

Face to Face

Muhammad Zafar Iqbal: A Man of Conviction

By Sonia Kristy

WHEN Copotronic Sukh Dukkho came out in 1976, little did the country's enlightened circle know of its author or care for the genre it belonged to. Science fiction has always been somewhat neglected in the realm of Bengali literature. Much has changed since then and should one person be singled out for making this branch of literature popular, it would certainly be Dr. Muhammad Zafar Iqbal. Currently, a professor and the Dean of Science Faculty at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet, this versatile personality has surfed through different areas of creative works with consummate ease. He was once attached to the print media as a cartoonist during his student days. His courtship with journalism continues till date as a bold columnist who thinks sense and doesn't hesitate to express what he believes to be true. His unorthodox style, sincerity and unbiased attitude has earned him the reputation of a man of strong conviction and made him almost a lone ranger in the flock of self-seekers and opportunists in the guise of intellectuals.

After completing his masters in physics from Dhaka University, Iqbal did his Ph. D. from the University of Washington. He then joined California Institute of Technology and later Bell Communications as a research scientist. But when the question of priority came, he didn't hesitate a bit to ignore all the prospects of a bright and prosperous career. After long eighteen years, leaving the land of opportunity, he returned home.

"I've never decided to stay back over there. There's no doubt that life is much better and easy in the United States where everything works through a system; for example, you can go to the grocery store you can buy stuff, you can go to the bank you can take money, you can send your kids to a good school — everything works over there. But despite all the facilities, I've never felt like staying back because it

wasn't my country. Suppose my mother wasn't pretty but that doesn't mean that I'm going to look for the best looking woman and make her my mother. This is my country. I grew up here, all my dreams are centred around this country, everything I have ever wanted to do is for Bangladesh and not for the United States of America. So if I stayed back, whatever I did I would have been done for another country. And besides, there are millions of people there doing exactly the same thing. But here you don't have too many people with my background. Therefore this is where I really can, and want to, contribute."

However, when he joined Shahjalal University, Iqbal didn't realise that he would eventually become so deeply involved in university administration. In fact, when he joined the university, he didn't even know that he would be the head of the department. He thought that he would be a professor. As it turned out, he was the only senior person there and his job was of a professor as well as the dean. It was tough. But what appeared tougher was student politics. He didn't have the least idea that politics that involves the future generation of the country could be so violent and dangerous.

"Few months after I had joined the university, during a debate programme somebody said something bad about the *razakars*. Some students who had certain beliefs (like Shibir) felt bad about it and one of them stabbed the debater on the stage. The university authority made a *tadanta* (probe) committee and I was made its chairman. I thought it was constituted to find the truth and act accordingly. But what I didn't know was that in our country such committees are supposed to just keep everything hush hush, keep it down and drag things long enough till everybody forget about everything. So, when I really wanted to find out the truth, some students' front protested and another probe committee was formed. What happened next was really violent. The whole

dormitory was on fire, the miscreant students literally burnt down their rooms, wanted to kill somebody, wanted to slaughter someone, beat up their rivals — it was horrible. And the most ironical part is, it was done by the Bangladesh Chatra League activists. Again I was made the probe committee chairman and again I did my job. The committee identified the miscreants and meted out punishment against them. Violence then spread out across the whole university. The university was shut down, the guilty students were looking for me and other members of the committee, and we were declared *persona non grata* at our own university. There are still burning signs in front my Sylhet residence. There were a lot of pressures from different levels of the government as well. But we, the teachers were determined to stick to our principles. And, finally, they had to accept the punishment."

The role of the general students, during such incidents is always more of observers rather than perpetrators. Even though they denounce violence and wrong-doing deep inside, they don't have the guts to come forward. This has been frustrating for Iqbal. Often, he rebukes his students, calling them cowards and blaming them for not coming forward when it matters. Once they did come forward, not all of them, though, for this particular incident involved the weakest of the weaker — female students.

"During a regular semester examination, some students demanded that the examination be postponed. At first, there were a few students in favour of postponement and appeared negligible. But soon they started creating huge problems like cutting the electric supply of the hostel and things like that. Soon the number of the agitating students increased. To make the authority approve their demand, they started behaving rudely with teachers. This made the female students feel really bad and they decided to take the exam. Even if a single student wants to sit

for the examination, it becomes obligatory for the university administration to make arrangements. "On the day of the examination, the campus looked almost like a battlefield. Hundreds of students were barricading the entrance. The police were standing there like mere on-lookers as they do in such cases. And in the midst of this total disorder — barricades, explosion of crackers and gunshots — the female students came out of the dormitory singing and demanding that the examination be held. Even though, eventually the examination was postponed, I'll say, that the female students set a precedent and it should be regarded as a turning point in the history of our student politics."

But non-participation of the male students is one of the weaker points in this brave act. Even more frustrating, for Iqbal, was the media reaction to the whole incident. Although he himself had invited the journalists over to his office and told them all about the incident, not one news daily carried a report on that. And, Iqbal thinks that it was male chauvinism that had clouded their professional judgement.

He doesn't particularly believe in the ideology of the country's mainstream political parties. He only believes in the spirit of our Liberation War. If a party, be it Awami League or BNP, in words and deeds, reflect that spirit, it will get his support.

On the role of the country's intellectuals, Iqbal entertains a negative feeling. "Ideally, the political parties should go to them (the intelligentsia) and beg them to write something good on their activities. But what happens in our country is just the opposite. Here, the intellectuals take shelter under different banners of political party and try to get some favour out of them. The intellectuals should remain above all this."

As a novelist, Zafar Iqbal is the champion of a neglected genre in Bengali literature — science fiction. Although he has quite a few

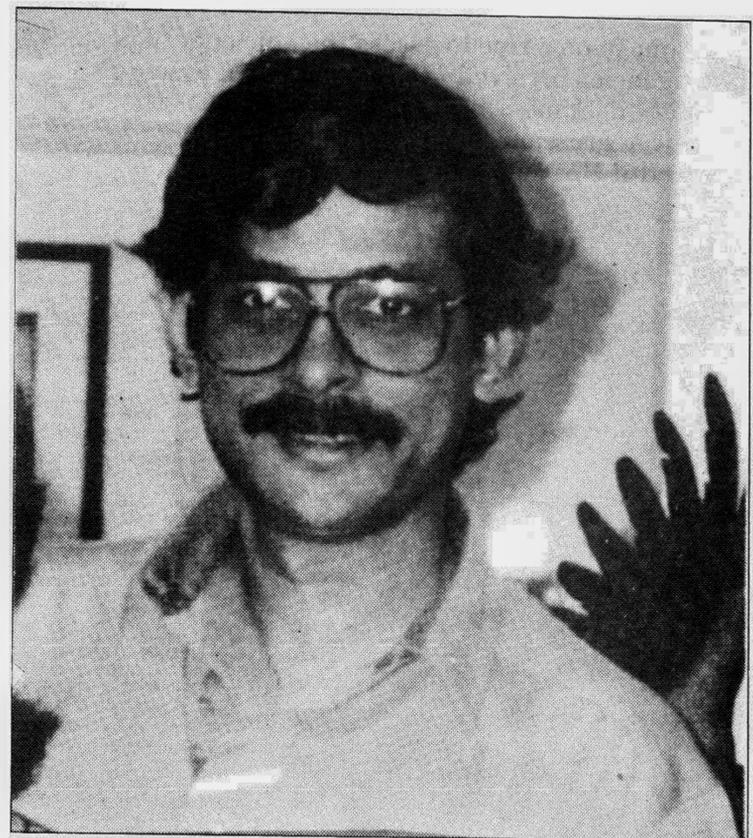
novels to his name, it is science fiction that earned him acclaim from the readers as well as the critics. He wrote his first sci-fi when he was about seven or eight years old; however, he himself did not know what genre it belonged to — science fiction or adventure story. It was about a couple of kids who built a rocket and made a journey to a planet. There they tried to find out whether the planet had oxygen or other gas by trying to light a fire. When the fire started burning it proved that there were oxygen.

"It was a childish effort. I didn't even know then that it was a special category of writing. I loved to read and science was my favourite subject. But, now I realise that it's something that people define as a different genre of literature and make quite fuss about it. But never did it strike me as something special."

While writing sci-fi, by his own submission, Iqbal has never tried to misrepresent science. He always tries to write on a scientific rationale. There may be very little of it, but it should be pure science. At least there should be a link to the future so that even if it appears a fantasy today it might be a reality in future.

The other genre he has consciously tried to make contribution to is juvenile literature, which earned him an enviable place in the tender hearts of the country's children. Adults, too, are avid readers of his works for the kids. Zafar Iqbal has always harboured a silent anger against the country's litterateurs as they neglect this section of literature most whereas still today the children are the most attentive and honest readers.

"When I was a child, *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer* had an immense impact on my mind. I still cannot forget that feeling. So, a good book can permanently shape up the psyche of a child. Therefore, it should be mandatory to supply them with good books especially in our country where the children are most neglected as regards the source of recreation and enter-



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On thematic definition of literature, Zafar Iqbal entertains a rather unorthodox view.

"In literature, it is claimed, that all the stories have been told. I don't agree

with it, because there are certain incidents that have never taken place earlier; for example, cloning or transplantation of human organs or installation of artificial limbs in human. Then, how can a novel or a story on these subjects be already told?"

Simplicity is the essence of Zafar Iqbal's philosophy

as a writer. He doesn't care whether his writing would have readership after a few centuries from now or forever. Whether critics term his works literature or not, he writes primarily for his own pleasure.

"I get immense pleasure and delight while writing and it is this pleasure I want to share with my readers."

When I was a Teenager

IN CONVERSATION WITH AZM OBaidULLAH KHAN

by Navine Murshid and Ekram Kabir

HE turned thirteen in 1947, a time when people were confronted by both agony and ecstasy. Noted poet, journalist, ex-lecturer of English Literature, once a civil servant and a diplomatic representative, Abu Zafar M Obaidullah Khan spent most of his teen years in Mymensingh and then in Dhaka.

He was the third among his six brothers and sisters and felt that his mother loved him the most.

"May be that was not true, but that is how I felt," he said while talking to *The Daily Star* at the Centre for Advanced Studies, a think-tank he now heads, in Dhanmondi.

He remembers the mental rigour with which he translated the editorials of *The Statesman* newspaper. Every morning his father would take a copy of the newspaper and leave it at his table and expected the translations to be done by the time he came home. Young Obaid (he has a household name that's for the classified people only) did so religiously, yet reluctantly. Today, he feels that that has allowed him to grasp the English language with a lot more ease. The distinction he received in English in his matriculation exam bears testimony to how much the language got cultivated in his memory. Similarly, he feels that it is because of his mother that he was good at Bengali.

"She had very little education. Yet, she was very knowledgeable. She kept in touch with all the happenings throughout the world via the limited number of magazines that were avail-

able during that time. She used to read a lot. In fact, it is with her I started my Bengali readings. She would read out aloud the writings of all the famous writers from Sharat Babu to Rabi Thakur."

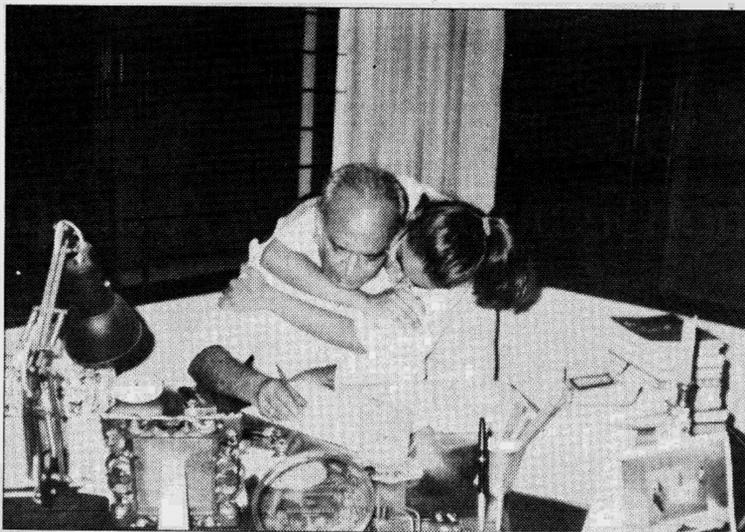
The saddest part of his teenage life, in fact his whole life was the death of his beloved mother who passed away in 1950. His mother was everything to him; his friend, his mate, his advisor, his inspiration, his mother — everything. The departure of her soul left such a quacking impact on Ma's boy that he, now when his hair grey, still feels the tremor at his core. He vividly, and with biting pain, remembers the fateful day.

He was then a first-year student of English Literature at the University of Dhaka. News came that his mother was ill and he had to go home. He was in his late teens. On hearing the news, he set out to search for his elder brother, Sadek Khan. Sadek Khan was actively involved in politics then and was on the move. Young Obaid finally gave up hope to find his *dada*, and left for Mymensingh by himself. He knew his mother was expecting a child. He hoped to see a brother or sister, when he went home, although at the back of his mind, he feared something bad had happened to his mother.

He did reach home. A home without his Ma.

He recalls the shock, the astonishment at the suddenness with which he had his first encounter with death, the death of his mother.

"...I felt *everything* in life..." he lost off.



His friend circle was the source of many pleasures. Besides talking about what colour of *saree* a certain girl was wearing, they had intellectual discussions, mainly about literature and politics, which helped him to aspire for higher things in life. Perhaps, it was because his mother died at such a young age that his friends were protective over him. He had many classmates, but few friends. The few friends he had were very dear to him and guided him in many ways. Often, he saw that he was more comfortable with older friends than with people of his age. He recalls the names of Hasan Hafizur Rahman, who encouraged him to write in order let out his pain after his mother's death; Syed Atiqullah and Dr. Harunur Rashid who were his guardian-friends.

Even today, he misses his mother and he feels that the shock will never go away.

He liked looking at girls. Good-looking girls always made him want to keep watching them, but from a distance. He recalls the names of Sugandha and Geeta among the girls he liked, older than him. Geeta sang beautifully and he was attracted to her. But his mother's image was always before him. His was too immersed in his mother's affection to have time for any one else! Later in life, after the death of his mother, he was scared to love anyone because he felt love brought with it pain; love brought with it desolation and loneliness because the loved one would ultimately go away.

"Perhaps I thought this way because I lost my love, my mother, to Death and I didn't want to experience

the same feeling of loss all over again. Another factor was that with my schedule, I knew I wouldn't be able to devote much time to my beloved, which would have been unfair to her. Yet, I let myself get involved with women because so was everyone else in my peer group. However, I always liked books more than humans because books cannot hurt anyone."

Then again, it would be unfair and hypocritical to say that he wasn't in love with intense passion.

"That part of my life is only mine; it's a fence that I won't let you in," he said, with a mysterious smile.

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The difference he sees today is the lack of support. When he was young, he remembers feeling secure; feeling there will always be someone there for him, meaning his brothers or sis-

ters.

"Today, it is not so anymore..."

He has seen his poorer relatives come and stay with them while studying.

"At that time if a relative was well-off, he had a sense of duty towards his poorer brethren. Today, no one really cares."

He remembers the Brahmaputra river and the many hours he had spent with his friends and family. In fact, hiding in a boat on the Brahmaputra, he first lighted a cigarette. Today, the place is formidable.

"The trees, the birds, the sky, nothing is as beautiful and pure as it was during those days."

Yet, he feels that today's people are more progressive, more intelligent and have greater exposure to the world.

"When I was young, the world was a concentrated place, limited within certain boundaries. Today, not even the sky is the limit. If anyone can do anything, then they are certainly the young ones of today."

He approves of the changes in poetry, in music and literature, because it reflects creativity. It reflects that culture is not stagnated, but moving towards a certain goal.

"The past is not nostalgic, but romantic. Reflection of the past is seen today and today's reflection will be seen tomorrow. This is a chain that always keeps you moving for a better tomorrow. We have to let go of the past; otherwise we cannot have 'tomorrows'. And stagnation means Death — every time you stop, darkness looms and, I don't know, this may well be The End."