

The Spectre of Globalized Biotechnological Exploitation in the Science Fiction of Muhammad Zafar Iqbal

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Abstract

This article discusses select science fiction texts by the Bangladeshi author Muhammad Zafar Iqbal with reference to a recurring theme, namely, the globalized exploitation of Third World bodies. This article discusses how these texts demonize technological modifications of the human body and suggest a core of “human” sentiments as the guiding force for combating such biotechnological intervention. This article focuses on a few texts where two key plot elements are, (i) artificially and illegally manipulated human bodies, and, (ii) the surveillance of the central characters by ruthless, technologically superior First World actors and their local collaborators. The texts analyzed in detail are “Dr. Triple A” (2000), *Prodigy* (2011), and *Animan* (2014). In these texts, Iqbal reposes faith in a human exceptionalism that is predicated upon emotions and morality. He thus steers clear of Western philosophical trends such as posthumanism or transhumanism. This is borne out by these texts’ celebration of strong interpersonal attachments and selfless love, which help (morally and emotionally alert) underdogs engage with and ultimately defeat their self-centred, technologically advanced oppressors.

Keywords: Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, science fiction, multinational corporations, globalized milieu, biotechnological exploitation, third world victims, human emotions

The Bangladeshi author Muhammad Zafar Iqbal (1952-), who has been publishing science fiction in Bengali since 1976, enjoys a phase in his public career where acquaintance with his biographical profile precedes or coincides with his textual reception by the target audience. Apart from being the most distinguished and best-selling science fiction writer of Bangladesh and a successful practitioner of several other genres of fiction, Iqbal is widely admired as a professor of science and technology and an activist for the popularization of science and mathematics in his country. Besides, thanks to his memoirs and newspaper columns, Iqbal is widely known as the son of a martyred freedom fighter, a leading proponent of punishment for war crimes committed in the erstwhile East Pakistan and a staunch critic of religious fundamentalism in contemporary Bangladesh. As such, it is tempting to relate his science fiction corpus to his well-known social commitments, reading it in terms of an allegory or cautionary fable indexed to his concerns about the here and now. However, such an approach will have only a limited viability since Iqbal's science fiction texts do not form a transparent vehicle for political commentary or address all his public agenda at the same time.

The nearest Iqbal's science fiction comes to a direct critique of the present globalized world situation is through a representation of the asymmetry and violence in the relationship between developed nations and economically backward countries (such as Bangladesh). While Iqbal has a substantial body of around fifty science fiction titles, featuring varied themes, chronotopes and stylistic registers, my article will primarily deal with texts selected according to three criteria. First, these texts are set in the present (rather than a distant, imaginary future) and in a recognizably postcolonial or globalized milieu. Second, a key plot element of in these texts is the predatory technological misappropriation and alteration of Third World human bodies. In these texts such biotechnological intervention constitutes what Darko Suvin (1979) calls a *novum*. It may be defined as an imaginary phenomenon or situation in science fiction that serves to estrange the fictional setting from the reality known to the reader but at the same time that is based on scientific extrapolation and endorsed by cognitive logic (pp. 63-64).¹ The third criterion for the selection of texts for detailed discussion here would be that, these texts depict as another prominent plot element the surveillance and manipulation of the central characters by ruthless, technologically superior First World actors and their local collaborators.

One of the best examples of Iqbal's science fiction satisfying all these three stipulations would be the short story "Dr. Triple A," first published in 2000. The Third Person narrative follows one Abid Hasan, a US-trained manager of a software company as he seeks to buy a dog for his daughter and is led to a posh but secretive firm called "Pet World" newly set up in the Tongi area of Dhaka (Iqbal, 2000, p. 344). The Dr. Triple A of the title, the American multinational firm's managing director, explains his objective of breeding intelligent dogs through genetic

¹ Borrowing the term *novum* from Suvin, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (1996) describes the second "beauty" or indispensable ingredient of science fiction as follows: "Novums (or nova, from the Latin for "new things") – imaginary inventions, discoveries, or applications that will have changed the course of history. (E.g., hyperdrive, time travel, faster-than-light travel, cloning, neural-interface computing, artificial consciousness, cyborgs.)" (p. 386).

engineering for the high-end First World market (Iqbal, 2000, pp. 347-48). The firm gives Abid Hasan's family a dog free of cost as a trial of its enhanced abilities (Iqbal, 2000, pp. 348-49). But Abid becomes suspicious of the firm's claims on observing the similarity of the dog's behaviour and intelligence to a human child's, and correctly guesses that this phenomenon is enabled by illegal brain transplant. When Abid challenges Dr. Triple A about his violation of animal and human rights, Abid is chased by the firm's hired goons and even shot at by them (Iqbal, 2000, pp. 357-58). On his way to the Ramna Police Station, he is abducted by two professional assassins armed with automatic weapons. In keeping with the international outreach of the corporation, the criminals deployed by them are from different countries. Abid guesses that one of the two goons abducting him is a Mexican and the other hails from the American south (Iqbal, 2000, pp. 359, 360). As a prisoner of Dr. Triple A, Abid gets to hear from him how his firm pretends to offer medical help to underprivileged pregnant women in Bangladesh and surreptitiously harvests the brains from their fetuses for commercial use. This is how he tries to make the most of the 3.5 billion US dollars invested in his project (Iqbal, 2000, p. 362). Dr. Triple A now seeks to extricate Abid's brain for grafting it on to a dog (Iqbal, 2000, p. 363), but Abid manages to turn the tables on him and replaces himself with Dr. Triple A as the donor for the transplant surgery. He also escapes the corporation's premises, stealing a briefcase that contains documents about Pet World's nefarious activities (Iqbal, 2000, pp. 365-67). The story ends on a note of poetic justice, as Abid discovers that Dr. Triple A's brain, together with his consciousness and memory, is now locked in the body of a Great Dane, whose mathematical skills make him a star attraction at a travelling circus (Iqbal, 2000, p. 368).

A later novel by Iqbal entitled *Animan*, published in 2014, uses the same theme and plot kernel. Whereas the story "Dr. Triple A" is set in Dhaka with indicators of a globalized milieu, the action of *Animan* takes place entirely in the US. The omniscient Third Person narrator follows two characters whose paths meet halfway through the novel. First, a young American innovator and self-confessed psychopath called Lydia who is hired by a multinational corporation called "Epsilon"; and second, Tisha Ahmed, the 13-year old daughter of an emigrant Bangladeshi family. After she miraculously survives an accident in a frozen lake and her pet dog dies trying to rescue her, Tisha's school gifts her a new pet, an "animan" (Iqbal, 2014, pp. 48, 53). The official description of the animan circulated in the media is that it is an animal with some human-like endearing traits, artificially produced in the laboratory through genetic engineering for marketing as a pet (Iqbal, 2014, p. 49). But the readers learn by following Lydia's narrative that the animan is Lydia's brainchild, produced by implanting cloned and genetically altered zygotes in the wombs of poor, unsuspecting women in the Third World under the guise of offering them free medical help (Iqbal, 2014, pp. 41, 58-59). In order to distinguish it from humans, the animan has been given large eyes, a pug nose, pointy ears and a cat-like fur-covered body. Besides, it is sex-less, unable to speak or weep, equipped with a weak memory and granted a lifespan of only ten years (Iqbal, 2014, pp. 41-43). The corporation marketing it clears all legal hurdles by bribing scientists, senators and congressmen and also manipulating the administration in Third World countries. When the demand for animen rises, Lydia plans to

increase their production by implanting as many as five zygotes in the womb of a Third World woman, thus pushing her to sure death but saving the cost of R&D and advanced laboratory equipment (Iqbal, 2014, pp. 59-60). After observing her pet animan named Mishka closely, Tisha begins to suspect that the animan is an unhappy creature. She makes a blog post to that effect, creating an upheaval and ruffling the feathers of Epsilon (Iqbal, 2014, pp. 67-69). As if this were not enough, Tisha, with the help of her hearing-impaired classmate John Witkamp, subsequently trains her pet animan Mishka to use sign language and makes a video post where it relates the traumatic upbringing it received at the hands of the corporation (Iqbal, 2014, pp. 94-96). Consequently, Tisha and her friend are chased and abducted by Lydia's men. They try to create a doctored video, showing Tisha and John to be drug addicts and anti-socials, before they would be killed off ostensibly through a self-administered drug overdose (Iqbal, 2014, pp. 105-6, 116-18). But they escape a sure death as the animen in the facility start an uprising led by Tisha's pet and subdue their oppressors (Iqbal, 2014, pp. 121-24). As in the story "Dr. Triple A," the bioengineering scam is stopped by the government, but the exposé is soon hushed up because of the corporation's enormous influence.

The same spectre of biotechnological exploitation of Third World bodies is revisited in the novel *Prodigy*. Here, a young journalist called Ishita with the help of Raafi, a young lecturer of computer science from a non-metropolitan university in Bangladesh, unearths and foils a conspiracy hatched by a multinational corporation called "Endeavour." Ishita discovers that the corporation has caused an epidemic in the T and T Colony of Dhaka by having an NGO spread a deadly virus called FT26 through vitamin tablets distributed among slum children (Iqbal, 2011, p. 71). Besides, the affected children have all been taken to the upscale headquarters of Endeavour in Tongi, never to return (Iqbal, 2011, pp. 65-66). When the mother of one such slum-dwelling boy raises a hue and cry, she is immediately killed off by the corporation (Iqbal, 2011, pp. 69-72). Her death is passed off as a suicide in the local newspapers and her missing son is labelled as a delinquent drug-addict (Iqbal, 2011, p. 72). Raafi takes the help of Sharmin, a poverty-stricken and dyslexic school drop-out who happens to be a mathematical genius, to hack the security of Endeavour and help Ishita enter their premises (Iqbal, 2011, pp. 95-99). It is revealed that Endeavour clandestinely makes implants on the brains of slum children and stimulates their brain cells as part of the experiments to make cutting-edge progress in neural computing, killing the children in the process (Iqbal, 2011, pp. 100-103).² Soon enough, Ishita gets caught and is imprisoned inside the premises

² Iqbal uses the theme of neural computing also in the short story "Neural Computer." It shows an upscale commercial corporation, owned and managed by two people whose names suggest Bangladeshi nationality. This story omits reference to any USA connection, unlike the novel *Prodigy*. In the story, the corporation has surreptitiously cloned human children and developed in them advanced powers of cerebration through genetic engineering. These twelve children, all six years old, are otherwise hideously misshapen and devoid of normal human traits. What is more, they think and function together like a single machine. These children have been reared in captivity away from human society and their brains are stimulated with electrodes by their masters for superfast, cutting-edge computing. The story ends as the children imprison their two human masters and prepare to vivisect them. This story, like Iqbal's other texts featuring the *novum* of biotechnological intervention, emphasizes the susceptibility of technology to unethical and inhuman exploitation.

of Endeavour, while Raafi and Sharmin are also abducted and brought there (Iqbal, 2011, p. 126). The team of ruthless white scientists hired by the corporation seeks to exploit Sharmin's brain cells for their research (Iqbal, 2011, p. 135), and one of the scientists even plans to smuggle her brain cells at the rate of a billion dollars per gram (Iqbal, 2011, p. 136). But thanks to her superlative mathematical prowess, she manages to fight back the lethal volumes of high frequency magnetic signals applied to her brain by the scientists in the name of an experiment (Iqbal, 2011, pp. 145-46). What is more, she triggers an explosion, destroying their apparatus, setting off a conflagration and exposing their clandestine operations to the general public (Iqbal, 2011, pp. 146-47).

This novel, like the previous two texts, reveals a sordid nexus between multinational corporations, politicians, local law-enforcement, NGOs, the mass media and professional criminals, and indicates how technology can be used to perpetuate the prevailing economic divide between nations. These three texts re-inscribe a time-honoured trope of science fiction, i.e., the evil scientist, in the figure of a managerial technocrat who, however, forms only a dispensable cog in the resilient wheel of a vast corporate syndicate. These three texts are preoccupied with the social repercussions of technology, but they also show an affinity with the category of "Hard Science Fiction" in their reliance on tenets of the "hard" sciences (Biology, Physics and Chemistry) and their commitment to scientific plausibility.³ It is this element of closeness to the target reader's familiar lifeworld that gives an extra edge to the unease introduced by these texts. Set in the present, these texts also bear a resemblance to two of the four subcategories of science fiction narratives itemized by Samuel Delany in his 1969 essay "About Five Thousand One Hundred and Seventy Five Words." The categories in question are "things that might happen" or predictive futures and "things that have not happened yet" or cautionary dystopias (Delany, 2009, pp. 11-12).

Two other novels by Iqbal, *Project Nebula* (2001) and *Serina* (2015), may be considered as thematically related cases since they depict the exploitation of Bangladeshi people by First World scientists, although not in the context of a commercial syndicate. In *Project Nebula*, a group of white scientists led by an American called Fred Leicester direct aliens towards Bangladesh and hope to secure advanced technological knowhow from them by offering in exchange local human beings for their experiments (Iqbal, 2001, pp. 66-67). The American scientists, acting without government orders, also train nuclear missiles on Bangladesh so that they can destroy the entire country if their planned contact with the extragalactic aliens goes awry (Iqbal, 2001, p. 67). The aliens colonize a village and symbiotically co-opt the bodies of some local criminals to generate zombie-like hybrid human forms having luminescent red eyes, a swollen head with multiple tentacles, a metallic torso and an extendable arm (Iqbal, 2001, pp. 90-95). In the second novel, a mutant girl from rural Bangladesh, who can breathe

³ For a helpful and succinct account of "Hard Science Fiction," see Roberts, 2006, pp. 15-19. Notably, the popular Bengali science fiction texts by Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) featuring the scientist Professor Shanku as the protagonist most often do not offer scientific explanation for the wonderful inventions and phenomena they showcase or care for their plausibility in terms of the "hard sciences."

through her skin and stay underwater indefinitely, is ruthlessly chased by a First World intelligence network. It forces her to separate from her foster father and morph into a hideous marine organism. In addition, the menace of surveillance and violent intervention by First World actors is visited by two other novels, both written for a much younger readership, *Tukunjil* (1993) and *Tituni ebong Tituni* (2016). In these texts an extragalactic alien through its interaction with a Bangladeshi child acquires capacities for friendship, empathy and solicitude and helps its human friends tide over minor adversities in their daily lives. These sentiments of fellow-feeling and selfless benevolence are lost on the cruel white scientists and their Third World associates who relentlessly chase and terrorize the child for gaining access to the alien and seek to vivisect it for their research.⁴

Going by these examples, one might be induced to speculate that Muhamad Zafar Iqbal's experience as a Third World intellectual who had a research career in the US underlies his distrust of multinational corporations as shown in his texts.⁵ The motif of the stolen and manipulated Third World bodies may be possibly seen as an allegory of brain-drain or even cybernetic outsourcing. Incidentally, almost all of these examples date from after Iqbal's return to his motherland, while *Tukunjil* was published towards the fag end of his research career in the USA. As opposed to these, his science fiction produced during the 1980s is predominated by the Asimovian themes of space travel and artificial intelligence in futuristic societies. But it is notable that Iqbal's brushes with religious fundamentalists, which form an important part of his subsequent public career, have never been (at least as directly and unambiguously) registered in his science fiction. In the novel *Prodigy*, there is a passing instance of a university lecturer from a minority community being verbally abused by a couple of goons in the name of religion and threatened to leave Bangladesh (Iqbal, 2011, p. 63), but this issue is not of central concern to the novel.

⁴ The phenomenon of globalized exploitation of Third World people is mentioned, but not fully elaborated upon, in Iqbal's novel *Icarus*. Towards the beginning, the novel shows a devious scientist called Dr. Kader who runs a clandestine medical outfit in a remote island of Bangladesh, where he has conducted inhuman experiments on 300-350 impoverished women brought from the streets. His research kills more than half of them and renders the rest insane. Dr. Kader, as is revealed during his cross-examination by a Bangladeshi military officer, implanted in the wombs of these defenceless women artificially engineered embryos that combined genes of human beings with those of animals, birds or reptiles (Iqbal, 2009, pp. 33-34). These experiments lead to the birth of the titular character of the novel, a human child with wings and capable of flying like a bird. Dr. Kader reports that his project is financed by an American genetic engineering corporation (Iqbal, 2009, p. 33). Later on, it transpires that the physician Dr. Salim is in talks with an undisclosed foreigner about dissecting the human-bird and selling its tissue samples abroad (Iqbal, 2009, pp. 56, 59). Dr. Salim makes an effort a few years later to capture Bulbul, the bird-child, but fails. Bulbul as an adolescent is then chased by Dr. Ashraf, a Bangladeshi ornithologist, and his students (Iqbal, 2009, pp. 129-42). There is otherwise no mention of First World actors trying to exploit Third World nationals in this novel.

⁵ Iqbal earned his Ph. D. in Nuclear Physics from the University of Washington and was subsequently associated with California Institute of Technology and Bell Communications Research before returning to Bangladesh in 1994 and joining the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Sylhet.

In his memoirs *Rangin Chashma* Iqbal states that as a student of Dhaka University he had dramatized and staged the Soviet author Anatoly Dneprov's story "The Maxwell Equations," projecting all the evil characters of the play as members of the Pakistani army (Iqbal, 2007, p. 42). But he is never so frank in his science fiction about the condemnation of military aggression or totalitarianism that he witnessed at close quarters in his formative years. His harrowing experience of East Pakistan may be glimpsed obliquely, if at all, in repressive regimes and predatory communities of his futuristic tales such as *Tratuler Jagat* (2002), *Ruhan Ruhan* (2006) and *Ritin* (2017). It cannot, however, be inferred that Iqbal revisits the theme of the globalized biotechnological exploitation of Third World people *only* because of his background as a Third World intellectual who has had a research career in the First World. It may be recalled that Iqbal's elder brother, Humayun Ahmed (1948-2012), who started his career as a university lecturer and took a Ph. D. in Polymer Chemistry from the North Dakota State University, hardly ever deals with the theme of globalized exploitation of Third World people in his science fiction. Rather, Humayun Ahmed is inclined towards futuristic societies and travellers from different galaxies, times and dimensions, often recalling the New Wave science fiction author J.G. Ballard (1930-2009) through his bleak, morbid vision.⁶

Iqbal in his memoirs or prefatory remarks does not show any keenness about Western science fiction authors or acknowledge their influence. But if we read his texts in the light of critical insights that have emerged in reaction to Western science fiction, Iqbal's corpus appears to be sceptical about technology and unwilling to problematize the essentialist category of "human." The texts by Iqbal under review are philosophically consistent with his futuristic tales such as *Tratuler Jagat* and *Ritin* in that they demonize technological modifications of the human body and show them to be means of exploitation. Even voluntary and purportedly ameliorative

⁶ One may attempt here a quick survey of the themes encompassed by Humayun Ahmed's science fiction oeuvre. Among the texts included in volume 1 of Humayun Ahmed's *Science Fiction Samagra*, *Tomader Janya Bhalobasha* deals with a confrontation between inhabitants of the three-dimensional world and those of a four-dimensional world; *Tara Tin Jan* features extragalactic visitors; *Anya Bhuban* revolves around a mysterious girl who is revealed to be a hybrid between a human being and an alien plant and has the capacity for telepathy and thought-reading; *Irina* deals with the prospect of human immortality set in a post-apocalyptic dystopia; *Ananta Nakshatrabeethi* includes the themes of space travel and time warp; while *Kubak* centres around an accidentally induced ability of thought-reading. Considering the texts included in volume 2 of Humayun Ahmed's *Science Fiction Samagra*, *Fiba Samikaran* deals with mind control, time travel and genetic enhancement in a futuristic society, *Shunya* features an alien from the world of zero; *Ni* involves some mysterious beings who create dreams; *Tahara* deals with telepathy and mind control; *Paresher 'Hailda' Bori* features a common man's mysterious knowledge of the future; *Ayna* revolves around a girl living inside a mirror; *Newtoner Bhul Sutra* shows a man obsessed with Newton's Laws and mysteriously managing to defy gravity; *Jantra* deals with the immortality of man and mechanization of human life in a futuristic society; while *Nimadhyama* features human-alien interface and accidental intergalactic travel of a common man from contemporary Bangladesh. Among the texts anthologized in volume 3 of Humayun Ahmed's *Science Fiction Samagra*, *Omega Point* shows a human-alien contact; *Ima* deals with space travel and artificial intelligence; *Dwitiya Manab* revolves around the concept of human mutation; *Anhak* features inter-galactic travel; *Jadukar* shows a benevolent extraterrestrial alien; *Kudduser Ekdin* deals with inter-dimensional travel and time travel; whereas *Samparka* features a traveller from an all-woman Earth of the future. Apart from these, the novel *Manabi* addresses the themes of artificial intelligence, alien interface and epidemic in a highly mechanized human society of the future.

cyborgian modifications of the body are shown to be fraught with dystopic possibilities in the novel *Jara Biobot* (1993). This novel shows a race of humans who have through generations voluntarily diminished their natural anatomy and integrated it with machines to enhance their abilities and transcend biological limitations. However, this race of *biobots* or biological robots have turned into an intolerant, power-hungry force who try to exterminate the human minority still opposing their policy of compulsory human-machine hybridity (Iqbal, 1994, pp. 561-63). At the finale of the novel, the biobot leader Claudian is incapacitated from fighting when a human girl sings a doleful song and stimulates its suppressed emotions, which serves to rupture the integration of its minuscule organic body with the technological enhancements (Iqbal, 1994, p. 587).

As is evident from these examples, Iqbal's science fiction does not concur with transhumanist theorists such as N. Katherine Hayles (1999) and Asher Seidel (2008) who believe in the technological perfectibility of human beings and regard an indistinguishable human-machine hybrid to be their only desirable *telos*.⁷ At the same time, Iqbal's science fiction is not congruent with the critical posthumanism of theorists such as Cary Wolfe (2010) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) since Iqbal through his texts does not seem to interrogate the distinctions between humans, non-human life forms and machines, or see them as belonging to a continuum.⁸ More importantly, Iqbal's science fiction is opposed to critical posthumanism since it emphatically believes in the uniqueness of humans as a species and identifies an irreducible core of humanity. Iqbal's science fiction, in fact, consistently and jubilantly reposes faith in a human exceptionalism that is premised on emotions and morality. In Iqbal's science fiction, what in Western critical parlance is called "liberal humanism" becomes, in fact, "sentimental humanism." This propensity is amply borne out by the texts' valorization of strong emotional bonds and selfless commitments, which often teeters on the verge of lachrymose melodrama. For example, in *Project Nebula* the colonizing aliens are convinced of human courage and unselfishness and made to leave the Earth when a village woman named Rahela braves all the physical persecution caused by them to rescue her abducted son, her tribulations being described over more than three pages (Iqbal, 2001, pp. 109-12). The novel *Prodigy* closes as Ishita, after escaping the clutches of Endeavour, elicits from Raafi the promise that he will hold her close to him for the rest of their lives and she wipes cautiously with the back of her hand the tears of joy accumulating at the corner of her eye (Iqbal, 2011, p. 151). Similarly, in *Animan* Tisha's attachment to her pet makes her defy a powerful multinational corporation and risk

⁷ Seidel (2008), for example, argues in favour of a post-human existence characterized by "enhanced longevity, parallel consciousness, cognitively enhanced visual perception, sexlessness, and social isolation," which will side-step current moral contingencies and make everyone "somewhat like what Plato had in mind for his Republic's philosophers, when left on their own on completion of their service" (p. 119).

⁸ Rosi Braidotti (2013), who styles her strand of posthumanist theory as "critical posthumanism," advocates "an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism" (pp. 49-50). This reconstitution of human ontology is directed against "Eurocentrism, masculinism and anthropocentrism" and seeks to place the [non-unitary] subject "in the flow of relations with multiple others" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 50).

her life. The novel ends with a tear-jerking description of the pet's death and Tisha's sorrow for it (Iqbal, 2014, pp. 127-28). The novel *Serina* ends with two chapters detailing the emotional afflictions of Serina and her foster father as they are perpetually separated from each other (Iqbal, 2015, pp. 120-25). In this unusually bleak story for Iqbal's corpus, Serina's continuing humanity after her aquatic metamorphosis is substantiated by her love for her foster father.

Apart from this, Iqbal's emphasis on affect as a basis of humanity is evidenced by his occasional investment in budding heterosexual love between fellow-victims and fellow-warriors. This can be seen between the scientist Riyaz and the journalist Nishita in *Project Nebula*, between the university lecturer Raafi and the journalist Ishita in *Prodigy* and between the teenage students Tisha and John in *Animan*. Moreover, some of these texts take a guarded stance against an unqualified demonization of white people and the First World. For example, towards the end of *Animan*, Tisha announces to a vanquished Lydia that her own motherland Bangladesh is a beautiful country since it does not have monsters like Lydia, and at the same time, the USA is also a beautiful country since it has such noble people as her friend John Witkamp (Iqbal, 2014, p. 124). Besides, the eponymous Dr. Triple A of the short story is in fact a Bangladeshi national originally named Asif Ahmed Azhar (Iqbal, 2002, p. 346), whose clandestine expertise and amoral intentions have been harnessed by an American corporation. The Third World agents and associates of the multinational corporations in these texts reveal the ubiquity of amoral greed.

Against such devious syndicates and their evil networks, these texts regularly pit a small alliance of disadvantaged but determined individuals. For instance, in "Dr. Triple A" Abid Hasan manages to defeat his captor and escape sure death with the help of his pet, a human-dog named Tweety, minutes before it dies (Iqbal, 2002, pp. 364-65). Similarly, in *Animan* the murderous conspiracy of a powerful multinational corporation is defeated by two teenagers assisted by hundreds of animen or genetically modified human children (Iqbal, 2014, pp. 121-25). Further, in *Project Nebula* the two-pronged aggression of aliens and a group of white mercenaries is combated by the journalist Ishita, the young scientist Riyaz and Captain Mahruf, a Bangladeshi army officer acting against his seniors. In *Serina*, a highly skilled white commando is scared away by a mob of schoolgirls wielding sticks and brickbats, one of them even managing to break his nose with a projectile (Iqbal, 2015, pp. 90-91, 98-99). The coalition against the multinational syndicate takes a more spectacular form in the novel *Prodigy* since it includes the eponymous mathematical genius, the university lecturer Raafi, the journalist Ishita, together with Raafi's colleagues, a firefighter who writes mushy, third-rate patriotic poetry under the pen-name *Maju Bangali* and also a shady, money-grubbing student politician at Raafi's university who goes by the name of *Bhotka Hannan*.

Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (1996) recognizes the final of the seven indispensable ingredients of science fiction enumerated by him to be the "parable." This is his name for the intrinsic moral tale that operates through the scientific content and historical extrapolation but that does not

originate in or base itself upon science and technology (p. 386).⁹ In Iqbal's science fiction texts under review, this "parable" is in fact enacted through the motif of solidarity between morally and emotionally alert underdogs and their eventual triumph over technologically advanced oppressors. Iqbal's choice of problems and their solutions in his science fiction is therefore likely to appear as simplistic to the more discerning reader. It may also be pointed out that Iqbal's science fiction seems to take the empiricist-materialist-positivist model of Western science to be sacrosanct, does not problematize the categories of "truth" and "reality," and does not speculate about alternative paths to (or forms of) knowledge and consciousness. Besides, Iqbal hardly admits of metaphysical or even psychological puzzles in his science fiction. This may, in fact, account for the phenomenal popularity of his science fiction among the Bengali readers. The texts under review acknowledge in an extrapolatory fashion some of the threats inherent in the politico-economic inequality of the present world system, and in view of the menace they stage the solutions are likely to appear as make-believe and unduly propitious. Conversely, it is also possible to argue that science fiction in Iqbal's treatment conspicuously privileges the inset moral fable, even to the point of being subsumed by it. Iqbal's brand of sentimental humanism refuses to accord finality to the spectre of human corruptibility, greed and malevolence. It reposes confidence in the resilience of human goodwill. The simplification of moral challenges that Iqbal's science fiction may be accused of actually emanates from and reinforces this robust and confident humanism.

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⁹ According to Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (1996), "whatever the scientific content and historical extrapolation of an sf tale, it is constructed in the form of literary parable. The science and technology are vehicles for moral tales; the morals may have a lot to do with science and technology, but they do not come out of science and technology" (p. 386). The unmistakable presence of a moral message is one of the enduring features of Muhammad Zafar Iqbal's science fiction.

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