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Observing an urban dystopia

Ahrar Ahmad spots compassion in a writer

Essays are a difficult genre to master. It requires the deep understanding of a scholar, but the light touch of a journalist. Adnan Morshed has emerged as an accomplished essayist, and his current collection of elegant and enlightened pieces is a pleasure to read. They had been published earlier in various newspapers and journals (many in the Daily Star or BDnews, some elsewhere) and it is clear that the author has gradually created an oeuvre of work that demands attention and appreciation.

Adnan is a bright young scholar who received his Ph.D. from the Architecture and Planning Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (one of the premier research institutions in the world), and currently teaches in the prestigious School of Architecture and Planning at the Catholic University in Washington, DC. It is perhaps expected that many of his essays would address questions relevant to his area of experience and expertise in direct and substantive ways. Even the title of the book (“Oculus” which indicates a “circular recess at the apex of a dome”) suggests his background and perspective.

More than half of the thirty essays here deal with issues regarding the capital city of Dhaka. As most of us who either live in, or have visited Dhaka over the last several years, can testify, the city has become an urban dystopia stiflingly congested, relentlessly chaotic, and woefully unplanned. Space is at a premium with thousands moving in to the capital following the push-pull syndrome affecting most Less Developed Countries (“push out” from dim circumstances in the countryside, and “pull in” towards the lure of urban opportunities). Moreover, energetic vendors and clamorous beggars encroach into the roads, selfish landowners (mostly the privileged and powerful) extend the boundaries of their properties into public spaces, lakes and water bodies are filled up for construction, parks and ancient landmarks are swallowed up under the aggressive onslaught of residential and commercial imperatives. Infrastructures remain hopelessly outdated and inadequate, more so because the garment exports and external remittances have led to a class of nouveau riche elements whose engagement in conspicuous consumption is both competitive and vulgar, and which has led to a surfeit of glitzy cars, fancy eateries, trendy boutique shops, and lavish celebrations. Traffic is capricious and noisy, the air putrid, civic life, in the absence of an urban sensibility, is suffocating. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, pervasive corruption, and confrontational political practices (expressed through the frequent calling of strikes, manab-bandhans, protests, mass meetings, and occasional violence) only serve to aggravate the problems. Life in Dhaka is simultaneously an adventure and a challenge, and residents require some degree of fortitude, both intestinal and moral, to survive.

Adnan surveys this bleak cityscape with a trained eye and a compassionate heart. In essays such as “Our Ecological Unconsciousness”, he demonstrates, and deplores, our environmental recklessness. In “Arian Beel’s Versailles Moment” (about a plan to build an airport in a sensitive habitat) or in “Digging a Cultural Grave at the National Assembly Complex” (about the impact of building new residential buildings in an architecturally rich and distinctive area), or in “Heritage Preservation” (about the gradual “cannibalization” of historic buildings to make way for new construction), he provides very particular instances of policy making which is blithely indifferent to ecological balance, aesthetic integrity, or historical awareness.

Adnan is equally convincing whether he is analyzing specific issues relevant to Dhaka (“A Sociology of Dhaka’s Traffic Congestion”) or looking at more general and future-oriented themes (“The Tragi-comic Destiny of Dhaka” or “Dhaka 2044”). It must also be pointed out that his tone is not one of lament and loss, but one of critical engagement tinged with optimism and buttressed by appropriate policy proposals. His essay on “Towards a Sustainable Dhaka” is an important contribution to thinking about urban planning in fairly reasonable and pertinent ways, and some of his suggestions should be discussed by appropriate authorities.
Adnan’s imagination and interests are obviously broader than a simple pre-occupation with Dhaka. There is a tender piece on his mother, a sharp essay on “decoding” the Bengali New Year celebrations, a sensitive article on a photo exhibit on Bangladesh and the controversies it had generated in the US, and an indignant and feisty essay on the shabby treatment of Dr. Yunus by the current government.

Most of his essays (obviously some are better than others) bear the imprint of an informed and engaged intellectual, a renaissance person with multi-faceted concerns and curiosities, a fine stylist, and a keen observer of the human scene. Some of his essays are astute and provocative, some almost romantic and visionary, almost all are clever and thoughtful.

Adnan deserves to be congratulated for the publication of his book. More than that, he deserves to be read.

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