REVIEW: SHORT STORY OF THE MONTH

Anxiety, unmarriedness, and 'An Eye and a Leg'



ILLUSTRATION: **ALIZA RAHMAN**

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Anxiety as an emotion is revelatory of not only individual fears, but structural ones. Faria Basher's "An Eye and a Leg" (*Granta*, 2025) touches upon a severe anxiety in Bangladeshi consciousness—that of the unmarried woman.

The unmarried woman in the current Bangladeshi landscape is an identity that fits uneasily into the preexisting slots, if at all. Discourse online and offline are rife with comparisons of women with inanimate objects that rot if left unconsumed. That the figure of the women is likened to these is not revelatory of the state of the women, but the ecosystem that marks her as such.

The rush to get women attached to a man, and subsequently the man's family and lifestyle, is clothed in statements that show concern, urgency, and for some, threats of perpetual loneliness and societal abandonment. But it may well be this very socially enforced anxiety, often bordering into paranoia, that is maybe the very thing being joked about here.

For one, the protagonist seems to be in a family without financial anxieties. She also has her own income from her music lessons, even if there is no indication that there is no connection to an institution. This freedom from financial constraint is of great importance if we consider that economic burdens loom large in the life of many people today when marriage comes into consideration. So, Basher's choice to have a narrator simply wake up sans one eyeball and eventually a leg that begins rotting, becomes the impetus behind her family frantically searching for a groom.

In contrast to the often arbitrary (but presented as catastrophic) reasons to get married, the surreal circumstances of the narrator's sudden disability becomes a genuine corporeal crisis, one that would actually lead to her death.

Thus, in the creation of this strange disorder that results from a lack of marriage, Basher gives a corporeal realism to the anxiety expressed at the state of women simply disengaging from marriage. In doing so, Basher situates the anxiety in a comparative lens which exposes the unfounded baseless nature of the anxiety directed toward young women who have nothing to lose from staying unmarried, unless of course the society disallows this through explicit and implicit tactics.

The narrator's condition comes in like a cosmic punishment. There appears to be no human source of her predicament. Yet, it is her unmarried state which is proffered as the reason for her illness, both by relatives who blame her parents, and medical professionals.

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The reactions to her grim prognosis mirrors the reactions women receive in real life, even when imminent untimely death is not an issue. And much like the fate of many Bangladeshi women, the once semi-independent narrator with a content life becomes forced to rely on a man to continue staying alive. In both the fictional and the real life case, the result is this: the woman's status in the current sociopolitical matrix is preserved and reproduced as she falls within the control of her husband.

Anxiety as an emotion has a high epistemological cachet. It is revelatory of where we believe lie the weaknesses of the structures we have come to be comfortable with. Any deviation from perceived norms causes not just the realisation that there is an arbitrariness to the rules we follow, but that they may be dismantled by human efforts. It also reveals, much to the discomfort of many, that their commonplace socially sanctioned anxiousness may not have a firm rational basis.

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In one of the most on-the-nose moments of the text, Basher's narrator is taken to the "marriage market", a place in a mall where women of varying ages and conditions are placed as products with a price tag on them. The narrator is priced at a discount, and sold to the third interested man.

This pricing of women has parallels in the material woman. The search for a serious partner often leads to a calculation of the self. Questions ranging from salary, status, education, age, physical attributes, and the like become variables that determine not only how much of a high valued partner one can get, but also the "furniture" a family can ask for.

In the text, the narrator's life with her husband, though not one of blind bliss, is one she can adjust to and feel a degree of contentment in, at least at the initial stages. It devolves, however, as many marriages do, with the husband being irritated at the minutest inconveniences, including even parts of the narrator that he had admired before. Her harmonium playing, which was one of the primary reasons for his interest in her, becomes one of the irritants, and the narrator eventually loses out on a source of income as she begins to revile the idea of having students over when her husband is so impatient.

The unhappiness at such a marriage causes the narrator to announce to her mother that she will leave, even if it means she will no longer be alive. That decision, however, never needs to be made as the husband (now former) brings in a new wife and asks her to leave. The story ends with the narrator leaving, her last words being "The next morning, and for the rest of my life, I stood on two legs, and looked at the world through fresh eyes."

The metaphorical and literal meanings are obvious, but the implications require analysis, for the text ends by including how the experience has very likely altered how she sees the world post-marriage and post-separation. It is these "fresh eyes" which are so lacking in society, for the psychic hold of marriage as an institution continues to distort thinking and disallow new ways of living. Should an outsider observe the urgency with which we enforce marriage by listening into our most vulnerable and intimate discussions, one would think there is a belief that marriage holds some sort of magical quality to it. History provides one answer for how it has come to be this way; mass anxiety's sociocultural permeation offers another. It thus makes sense why Basher's story of an absurd, near surreal circumstance makes way for an easier critique of an institution that continues to demand more of women who already shave off parts of themselves before they exit singlehood. The story can thus be seen as a commentary on anxiety as a mechanism for control.

Anxieties, much like the parties in a marriage, have rankings. Some are given the status of being absurd, while some are elevated to the rank of such importance that deviation from a path elicits fear so immense that it produces actions some individuals would not otherwise partake in. In the case of marriage, the anxiety ranks alongside events such as birth and death. This isn't surprising if we consider that much like some other cultures, we believe that of the things that can never be avoided, marriage is one of them. This unfortunately common belief leads to marriage being treated, even if it is not admitted, as some kind of magic. If we think with honesty for an instant, we will be able to conjure up the many times marriage is proffered as a solution for problems that require systemic support and funding, for the things marriage can supposedly cure include depression and anxiety to a person's drug addiction problem and violent behaviour. Maturity and betterment, they say, will come after. Marriage, however, must take place, even if body parts don't disappear in the middle of the night.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Three realms, one unforgettable love story

Review of 'Love Beyond Realms' (Zass Publishers, 2025) by Syderra Jaks

NUSRAT HUQ

This book has been categorised as a fantasy romance, but it has much wider dimensions than that. A heartfelt love story is at the book's core, and its unique feature is the blend of three realms that the characters inhabit. First, in the real world there is the seemingly simple office romance—this overlaps with a virtual romance in the computer gaming world, and finally, in the realm beyond is the romance of a soul who, even in death, perhaps transmigrates to another living soul and the love becomes eternal.

The reader is intrigued at how the three realms are fused into a plausible story, but that is just what the author has achieved. In the meticulously thought-out plot, you will marvel at how the three realms converge. As the plots multiply, the reader wonders how so many loose ends will ultimately be tied up.

The game 'Anima Sanctum' in the story is similar to an actual computer game called *World of Warcraft*—Eeciting, magical, adventurous, and yes, addictive. Game after game your partner and you save each other from death and since you play incognito and only have a game handle or ID, no one knows you. Your romance with an online unknown player can spill into your real life and cause you sleepless nights. How did you fall in love with a virtual person?

Other strengths in the book are the knowledge you gain of how private investigators work. They must have contacts in the police department, learn how to glean information from every possible source and how to avoid being caught from breaking the law themselves. We learn how stock market manipulation is a ploy to defeat your business rivals. The one upmanship in business rivalry is very enjoyable to read. We also learn about Blockchain technology—an advanced database mechanism that allows information sharing within a business network.

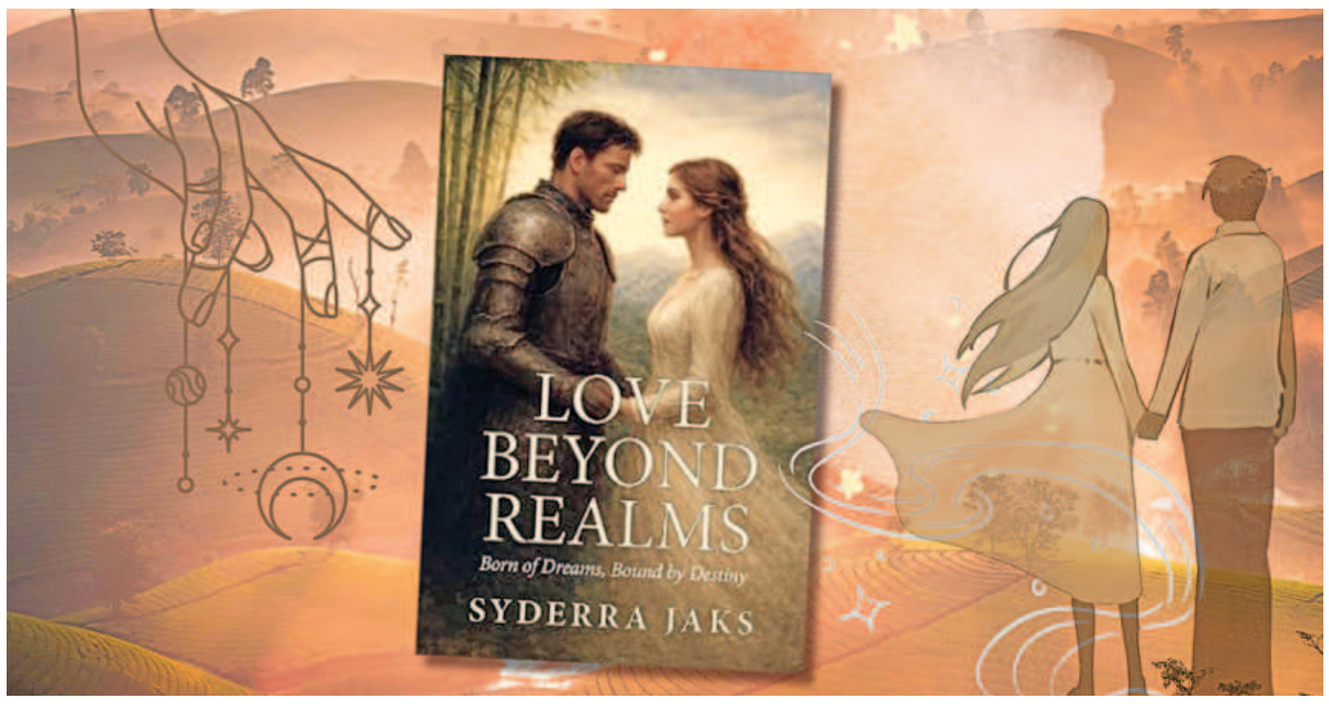


ILLUSTRATION: **MAHMUDA EMDAD**

The characterisation is strong, interesting and well-crafted. Where there are wealthy CEOs there are the proverbial gold-diggers. These are the fun elements in the book. Enjoying the smoked trout and Chardonnay is less important than who you dined with and why. The entire world wants to know who will be chosen to become the devastatingly handsome and obscenely rich CEO's bride! And if he is dining with another CEO, is there a merger or hostile takeover on the horizon? The conjectures are inevitable.

There are 44 chapters in the book and the title of each chapter is a testament to the writer's ability to hint at a mystery or even a solution to a mystery in the title. The 44 titles themselves are part of the book's elevated standard. Some titles appear simple like "The Orphanage" or "The Scarf" while others point to the mystery itself like "Subterfuge" or "The Invisible Bond".

The research to support the information in the book is thorough and extensive. The very first chapter which is about climbing the Himalayan range will immerse the reader into the snowy, magnificent yet treacherous range of the Himalayas. Fissures, crevasses, the rest step technique, jumaring, etc., transport us to the mountaineer's world.

Those of us who know little about video games will be drawn into the world of virtual reality. A shield to protect can be of chainmail or iron, but it can also be as delicate as gossamer silk. And when you see that the enemy has a katana, you wonder how you can possibly defend yourself. Is the game more about quick wit and strategy, game partnership, or about the superiority of your weapons? Are these factors applicable to modern warfare as well? Is it about diplomacy and strategy, or about the strength of your arsenal?

The couple we love most in the story are Fergus and Bellflower, an aged couple who run a small café where there is no menu, but you are served whatever Bellflower fancied to cook that day. Their sweetness and wisdom make them most lovable.

Finally we meet the mysterious millionairess and the author's skill when the story telling is at its peak. All the loose ends that keep you turning the pages come together brilliantly and we are left with a superb novel truly deserving of a very high rank in literary achievement.

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