

IN THE LIGHT OF WHAT HE KNOWS

In conversation with the Bangladesh-British writer Zia Haider Rahman

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You studied advanced mathematics, finance and law. Why did you turn to fiction?

I have been writing since I was a child. So I was always a writer. Until now it wasn't important to publish anything. For me the reward of writing is the reward of the process, not the product. So nothing substantially has changed. A friend of mine read the first chapter of the novel and he urged me to publish it and he shared it with someone. After that in 6:30 in the morning I began to get calls from agencies. So you can say I am an accidental author. But I am not an accidental writer I have been writing for my whole life. It is something I do because I have to do it. So after my first novel I found myself in a position where it seemed what I was writing it could be published. I didn't get a publisher for my book. I didn't seek one until I finished writing it. I didn't want anybody standing over my shoulder looking at my work. And even then I was not sure I really wanted to publish. You know there are costs involved in publishing. There are certain laws of privacy. So I wasn't entirely sure about it.

From a historical perspective, it's interesting that the main protagonists of your novel are from Pakistan and Bangladesh. The narrator, who is originally from Pakistan, belongs to an affluent, educated family while Zafar, whose parents are immigrants from Bangladesh, comes from more humble origins. Given the history of the two countries, was the difference in the background of the two characters a conscious decision?

These two characters are not emblematic of their respective countries. No human beings are a summary of a nation. It doesn't make sense. So I would not instrumentalise any human being, even a fictional one, in that way. In terms of appearance Zafar and the narrator have come together in the same time at the university and it is only in the context of university where such friendship can be

formed. People from very different walks of life meet each other. There are people of all classes in all countries. So the class difference was important for me.

I wanted to see how class shapes the way you encounter the world and the way you set terms for your dealings with the world. In the novel you will notice that it tends to pick up a number of themes and that's probably because every reader brings their own preoccupation to the novel. But I was interested in looking at power and how it shapes our understanding of the world. Look, how many people come to Pan Pacific Sonargaon? I feel very uncomfortable here. This is not my natural milieu. I have done a number of festivals, and I am always put in the best hotels. And I'm always feeling very uncomfortable because my class inheritance is something that is not in harmony with this. And the novel gave me an opportunity to explore that. I arrived in Dhaka last night. Within 24 hours I saw thousands signals of class. People unfolding to each other in ways that it immediately establishes the hierarchical order. It is a fascinating phenomenon you can experience in society after society across the world. And that's what I try to explain with these two major characters in my novel.

It's easy to see the biographical connections between you and Zafar but you and the narrator too seem to share some similar traits, one of them being that he is an investment banker just like you. How much of the novel comes from your own life experiences?

It is a very difficult question to answer but very easy to ask, because of the apparent biographical similarities. It is hard to answer because the imagination works in coherence with experience. Imagination is not prosthetic. It is not something you adorn after you identify what is experience. It works simultaneously. It's a limb of experience. For



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“Imagination is not prosthetic. It is not something you adorn after you identify what is experience. It works simultaneously.”

me it is lot less biographical and I know how much it is not biographical. And nobody else does. Because all they see are those biographical details on the back of the novel. And all the biographical detail correlates some or other aspects of Zafar and the narrator. This is a problem that human beings have. There is story of a benign dolphin around the world. The story is about a dolphin that is friendly and helps fishermen. It is a story that you will find in culture after culture. But here is the reality; now scientists understand that the dolphin is just playing. The

dolphin doesn't care whether he is saving a life or not. Some dolphins carry sailors not in the direction of the shore but to the sea. In other words there are sailors who were killed by dolphin, but we never see them. We only see the sailor brought back to shore. So we tend to focus on the thing we see. So what we can see here is that the author's biographical details are similar to the characters. But nobody sees the other things that are not at all similar.

Zafar is obsessed with Kurt Godel's Incompleteness Theorem. And then there's the title of your novel. What interests you most about that space between light and truth?

I would describe it as an intellectual rainbow that hangs over the whole novel as a metaphor. It says that there are things that are mathematically true but that cannot be proven to be true in the field of mathematics. It is a shocking idea. Firstly, the theorem features distinction between something that is provable and something that is true. It is alarming enough to itself. Secondly it says that we can't know what is true out there in the world. So our reach is limited here. And in my novel Zafar sees it as evidence that even the truths of mathematics cannot be reckon upon to be reachable. ■