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**Rebel with a cause**

Those of us who believe in scientific reasoning as a core base of analysis in the development of human society and individuals, would not buy the general beliefs about ‘gifted people’. Yet we read about people in human history whose qualities, work, character and role leaves us wondering how they became the people they were.

For the past three weeks, besides mourning his tragic, untimely and unfair death, I have been thinking about who Zainul Abedin was – his conditioning, early influences on his life, the books, ideas, people and movements around him. Despite the fact that I had known him for the past 25 years, I am unable to explain this prodigy that senior editor Talat Aslam described as a “powerhouse of ideas”.

When we met him in mid-1995, Zain (1971-2021) was already a mature, serious, well-read intellectual, public speaker, mobilizer and passionate reader. A man without much social connections with people in power, his circle comprised mostly his own students at an English language center that he ran, and his class fellows and friends, who all saw him as a friend-and-teacher. One of the reasons many like me were so glued to him was because what we were not getting in the classrooms of the International Relations Department at the University of Karachi, Zain offered it to us with much detail and affection.

While all of us his students, including me, had career dreams, Zain was never a careerist. Some of us his close friends had a political background or roots in organized activism. Zain never had the opportunity; like any learned man he could not be confined to a party's ideological limitation. He was a hardcore communist, but would not agree with the politics of the communist party.

When we met him in university, he was in his 20s but had read all the books and authors whose names we had heard -- from Dr Mubarak Ali and Dr Hamza Alvi to Ali Abbas Jalalpuri and Syed Sibte Hassan. Zain’s ambition to have an organized progressive youth and student movement did not last long. Though he understood the need for it, circumstances and conditions perhaps did not allow him to pursue such a path. To fill the political void at the university, Zain formed The Reasoners, with its revolutionary manifesto which he himself drafted, a founding document which offers us his vision for a progressive society believing in reason, logic and a just society. Those were the heydays of his activism. During the annual student’s week at the campus, The Reasoners, under Zain’s leadership, arranged a Faiz Mela as well.

Over the weekends, at the tuition center, Zain would organize screenings of Carl Sagan’s series on cosmology, translated into Urdu by the late Mansoor Said, secretary-general of the Communist Party and father of actress Sania Saeed.

After classes at the campus, Zain used to often spend time at the library of the Irtiqa Institute of Social Sciences, where Sibte Hassan had donated his personal library. Looking at his books, Zain would say ‘our society does not remember and pay tribute to intellectuals; had Sibte Sahib been a poet, his name would have been everywhere….’

A year before his graduation, Zain had gotten into a fierce argument with a right-wing teacher, who not just threatened to have him expelled from the department but could have also taken further legal action. Zain did not succumb to the pressure, though. He was rebellious, and would not say things to just appease anyone, not even teachers. During an argument once, I accused him of being a ‘rejectionist’. I later realized he was in fact a non-conformist, and had a lot to be angry at.

Later Zain started working as a journalist at The News, Dawn, Daily Times and The News again. While I was working for a diplomatic mission in Karachi, we came across each other at a luxurious hotel. His words: ‘Oh so my comrade friend is now working for an imperialistic power’. ‘How does a communist feel working for a corporate media house’, I fired back at him. We both smiled and spent a brief time talking.

With campus politics and party organizing already in the past, books became his life once he entered journalism. In his own intellectual pursuits he, in a way, became liberated from the day-to-day issues of political discontent, and had moved on to questions of theory and history. When all of us around him, Sindhis, Punjabjis, Pashtuns and very few Urdu speakers were stuck with identity politics, he was beyond that.

One of the reasons Zain was always surrounded and loved by people in his life was that they saw in him a teacher, a friend, someone who lit up their lives with his ideas and critique and questions. Since our university days, somehow most of us believed we were accountable to him for the ideals we believed in and had pledged to work for.

For close to a decade, he served as the oped editor for this newspaper (The News). He did not write often under his byline – probably because he was so engrossed in study. But he was destined to write. That is what all his study was leading up to.

On January 14, two weeks before he passed away, we had a long conversation and I found him very excited about a new biography of Karl Marx, asking me how soon I could get hold of it for him. Moving from books he started talking about classic movies. After his conversation, I ended up subscribing to ‘The Criterion’ streaming channel.

One of the greatest intellectuals and writers of the 20th century, Will Durant’, has suggested a list of 100 books one must read. Being a voracious reader and also a major collector, Zain wanted all in his collection. It took years for him and us his friends to collect most of those titles for him.

For years, Zain was concerned about questions of class, race, equality, justice and peace. For every question, he read many books. The intellectual insight and sense of history and philosophy that the three decades of readings had given him – we were sure he would write on all these unresolved questions of history.

It is that sense of loss that we see in his passing away, the loss of an intellectually honest perspective that he was capable of writing and sharing with the world. While in his editorials he wrote a lot on everyday political problems, and the contradictions and conflicting narratives that marred Pakistan’s polity, life did not give him enough time to write about what he thought of the questions that concerned him most.

In the tradition of rebellious characters motivated by a cause, and in keeping with what Faiz Sahib had wanted for our youth: “Jurat-e-taheqeeq mile”, Zain was one with a courageous mind constantly in search of the truth.

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