



## ***Young comic-heroes defend human rights***

### **Interview with Imran Azhar, publisher in Karachi, Pakistan**

During his long career as a hotel manager in Africa, the Middle East and Europe, Imran Azhar from Pakistan gathered rich experiences. He was impressed by friends who worked with children in Nigeria, children who were forced into the army as child soldiers, but who had not yet killed. With the help of stories, picture books and comics, they were rescued and brought back.

Imran Azhar, who has been a fan of comics and storytelling from childhood on, went back to Pakistan and started Azcorp Entertainment (AZ Corp), a publishing house for comics. In the stories, young heroes, girls and boys, Hindus, Christians and Muslims, fight against violence, injustice and prejudices. In a conversation with Renate Müller De Paoli, Azhar said: “We aspire to engage kids, teens and young adults, because this is when they are most impressionable and form opinions, this is the age group we feel can make a difference in giving them choices.”



**Imran Azhar**

**Mr. Azhar, what leads a hotelier – you were running several international hotels abroad – to jump into the publishing domain? What made you change your profession?**

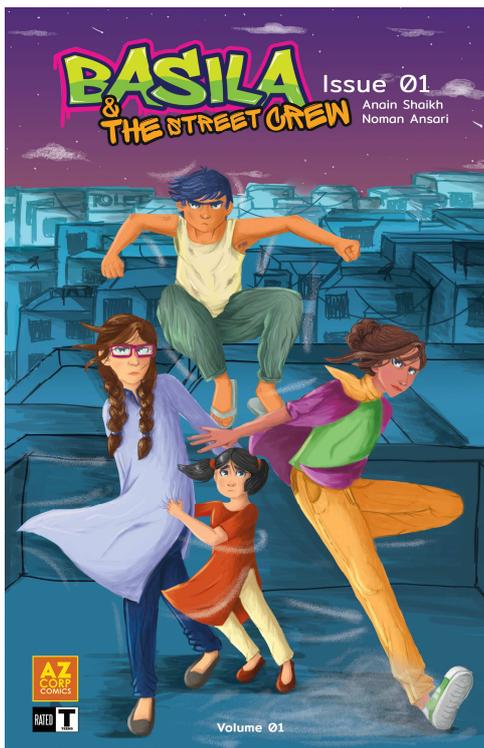
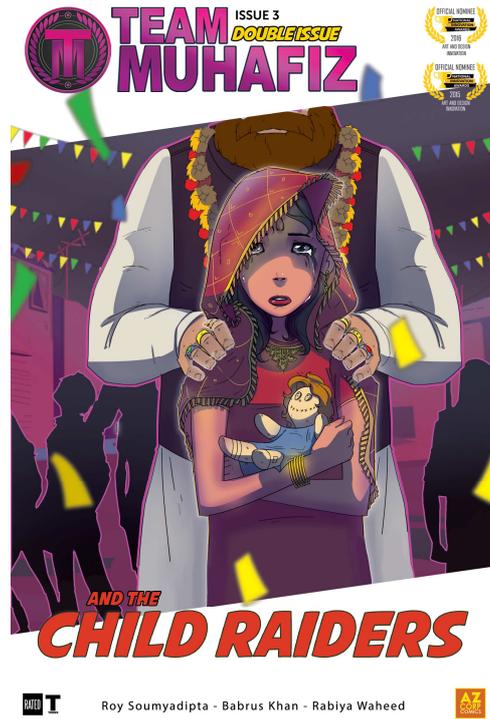
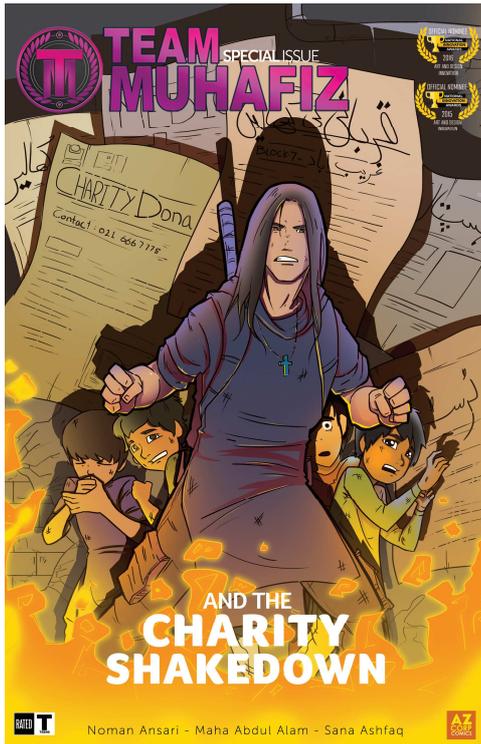
*I was always passionate about both industries, grew up reading comic books, big fan of pop culture and eventually understood the power of storytelling in inspiring positive local action. Meanwhile I became in love with the hospitality industry when for the first time in life I travelled abroad to Maldives with couple of school friends and was immediately pulled in to the positive dynamism a hotel possess. I am a people's person and get my energy from others. After spending 25 wonderful years with Starwood Hotels & Resorts (now Marriott Hotels), I wanted to move back to Pakistan and had made up my mind to create a company which will celebrate our unsung heroes and create new ones. This is when I dived into publishing.*

**Children and young people are your main target group. Why especially this group? What kind of contents you want to give to them compare to other media? In which way differ heroes and ideas in your comic book creations from what a lot of children have to live through in reality, what they experience in their daily live for example in poor areas of Karachi? Or for example what Malala had to live through only because she wanted as a Pakistanian girl to have the right to go to school?**

*We aspire to engage kids, teens and young adults because this is when they are most impressionable and form opinions, this is the age group, we feel we can make a difference in giving them choices, in our stories we show but don't preach. Our heroes are no different than any heroes, they are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, embody the spirit selflessness, compassion and empathy and want to do good. The difference is that they are home grown and represent our diversity as a blessing rather than a curse. Not only our heroes show ground reality, one of our brand Mein Hero/I Am A Hero, derives its stories with the help of students themselves, who create their own heroes, identify local challenges and find solutions through group-work with the help of our facilitation. So our heroes represent us and tackle real issues which are completely relatable and all that happens in the form entertainment.*

**Tell us how did “Team Muhafiz” (protector?), your first comic come to life? How was the beginning? Let us look a bit into the secrets of the publishing process of AZ Corp, your publishing house.**

*Team Muhafiz was the first brand we launched, the foundation was 10 teenage heroes, 5 girls and 5 boys, led by Parinaaz, a young law student who stand up to social injustice With TM I really wanted to celebrate our diversity and showcase the positive aspects of our youths, who are doing some amazing work but who are not enough commended. Beginning was quite tough, I didn't understand neither the comic book industry nor the publishing & distribution business so made many mistakes and fell down many of times, also you need to understand that comic book business has yet to develop a clear demand among the target segment hence not many investments are being planned in this space. There are no secrets in our process, we develop scripts after primary and secondary research, conduct short audience research and once the script is ready, start the illustrations process, which usually starts with storyboarding, line art, colouring, lettering (speech balloons), formatting& designing. Then once the print proof is approved, we send it for printing and then distribute them to our distributors, while people can also buy print copies as well as soft/digital copies via our website.*



**Why did you choose from the beginning the comic form?**

*Because it's the cheapest way to test any brand in the pop culture universe and I wanted have enough money to go to main stream media, for instance an animated TV/Web series. But now we are attracting traction locally and internationally so are pitching exactly that. Hopefully we will get enough funding and start soon, I am very hopeful.*

## How do you find the artists for the illustrations? Where do you search?

*Local market is matured enough so we are definitely contributing in paving this industry in Pakistan, for illustrators we look for talent and have a pool of very skilled and passionate illustrators who are trail blazing as they go. In Pakistan, we source talent via several digital communities, via local universities and many approach us directly.*



**What kind of reactions do you get from the children and youth, your target group? And how is your approach and work seen from the different political and religious groups?**

*The reaction is very positive and our content is much liked however there are several challenges, first one is the accessibility as the distribution network for books/comics is only restricted to major cities. Second is many entertainment options which are available for our target market, from movies to games, this is not only restricted to Pakistan as even in North America, traditional comic book business almost tanked before Disney and Warner Brothers bought Marvel & DC comics respectively and made their content into multi-billion-dollar franchise. So, this in fact is very encouraging as content is becoming a very good business for many across the globe. As for reactions from any political & religious groups, we never had any issue so far and do not think that we will in the future, first of all we are a apolitical and areligious company and secondly all our content is culturally appropriate. In fact if I may add this is a big misconception about Pakistan that is exactly why we wanted to show the other side of Pakistan which sometimes local and international media doesn't show. Pakistan is a young dynamic country of over 200 plus million people with over 65% of our population below the age of 30 years, doing some amazing work and yes like any other place we do have our share of challenges but this is definitely not the majority. Not if you look deep down and live within communities.*

**It seems that your comic heroes by now have a growing fan community. How many titles have you published so far? How big is the readership today? Do you have a distribution network only in Karachi or also in the countryside of Pakistan?**

*So far we have introduced 4 brands/titles and had published over 30 comic book issues, 23 short documentaries and 2 audio series. We are launching our comic book reader mobile app next month which will work on subscribing base model, quite similar to Netflix model of as much as you can read for a minimum amount, in the first 3 months we will run a promotion and offer it for free. Currently we are distributing to over 300 schools nationwide, have distributed over 100, 000 to urban and rural area and is available through traditional retail network. Though we get orders from the rural areas of Pakistan via our Cash on Delivery model, no major distributor works in those areas. We are lucky that even our latest brand Sheeba & the Private Detectives was piloted in 250 schools and all those schools were either public schools, low fee schools or informal schools from Karachi to all the way to Northern Areas of Pakistan.*

**How does the book market in Pakistan look like generally? Do you have a lot of competitors? Which role play the new media in Pakistan?**

*Book market mainly thrives on academic text books and reference material, while a small fraction is from literature and entertainment material. However we are experiencing more leaning towards edutainment content, which we do and I feel this is the way forward, learn while you have fun.*

**Mr. Azhar, what are your plans for the future? Do you want to publish your comic series also in other languages, for example in German?**

Have very optimistic plans, we are planning to go towards animation and gaming and want to leverage our already popular brands into digital space. Yes since we already have our content in Urdu and English language, we are now looking at translating our comic books into French, German and in Chinese language.

Mr. Azhar thank you very much.

Written by Renate Müller De Paoli  
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