

ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

The apocalypse is already here

A review of ‘Moon of the Crusted Snow’ (ECW Press, 2018) by Waubgeshig Rice

In a twist on the popular post-apocalyptic narrative, the novel focuses on an indigenous community’s response to a worldwide calamity. The outages and resulting loss of modern amenities draws a stark line between those who have retained traditional hunter-gatherer skills and those who have not.

SABRINA FATMA AHMAD

From *A Handmaid’s Tale* (McClelland and Stewart, 1985) to *The Hunger Games* (Scholastic, 2008), most dystopian novels tend to set their apocalypse in an undisclosed future from the time they were written in. With our news feeds showing us mind-numbing images of human savagery every single day, it begins to feel like we’re already living in the end times, and horror writers certainly have their work cut out for them.

Two years ago, Bangladesh experienced a country-wide power outage that lasted less than 24 hours, and anyone who was around at that time will recall the panic and mayhem that ensued, so soon after we had emerged from a global pandemic. It was a sobering illustration of just how dependent we have become on modern technology, and how limited our survival skills have become—a feeling reinforced earlier this year during the July revolution when the AL government shut down the internet and imposed a media blackout.

While these are nightmarish

situations for many of us, these are realities for many communities within our borders and across the world. And this forms the basis of Waubgeshig Rice’s speculative fiction.

Moon of the Crusted Snow takes place in an isolated Ojibwe community in Northern Ontario. It is late fall. Snow is imminent. A sudden disruption of the electricity, cell phone service, and internet takes them by surprise. At first, these outages seem typical of the unreliable services provided by the authorities ‘down south’. Days go by, however, and neither power nor communications are restored. Days turn into weeks and gradually it becomes clear that something apocalyptic has happened.

In a twist on the popular post-apocalyptic narrative, the novel focuses on an indigenous community’s response to a worldwide calamity. The outages and resulting loss of modern amenities draws a stark line between those who have retained traditional hunter-gatherer skills and those who have not. As winter deepens, and emergency food supplies dwindle, those less equipped to survive die off

and their frozen bodies are piled in a makeshift morgue. Further tensions are precipitated by the arrival of Justin Scott, a white refugee, whose snowmobile trailer contains liquor and guns. In true white man fashion, Scott tries to assume leadership of the community. Interspersed within the terrifyingly mundane details of the community’s slow decline into chaos and violence are flashes of the supernatural—dreams and visions that feel like prophecies, old cautionary tales told by the elders, all adding an eerie quality to an already horrific situation.

Rice’s novel uses the post-apocalyptic setting to celebrate the resilience of indigenous people and to explore the challenges and possibilities of indigenous resurgence. He crafts a rich and full portrait of his community in a humble and direct style, the experience of reading which would remind readers of the tone and tenor of the “Drama in Real Life” stories from *Readers Digest* back in the ‘90s.

There has been some complaint among readers about the lack of exposition regarding the inciting incident of the novel, i.e., the calamity

that caused the outages, a conceit reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); the book does not explain the calamity that has led to the setting. This sharpens the focus on the reactions of the characters, which serves some good novelistic purposes. For me, personally, the conceit works: The eerie ‘jovial bully’ personality of Justin Scott displays a creepiness similar to Stephen King’s books. For a subjugated people, the ‘why’ of certain abuses that have happened becomes less important than the fact that they happened at all. One way to read the post-apocalyptic aspect of the novel is as an expression of how difficult indigenous resurgence is in present-day Canada, or really anywhere where indigenous communities have been relegated to minority status. In the wake of the ongoing turmoil in the CHT, this becomes a particularly relevant consideration for Bangladeshi readers.

The novel offers an engaging glimpse into the challenges of the Ojibwe people, who have been displaced by the white settlers. “Our world isn’t ending. It already ended”, laments

one of the characters, a community elder. He continues: “It ended with the Zhaagnaash came into our original home down south on that bay and took it from us. That was our world. When the Zhaagnaash cut down all the trees and took our fish and forced us out of there, that’s when our world ended.”

The opposing forces of forced assimilation and a struggle to retain the cultural identity in the face of ‘progress’, are rendered moot by the arrival of the apocalypse. How to pass on Ojibwe traditions in the face of the distractions of modern life is no longer an issue when modern life no longer exists?

In a world where an ongoing genocide has become an accepted background noise, where climate change continues to wreak havoc on every day life while political leaders pursue their usual rhetoric, a novel like *Moon of the Crusted Snow* doesn’t need to work too hard to be absolutely terrifying, and I for one, cannot wait to read the sequel.

Sabrina Fatma Ahmad is a writer, journalist, and the founder of *Sehri Tales*.

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Behind the screens: Unpacking the power of Bangladeshi TV ads

Review of ‘Decoding Ad Culture’ (Lexington Books, 2024) by Dr Harisur Rahman

MRIITKA ANAN RAHMAN

Consuming advertisements on television is a fixture of modern life—we are constantly aware when watching TV that we can buy more things, be better looking, have more fun, and treat ourselves to more. In an environment where we are a perennial audience for messages that tell us how we can improve our lives, it is natural for us to wonder what effect these messages have on us.

The conversation around ads extends beyond simply whether one can convince us to make a purchase or not. How does our history of colonialism affect the identity of ourselves that we have accepted? What kind of portrayals of gender does the contemporary local audience accept? Can an ad of foreign origin reflect the local audience simply by being dubbed in Bangla?

Although ads can be a common topic of discussion among audience members due to its wide reach, seldom has there been a structured and methodical dive into the Bangladeshi TV advertising industry and the many meanings and messages in the ads we see.

Decoding Ad Culture by Dr Harisur Rahman does just that. Rahman, a scholar of South Asian media studies, has previously

authored *Consuming Cultural Hegemony* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), which largely explored the Bangladeshi audience’s cultural obsession with Bollywood. In his new book, he dives into the contemporary advertising landscape of our country, thinking about the narratives, values, and ideas we consume on a daily basis. He achieves this through extended analysis of almost 40 popular ads that aired on Bangladeshi TV between 2018 and 2023, and conducting more than 30 interviews of ad makers and audience members alike.

The book provides observations and findings that will be of interest to anyone curious about the media or familiar watching local TV in general. In the earlier chapters, we are taken case by case through many popular ads exploring their use of language, symbolism, hidden meanings, and the types of logic and ideas that are embedded

in them.

While this analysis may be of particular interest to readers who enjoy analysing texts themselves, the approachable writing and explanations for every concept that is discussed makes this book perfectly appropriate for a wider audience.

The incorporation of quotes from audience members provides us an understanding of how other viewers feel about the issues discussed by the author. The book delves into greenwashing or how ads adopt certain pro-environment narratives to make it seem their work benefits the environment.

Gender roles, acceptable beauty and body standards, middle class identity and class dynamics, the disparity in ethical standards in marketing in western and non-western markets—all become part of the conversation in exploring how these ads construct their

messages.

One of the more interesting conversations that *Decoding Ad Culture* brings to the table is of cultural hegemony from Indian and western media. It is very difficult to define which culture is “ours” or even what the definition of “our” is for a country that is as young as Bangladesh, was once colonised, and shares borders with other countries (and consequently cultures) in the region. In any media, at what point does depiction of our culture end and that of a slightly different, more dominant neighbouring culture begin? Which ideas, cultural symbols, and norms can be claimed as “local”, and which are being pushed on us by the soft power of more powerful media? The answers are not so easy.

Another interesting question the book brings up is “what is real”? The book quotes Pollay when stating “cultural values in advertising are reproduced in such an idealized manner that the audience finds a similarity between themselves and the subjects of the advertisements” (1983). That begs us to ask: How much of what is shown in an ad is meant to be perceived as “real”?

If the youth in an ad converse using buzzwords young people seldom use in real life, is that meant to portray the lives of real youth in a heightened fashion or does

that represent a hyperreal world which is not meant to correspond to our society? *Decoding Ad Culture* seamlessly blends real life ad examples with theoretical components, bridging the gap between big picture ideas and the everyday products we use.

Overall, *Decoding Ad Culture* provides a truly wonderful insight into the commercials we see on an everyday basis. It is a reminder that nothing should be interpreted at a surface level—no text is simply words and actions, but layers of embedded meanings, ideas, and implications. Everything we see pushes specific values, makes assumptions about people and their lifestyles, and creates ideas of what is superior or even acceptable in society.

In a world where everything is commodified, it is difficult to maintain one’s own ideas of beauty, comfort, and fun. Reading a critical text like this serves as an important reminder of the many ways messages are designed to appeal to us, and the ways in which we may engage critically with the messages to take away information in a manner that is helpful to us.

Mrittika Anan Rahman is a contributor to *Daily Star Books*.

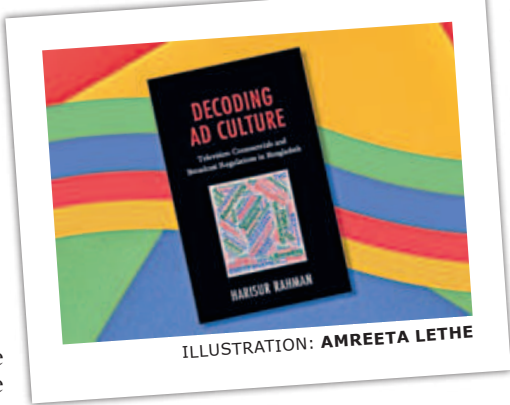


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