seen with jeans labelled "Made in China"—an insignificant detail in the grand scheme of things, but affectingly tragic from Sanya's point of view. There is a sense of aloneness which permeates throughout the book. Even the love and care of a family tastes saccharine in this light.

In Sanya's world, where every interaction is scrutinised, any deviation of thought is treated with suspicion, and friendships are forged to administer medication easily, it does not ultimately matter how quickly one recovers and returns from the institution. As we see in Sanya's case, home too can easily become cold and clinical with only a coating of warmth on the surface, just like hospitals.

Shahriar Shaams has written for Dhaka Tribune, The Business Standard, and The Daily Star. He is nonfiction editor at Clinch, a martial arts themed literary journal. Find him on twitter @shahriarshaams.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

TALESPEOPLE SPIELS

A change of perspective

This is part two of a short series on creative writing from Talespeople, the hosts of Sehri Tales, the annual Ramadan prompt-based flash writing challenge

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

I love reading about popular inventions which were originally created with a different purpose in mind. For instance, did you know that bubble wrap, that oh-so-ubiquitous packing material that doubles as a stress-relieving toy, was initially intended to be wallpaper? Imagine that! On the one hand, you have hours and hours of bubble-popping fun. On the other hand, probably a trypophobia's nightmare, so maybe not. Either way, March Chavannes and Alfred Fielding, the co-inventors of the material, thought they had a dud on their hands until IBM started looking for better packing materials for their delicate new computers. The rest is history.

The point of this story is that sometimes looking at something a little differently can completely transform the narrative. This is also applicable in the case of our Sehri Tale prompts. Sometimes, facing a blank white page is the scariest part of the writing process, but having a prompt to hang your story on, and using a little lateral thinking to glean new meaning from a familiar word, can open up a world of possibilities. Halfway into the month, it's been amazing to see the weird and wonderful ways our Talers reinterpret each prompt to create imaginative stories. We hope our readers have been enjoying the top stories every day, too.

Stay tuned for more exciting updates.

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SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

Though on its surface Sanya Rushdi's *Hospital*, translated into English by Arunava Sinha and recently longlisted for the 2024 Stella Prize, looks to be a breezy, short read—it is anything but. With her rather flattened, sparse prose, Rushdi has managed to write an enduring piece of autofiction, a compelling account of psychosis that neither sensationalises nor withers away any sentimentality from the struggles of mental health.

Hospital, originally published in 2019 in Bangla by Bohiprakash, is

Sanya Rushdi's debut, and as first novels go, it is a commendable effort. A thoughtful novel, where the narrator's attempts to understand her condition (and the world around her) is skillfully pitted against the maze-like complexities of her illness. The Sanya in the novel had been working toward a PhD in developmental psychology before a bout of psychosis put a stop to it. "I was half done", she says, "I'd just got through the confirmation-of-candidatures stage. I was about to start my research after getting approval from the ethics committee when

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

'Shubeik Lubeik', wishes, and the vulnerability of human beings

A review of 'Shubeik Lubeik' (Knopf, 2023) by Deena Mohamed

ALIZA RAHMAN

In Deena Mohamed's *Shubeik Lubeik* (originally published in 2015 and translated in 2023 by Mohamed herself), wishes have not only drastically altered the fabric of daily life in Egypt, but the world at large. Set in 21st century Egypt, the inequalities within Egypt and those beyond are clearly visible in *Shubeik Lubeik*. From characters suffering because of their socioeconomic position and religion to Western nations exerting their outsized influence on Egypt through trade and treaties, the fictional world is almost a complete replica of the real one. The only change is that wishes exist.

Each genie allows one wish, and they can be divided into first, second, and third class wishes, their positions indicating their strength and quality. Wishes are life-altering; they have invaded entertainment industries, international relations, and even the personal and the sacred, such as struggles with mental health and religious beliefs.

Almost akin to money and oil, wishes are extracted, sold, and weaponised in much the same way that the aforementioned resources are in Deena Mohamed's world. However, genies are sentient, and using a wish requires the consent of the original owner of the bottle for its quality to be maintained. Moreover, making a wish itself is tricky. For instance, resurrection cannot happen but going back in time can. While some wishes, such as asking to look like a celebrity, can be simple with a first class wish, others such as wishing for the intangible, such as not feeling

sadness, has unintended negative consequences.

The author also makes clear that the politics of who can and cannot buy wishes is based on real world politics of inequality and distribution. One of the more overt references is the author's decision to call third-class wishes Delesseps, after the French developer of the Suez Canal. These wishes do not work properly, and may even cause grievous harm such as chopping off an arm when a wisher wants to be 10kgs lighter.

The story is set in three parts. Each of the three parts focus on Aziza, Nour, and Shokry respectively. Each of the characters displays a window, not only into the way that wishes have changed how one lives, but the moral dilemmas that arise with having possibilities that never existed before in their world. Each is connected to the other via wishes—both Aziza and Nour for instance, buy their first-class wishes from Shokry, an honest owner of a kiosk, who refuses to use them for himself due to his religious beliefs.

Aziza represents the downtrodden. Her marriage to Abdo, one of the few bright spots in her life, disappears when he is killed by a Mercedes, the very thing he wasted multiple third-class wishes on. Arrested despite having acquired a first class wish with her hard-earned money, Aziza's story highlights the way corruption operates in nations where the poor have little respite from the cruel machinations of those with more authority. When ultimately released through the help of a Dr Nadia from the Wishes for All Foundation, Aziza asks for



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

forgiveness.

Nour, the second customer to buy the wish from Shokry's kiosk, belongs to the affluent section of society. Living in a neighbourhood not visible to those who don't have access to it because of a wish, their struggles with mental health are seen even by some of their classmates as not being logical. One conversation with a classmate involves being reminded that they have neither health nor financial worries, which means that they, in reality, do not have much to be sad about. This is a kind of conversation that many are still painfully familiar with, and Nour's guilt increases after hearing this. A particularly painful moment for them is when they see Aziza has

been wrongfully put in jail because of her socioeconomic position, the very thing that protected Nour from the same fate, despite both buying their first class wishes from the same place.

Through Nour's story, we get to see the complexity of wishes compared to other resources. It might be tempting to try to compare wishes to money, labour, or even training that allows for admirable qualities, but in actuality, for many wishes to be fulfilled, a great deal of thought is required. Nour soon realises that they cannot simply wish their depression away. Moreover, considering their privileges, a further struggle is deciding whether they should even use the wish for their own benefit.

Shokry's struggle, in contrast, involves his desire to rid himself of the wishes. Finding them sinful and repugnant to his religious beliefs, he refuses to even allow an advertisement for wishes on his kiosk. His own family history reveals that his father did not make use of the wishes given to him by European tourists visiting the pyramids. He remains staunch about this even when they lose their house, and later we see that Shokry is equally determined to not have a single breach in his integrity.

However, the twist is that Shokry, despite initially seeming so, is not the only main character in the third part. This part switches to another character who has so far remained on the sidelines

throughout the novel. Intertwined with Shokry's desire to always help, the character emerges at a time when the continuous ruminations of both Nour and Shokry may feel a bit tedious. This character takes centre stage in such a way that Mohamed's impressive skills as a graphic novelist become evident. It is a welcome reprieve in that it is action-packed, unlike the second part, yet the unpredictable change feels more than fitting.

It is here that we learn of another dimension to wishes, one that separates it from any other kind of resource in terms of what it is able to provide, i.e. the chance to restart life.

This shocking story, which again has the wish as a vital driving force, is stunning, not just because of the fantastical elements, but the deeply tragic narrative that shows a woman enduring what one would never otherwise endure had wishes never existed.

Shubeik Lubeik, like many such works before it, is a clear example of how a fantastical element in a text allows vital truths about the real world to be said. Mohamed makes the graphic novel her own not just in terms of certain stylistic choices, but also through the unique challenges faced by the characters who are moulded by their surroundings—and of course, wishes. Despite it being set in Egypt, the challenges are ultimately human ones, and allows us the opportunity to ask what we would have done if we had such power in our hands.

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