

Plight of a Pseudo Reader

TAZREEN JAHAN BARI

It was a rainy Friday. And like any Bangladeshi reader, I was about to snuggle in with a book after having stuffed myself with some *khichuri-ilish*, when the world as I know it came crashing down. The realisation hit me with painful clarity -- I am not a reader anymore. I have not been one for a very long time.

I have been adding more books to my to-be-read pile. I have been buying books for every occasion to justify a semi-questionable consumerist streak. I have been taking pride in calling myself a reader in social settings. I have been taking aesthetic photos to revive my bookstagram account that never quite took off. And yet, I cannot remember the last time I read a book.

BEGINNING OF THE END

It started with a simple case of a reading slump. Days became weeks. And long before I could comprehend what was happening to me, months went by without me reading a single book. Like any reader desperate to cling to the title of a "reader" to justify their dark academia aesthetics, I too denied it first. But one term is only valid for so long. So, I tried my hands at paraphrasing and started calling what I was going through a reading hiatus. When an entire year passed by, I should have realised the end is here.



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THE DENIAL

You see, someone capable of taking a nap in the face of impending assignment submissions, and someone used to cutting the back end of a tube of toothpaste before calling it truly empty, cannot be expected to accept the truth without a scuffle with denial first. And so, I took the help of

lists and impulsive buying to cover up my non-reader status. I smiled brightly, buying new books and increasing my to-be-read pile as if I were not the same person who has not picked up a book to read in ages. But the shame and guilt that comes with not reading followed me around until it had my poor heart maimed at last.

BITING THE BULLET

Having lost the game of denial, I took refuge in acceptance. What used to give me joy can only offer a sense of guilt and loss now. So, it is time to rip the band-aid off and bite the bullet once and for all. Dear reader who has been nervously relating to this traumatic experience, let me break it to you -- you are not a reader anymore.

A NEW BEGINNING

Like most life changes, accepting is the truly hard part. Once you have accepted you are not a reader anymore, you will see that the scrutiny of the increasing number of unread books on your shelf and the guilt you associate with not reading like you used to will vanish into thin air. Even the spotlight syndrome impaling you with fear of judgement at the thought of coming out as a non-reader will become manageable.

So, own your status as a non-reader. Cherish the good memories you made while reading in the past. Find a new hobby. And just in case the thought of changing your whole aesthetic paralyses you with fears of an identity crisis, remind yourself that change is inevitable.

Tazreen is your typical angry liberal arts student who likes to blame it all on capitalism. Send her anger management tips at tazreenzahan@gmail.com

What it's like to be a student tenant in Dhaka

H. RAINAK KHAN REAL & RASHA JAMEEL

Some might call adulting a challenge, some might dismiss it as just another phase in life. For university students who reside in rented spaces in Dhaka, it's a rather complicated affair. From living on instant noodles to dealing with problematic property owners, student tenants have to navigate many hardships to live in the city. We talked to a number of students to get the nitty gritty on what life is like as a student tenant.

Among the students we reached out to, very few described the transition from living with family to living solo as being completely unpleasant. There is always the dreaded element of uncertainty, be it in managing your personal expenses yourself for the first time or getting accustomed to living with people you don't really know well enough.

Swagata Das*, a Brac University alumna, spoke about how living in a rented space was quite unnerving for her at first, "I was unsure whether my roommates would take to my presence and initially had a fear of being judged in a communal environment."

For those who weren't particularly fazed by the transition, they confessed to being quite shaken up by the drastic changes in living conditions. Gone were the days of relying on parents to deal with finances and household chores.

which every roommate contributes a fixed amount: 2500 taka. If our supplies run out before the month ends, each of us contribute an equal amount again to buy necessary products," stated Ifakhar Uddin, third-year Computer Science and Engineering student from the University of Dhaka (DU) who lives in a rented apartment in Motijheel.

The students who choose to eat outside either don't want to deal with the extra expense of a cook and grocery shopping every month, or find better alternatives like eating at local hotels or university cafeterias. Jafrul Alam, studying Accounting and Information Systems at Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP) and staying at a rented apartment in Mirpur DOHS, informed us that they are accustomed to eating breakfast at the university cafeteria, and lunch and dinner at home prepared by a cook.

Rent, of course, is a key factor to be considered when looking for apartments.



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA



PHOTOS: DARSHAN CHAKMA

Based on our research, the primary concern amongst these students seemed to be associated with food. From the students we reached out to, one half appeared to totally depend on local food hotels near the apartments and on university cafeterias, while the other half took the extra hassle of doing the groceries and cooking their meals either by themselves or by employing someone. Those who opt for a balanced meal at home, often buy a fridge through equal contribution from roommates.

"My eight roommates and I had to cram our groceries into one tiny refrigerator. Every now and then my groceries would go missing as someone else would confuse my purchases for theirs. It was quite difficult to keep track," recalled Fardia Ahmed*, an Environmental Sciences major from North South University.

"Since we prefer to eat meals at home, we assign monthly managers amongst ourselves who are responsible for buying as well as tracking expenses related to groceries and food for a month. Thirty days' worth of groceries and food products are bought at the beginning of each month in

Being the capital, increased rural to urban migration has accelerated the already growing demand for rented apartments and as a consequence, high rents are charged within both city corporations of Dhaka, compared to other districts of Bangladesh. To mitigate the issue, students commonly rent apartments together with others who share similar residence problems.

"My friends and I rented a two-room apartment in the New Graveyard area in Azimpur for 14,000 taka per month back in 2018. Considering the inadequacy of space, the five of us later rented a three-room apartment in Joynag Road, Bakshi Bazar for 16,000 taka. This is a much better deal as the apartment space is sufficient for five and is located within walking distance of our university," said Noor Ahmed, currently a third-year Nuclear Engineering major from DU.

Variations in apartment rents are mostly based on location, though negotiation plays a key role during the determination of final rent. During the pandemic, student residents have been caught up in an even larger dilemma regarding the rent they're

being charged. Due to all the confusion surrounding the reopening of university campuses, students have been unsure about whether to stay at home with parents or in Dhaka. As a result, many are currently paying full or close to full rent out of fear of eviction, even though they're occupying the space in question for a few days at most.

"I've been paying a reduced rent of 3000 taka instead of 4000 taka even though I returned to my home district last year because of the country-wide lockdown due to Covid-19 pandemic," comments BUP's Mustakim Iba Quashar, who is renting an apartment in Mirpur DOHS.

Notably, Section 18 of the Premises Rent Control Act 1991, prohibits the landowner from threatening their tenant with eviction unless the latter has been found guilty of violating any of the terms of agreement. However, there are currently no tenant laws in place to ensure reduction of rent under the circumstances of a financial crisis.

As we looked into the living facilities at rented spaces, a majority of the interviewed students said that they have to pay predetermined bills and service charges.

Tanvir Mohammad Farhan, a fourth-year Geography and Environment major from DU, said, "For a two-room apartment in Wireless, Moghbazar, we pay a service charge of 950 taka per month, which includes gate fee, water bill and waste collection fee."

Most of the students we interviewed also reported paying electricity and gas bills separately. Though the gas bill was fixed, we were told that their electricity bills fluctuate depending on holidays and seasons. Uninterrupted availability of gas is expected by the students as they are paying fixed bills every month, but students from several areas complained about either low pressure of gas or unavailability of gas during the afternoon.

Moreover, almost all the students we spoke to confessed that they never really feel safe with their possessions at rented apartments, since strict security measures aren't always guaranteed. Some students cited cases of harassment, bullying, and theft

which largely remain unresolved as the property owners themselves often refused or hesitated to get involved in the renter's "personal affairs".

Kate Rosario* from Independent University, Bangladesh discussed one such incident where her roommate forced her into a "subtle situation" by occupying a significant amount of space with her husband at the flat she shared with Rosario. "The property owner refused to step in and was of no help in the matter," Rosario mentioned.

Even though in some cases security within the apartment space was somewhat ensured, the same couldn't be said for the garage and other locations.

"Theft is very common in Kalshi, Mirpur. Thirty thousand taka was stolen after thieves broke into one of the apartments. A friend of mine who came to us for a visit got his bicycle stolen. Even the bicycle of the property owner himself got stolen," reported Shifat Sharif, a student from Military Institute of Science and Technology.

"Bottom floor apartments are most susceptible to theft and stealing of bicycles is a common occurrence," according to Masum Billah, a fourth-year undergraduate student from DU living in a rented apartment in Chankharpul.

Student tenants already have more than enough on their plates as they try to build a secure future for themselves in a competitive academic environment. The trying circumstances that they often have to face at rented spaces only further test their resolve. This struggle is largely unnecessary, and a huge barrier to success for many. Proper regulations, enforcement of such regulations, and a healthy rapport between community leaders, students, and university authorities can only lead to a better and healthier experience for student tenants in our city.

*Names have been changed upon request

Reference
The Daily Star (May 5, 2020). *Protecting tenants' rights during Covid-19.*

This Is Why You Should Invest in Art

AYRA AREEBA ABID

The mere ability of creating anything over nothing delivers sheer bliss. After being intrigued by colours, in the late 2000s I finally expressed my wish of being admitted to an art school. This was perhaps one of the best decisions I have made in my life so far. Art can be so rewarding but can only be felt once you start immersing yourself in its creativity.

The following steps are only a guide. I urge you to add in or exclude from the stages I mention.

BUILDING A CREATIVE SANCTUARY

We find joy in different customs, through different paths and from different sources. Art, for one, can be therapeutic when you wield your brush over a canvas or sketch delicate, black and white portraits. Art can be induced through self-expression, a sense of individual identity. Forming identities can be daunting, but it is a process and evolves through time and practicing art.

FINDING A SUITED MEDIUM

Use different mediums and observe what works best for you. Personally, I am comfortable working with watercolour, pens and pencil but my skills have dropped over time due to a lack of devotion. Thus, it is imperative that we devote time and schedule intrinsically, in order to form greater strengths in the field. Even if you're not the Leonardo da Vinci of the 21st century, allow yourself to form an identity of your own. Studies suggest art may promote individual well-being and psychological health. So, if you're looking for a way to cope with the



uncertainty and the advent of adversities the pandemic is presenting currently, art might just be the right getaway for you to choose!

LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE

It is sadly, however, the case in many art schools in Dhaka where village landscapes are solely the topic focused on. There is little to no creative liberty, as Fatima Jahan

who is now a university student, says from her experience attending art school in her childhood.

Samrin Haque, a high school student, however has differing views, as she sees her art school as a safe place attended by like-minded people. My cousin who attended art school with me says, "I enjoyed working in the classes as traditional

Bangla music played in the background. Sometimes special appearances by famous musicians would exude an aura of charisma through their remarkable live music."

Another cousin of mine remarked that for her art was like a "recreational activity" and "a momentary retreat from strain." Suraqa Noor, a university student, particularly loved her teacher's method of motivating students from all age ranges. However, when she joined her O Level art classes, she disliked the idea of drawing the same thing in every class. Liberty to choose topics in local art classes is minute and comprehension of detailed construction of complex yet basic anatomy compositions are vastly discouraged in art schools.

The ability of birthing reality from personal imagination equips artists with a sense of gratification while permitting the critics to interpret however they wish to. If you need a tip on problem-solving skills, I'll tell you a secret, dear readers. Art will present you with this expensive skill.

Ayra Areeba Abid's favourite word is 'serendipity' and she's a linguistics geek. Connect with her at areeba.ayra@gmail.com

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