

## Transnational Locality and Subjectivity in Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know*

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### Abstract

This paper offers a literary analysis of Zia Haider Rahman's novel, *In the Light of What We Know* (2014), from the theoretical perspective of transnationalism. Drawing on insights from the evolving theoretical lens of transnationalism, and off and on from nationalism, the paper examines how the novel's narrative explores the themes of cultural identity, migration, and subjectivity within the context of a rapidly globalising world. It identifies and analyses the ways in which transnationalist concerns are expressed in the protagonist's diasporic experience and the socio-political milieu in which the novel is set. The paper explores, to be precise, how the protagonist's transnational subjectivity is shaped by experiences of migration, exile, and translocality, and how it is informed by the cultural contexts in which he operates. It argues that the novel's exploration of transnationalism offers valuable insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of contemporary identity, and contributes to ongoing academic debates about the relationship between globalism, localism, nationalism, and transnationalism. Overall, this paper offers a fresh perspective on the intersection between nationalism and transnationalism, and highlights the potentials of transnationalism as a theoretical framework for understanding contemporary cultural phenomena as depicted in *In the Light of What We Know*.

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## Introduction: A transnational narrative

Zia Haider Rahman's debut novel, *In the Light of What We Know* (2014), achieved immediate success and garnered international critical acclaim. It received Britain's oldest and prestigious James Tait Black Memorial Prize.<sup>3</sup> Randall Stevenson, chairman of the prize, appreciates the novel saying that Rahman "explores problematic areas of politics and finance, which are often exiled from the pages of fiction, immersing his readers, dauntingly but comprehensibly" (qtd. in Flood). This award alone attests to the novel's literary merit and Rahman's virtuosity in the domain of creative writing.

The enticing element of *In the Light of What We Know* (hereinafter *In the Light*) lies in its unconventional narrative structure. It challenges conventional norms, diverging from traditional linear storytelling. Through its non-linear storyline, the novel incorporates elements such as long epigraphs, footnotes, and digressions, which create a unique reading experience. These unconventional narrative techniques contribute to the reader's sense of perplexity while unravelling the main plot, suggesting "a fundamentally evasive strategy" (Alcalá 1). Additionally, the thematic structure of the novel is replete with multidimensional and multifaceted tropes that encompass a vast array of subjects, ranging from exile, immigration, and mathematics to the global financial crisis, geopolitics, and the societies of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Britain, and America. These form a large part of the thematic richness and complexity of the novel.

Due to its depiction of war in Afghanistan, Muslim identity issues and financial crisis make the novel a quintessentially post-9/11 story that explores "the post-9/11 world that is both personal and political, epic and intensely moving" (Preston). Categorising the novel within specific subgenres proves challenging due to its multitude of themes and issues. Nevertheless, the focus in this paper lies in discerning the implications of transnational context within the narrative and analysing them through the theoretical framework of transnationalism.

To appreciate the critical commentary and theoretical paradigm offered by this analysis, it is essential to grasp the intricate storyline of the novel. This is a novel of ideas, which is not primarily based on incidents or stories. However, as the conversations of the protagonist and the narrator unfold, the story aims towards an ambitious scheme of deftly exploring the entire nature of human life.

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<sup>3</sup> Inaugurated in 1919, some of the former winners of this esteemed award include literary stalwarts like D. H. Lawrence (1920), E. M. Forster (1924), Aldous Huxley (1939), Graham Greene (1948), Evelyn Waugh (1952), and Nadine Gordimer (1971).

The novel is, as the narrator sums up, “the story of the breaking of nations, war in the twenty-first century, marriage into the English aristocracy, and the mathematics of love” (Rahman 2). The story revolves around the unnamed narrator, a Princeton-born derivatives trader of Pakistani heritage, who, amidst personal struggles and setbacks, reunites with his old friend Zafar, a British-Bangladeshi. As the narrative unfolds through their extended conversations, their shared academic backgrounds, continental birthplaces, religious heritages, and professional careers become apparent. However, the contrasting family backgrounds and diverse childhood experiences of the characters complicate their identities.

The protagonist’s transmigrational experiences, intertwined with the narrator’s multifaceted diasporic encounters, constitute significant components of the narrative. The narrator, hailing from a privileged background, identifies himself as a citizen of the world, with a blend of American, British, and Pakistani connections. In contrast, Zafar’s life has been shaped by poverty and the challenges he faced while striving to escape it. Growing up in a lower socio-economic environment, his determination for academic and professional success stems from his humble beginnings.

One of the drawbacks of the narrative is its incorporation of encyclopaedic information that digresses the main story and brings incomprehensibilities. While the novel’s intellectual erudition is remarkable and its thematic range ambitious, the incorporation of such radical digressions can hinder the main storyline, leading to a degree of reader disengagement. Nevertheless, for enthusiasts of ideas, these digressions serve as a captivating exploration of various concepts. Despite the narrative complexities of the novel, Rahman can be compared to his other writers of South Asian backgrounds, such as Arundhati Roy (1961–), Mohsin Hamid (1971–), Kiran Desai (1971–), Mohammed Hanif (1964–), Monica Ali (1967–), Nadeem Aslam (1966–), and Tahmima Anam (1975–). Arin Keeble and James Annesley, comparing Rahman’s narrative with that of Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* (2017), opine that both novels are “pessimistic in their depictions of globalism and multiculturalism in Western, capitalist democracies in the early twenty-first century” (81).

Set primarily in 2008, the novel frequently transports readers back to the 1990s, when the narrator and Zafar were studying at Oxford. Rahman’s own experiences, reflected in Zafar’s journey from poverty to education and high-status employment, lend autobiographical elements to the narrative. James Wood, whose 2014 book review in *The New Yorker* earned the novel wider readership, judges Zafar’s journey of lifting from poverty by drawing upon autobiographical elements. From an autobiographical perspective, “the dialectic of sudden privilege was probably much as [V. S.] Naipaul had experienced this more than three decades earlier” (Wood, “The World”). In the narrative, Rahman fictionalises the very dynamics of *homelessness* from a novel perspective by way of

contrasting two entirely unrelated fictional individuals in their forties. The sense of homelessness and identity dilemmas shared by protagonist Zafar inform the readers about the symbolic connections established by exilic and diasporic displacement in the context of the life of a transmigrant who is at the crossroads of transcultural and transnational flows.

The narrator's recording of Zafar's life story, unfolding across landscapes from London to Kabul, New York to Islamabad, unveils themes of identity crisis, homelessness, and lovelessness. The nameless mediating narrator of the novel reveals the story of his friend Zafar who is a Bangladeshi-born British mathematician, banker, lawyer, and heterogeneous thinker, who trots around the world, "chasing his 'homing desire'" (Hasanat 64). In his desire for the presence of a homed space, he goes on to be a frequent transnational border-crosser. However, the analysis of this paper aims to examine the novel's portrayal of transnationalism, shedding light on the intricate and multifaceted nature of contemporary identity. In particular, we have explored transnational homelessness and disenchantment, and the dynamics of cultural identity in translocal contexts. The discussion focuses on the protagonist Zafar, whose experiences bear resemblances to the author's own life. Furthermore, the paper also explores issues such as migration, exile, transnational displacement, globalism, international affairs, and the formation of transmigrant identities.

By critically engaging with the novel through the lens of transnationalism, this study offers valuable insights into the complexities of contemporary identity formation. Rahman's narrative serves as a testament to the power of literature in examining and illuminating the multifaceted dimensions of transnationalism and its impact on individuals' lives. While the narrative's compelling storyline initially captivates readers, as this study finds, a unique depth of the novel emerges when viewed through the theoretical lens of transnationalism. It navigates the complex interplay between transnationalist concerns and nationalistic undercurrents. Thus, this paper offers a fresh perspective that deepens our comprehension of the complex dynamics between national and transnational forces that shape human experiences in a globalised era.

### **Migration, exile, and transnational homelessness**

A quotation from Edward Said describing what it is like to live in exile opens the novel. In his notable essay, "Reflections on Exile," Said says that exile is terrible to experience and an unhealable rift that is "forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home," and that its essential sadness can never be overcome (173). The author, placing Said's take on exile at the very outset, subtly hints the reader about what this novel is about. The narrator and Zafar are living in exile, far away from their homelands, Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively. The novelist himself is also a transmigrant who lives in Britain, but was born in Bangladesh. Therefore, migration and exile remain two of the pivotal

themes in the novel where the author portrays “a realistic and moving portrayal of exile and (un)belongingness in the contemporary world” (Thakur 109).

The kind of exile Said talks about is “forced homelessness,” but in the narrative, we have experienced a different kind of exile and homelessness. Literary critic James Wood considers this kind of exile status as a state of *secular homelessness* that “cannot claim the theological prestige of the transcendent.” Wood uses the term “secular homelessness” because it more thoroughly captures Said’s idea of exile as “forced homelessness” and includes voluntary migration from the rural to the city as well as movements between social classes. Therefore, replacing Said’s tragic sense of homelessness, Wood claims that “secular homelessness” is perhaps the right phrase that characterises contemporary transnational reality. For Wood, such homelessness “moves along its axis of departure and return” and it can be “necessary, continuous” whereas exile is “acute, massive, transformative” (Wood, “On Not Going”).

Chinmaya Lal Thakur, however, does not fully agree with Wood’s postulate of “secular homelessness” in the context of Rahman’s novel. Thakur contends Wood’s view by asserting that the “faith that Zafar comes to invest in ‘metaphors’ like ‘trust’ in someone outside of himself, signifies a movement towards the ‘postsecular’ in the novel’s narrative” (109). He critiques Wood’s famous 2014 review of Rahman’s novel, “The World as We Know It” – which actually was a main catalyst in bringing popularity to the novel – by arguing that the substantial symbolic role of “faith and trust” is not mentioned in the review (109). Rahman’s narrative can be seen as portraying a nuanced form of homelessness and exile that encompasses both faith-based and secular dimensions. This portrayal, influenced by the author’s own experiences and drawing upon the perspectives of Edward Said and James Wood, reflects the complexities of displacement and uprootedness. The protagonists’ lives exemplify this oscillation between different forms of homelessness, capturing the multidimensional nature of their identities and the challenges they face in finding a sense of belonging.

*In the Light* is a significant narrative in migrant literature that deals with issues of diasporic homelessness and exile. Wood makes the case that some types of postcolonial literature should be acknowledged as having important theoretical implications for issues related to emigration, displacement, homelessness, and tourism. As Wood asserts, there are specific types of postcolonial literatures that strongly deal with important questions of “homelessness, displacement, emigration, voluntary or economic migration, and even flaneurial tourism” (“On Not Going”). Indeed, the novel is a postcolonial literary piece and it powerfully resonates with what Wood wants to assert in relation to the subject matters. The thematic aspects of the novel, however, reverberate with agonising exposure people in exile – forced or voluntary – undergo. In other words, the narrative does not fully fall into the kind of exile and homelessness that Said considers in

“Reflections on Exile.” Nor can it be comprehended with its full essence using James Wood’s proposition of secular homelessness.

As Howard Campbell and Josué G. Lachica point out, transnational homeless people pose some challenges to foundational concepts of homelessness, be it from the traditional or new perspective, and they also sharply encounter neoliberal international boundary enforcement, because they utilise the benefits and traditions of two nations at the same time (Campbell and Lachica 279). However, in the case of the protagonist Zafar, transnational homelessness appears to be more of an issue of crucial psychological concern rather than physical or practical matters pertinent to homed/unhomed dispositions of identity. Zafar has physical homes in London, and he has materially flourished; yet he is rootless and homeless due to his transnational migration and failure to generate a meaningful bond with the adopted homeland. Consequently, his transnational homelessness has stripped his existence of meaning and dulled his sensitivity to the concept of a true home. The protagonist expresses a recurring sense of dissatisfaction with regards to his sense of belonging. He articulates his unease to the narrator on multiple occasions, emphasising his deep-rooted concerns about his familial legacy and the memories of his childhood. These sentiments underscore the profound impact of his past experiences and upbringing on his current state of identity and transnational subjectivity. There are two crucial reasons for Zafar’s utter distress pertinent to his childhood. First, his mother was a *birangana* (war heroine) of the 1971 Liberation War. That is to say, she was raped during the war and, in social terms, he is an illegitimate child. Second, his family lives in poverty that brings lots of woes and sufferings throughout his childhood. This is why, Zafar is in a constant state of agony as far as his childhood and family history are concerned. This is why he so fiercely tries to belong somewhere else.

With his girlfriend, Emily Hampton-Wyvern who belongs to the elite British aristocracy, Zafar aspires to mingle with the local community and bring a sense of homed identity. Although Emily wields and carries tremendous socio-political influence even in 21<sup>st</sup>-century British society, Zafar shows no ambition for garnering fame or taking advantage of her social position. He aspires to become a “part of the Hampton-Wyvern clan as it might allow him to feel a sense of emotional belonging within the larger social community in England” (Thakur 110). Zafar’s strong, healthy, and long-term relationship with his wife is one of the ways he attempts to attain a solid sense of identity and independence amongst his dreadful situation of transnational homelessness. The deep-seated fear of his childhood and boyhood experiences manifests in his relentless pursuit to erase that distressing chapter from his life. This perpetual quest for refuge often leads him to seek solace in the shadows of others, as he avoids confronting his own identity and history. For instance, when Zafar gets to know that Emily is pregnant with his child, the first thing he decides is that the child will bear Emily’s family

name, not his own. This is a clear reflection of his desperate attempt to erase his past burdens and painful truths that he does not want to impose on his child. He finds the burdened truths of his past as painful baggage (Rahman 110). However, he recognises the baggage of the past in terms of “bondage” injected to his identity through his familial legacy and explicates his choice, thus:

The truth was that names meant something to me and her [Emily] name meant everything. People surrender judgement for much less. Did you know that there are two ways to change your name in England? The first is by deed poll, an official document by which you announce your new name to the world. The second is when you’re baptised, when you announce your new name to God, and the law of the land bows to divine law. Giving my child her family name was an act of cleansing to me. However distasteful that now sounds, that is what it meant. It was a means of overcoming the bonds with bastardy, with my parents, overcoming bondage. (Rahman 461)

As Wood says, the introduction of the jet engine permitted massive migration of people across continents in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. Since World War II, international travelling has become easier and more convenient. It takes “a Nigerian to New York, a Bosnian to Chicago, a Mexican to Berlin, an Australian to London, a German to Manchester” (Wood, “On Not Going”). In the narrative, the protagonist Zafar is an emigrant in the Western metropolis, in New York and London, owing to his parents’ migration from the Sylhet district of Bangladesh to the megapolis. He is also of the opinion that the influence of the jet engine is likely to be bigger than that of the Internet. Wood’s perspective, in regards to the narrative, is factual. It is because of the jet engines through which both narrator’s and Zafar’s parents could fly thousands of miles, leaving their native and ancestral homelands (Pakistan and Bangladesh) for the West. Had it not been for the jet engines, their parents might not have migrated to that far using other means of transportation. In fact, the modern aviation industry is reshaping people’s migration, settlements, and their transnational belongings.

Many diasporic writers of Asian origin wrote literary works, having similar thematic undertones as portrayed in Rahman’s narrative. Some of such novels include Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003), and Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990). There is no denial that planes, flights, air tickets, immigration booths, and so on shape transnational activities. The air travel can powerfully remind an individual who they are, to which nationality they belong. The narrator of the novel, for instance, has grasped Zafar’s incessant identity dilemma associated with his unsettling sense of belonging, when he encounters the border controls at the airport at a time when he forgets to bring along his passport:

I have never had much difficulty with feeling at home. The nearest I have ever come to an identity crisis was on reaching border controls at the airport, before a flight, to discover that I'd forgotten my passport. I have wondered why I had not spotted it before, why I had never grasped that the question of belonging governed the interior life of my friend. Certainly he never discussed it, but had he also restrained every sign? That is the context in which I see him standing in the post room, reading the messages on the board. The matter of where one belongs is something I had understood to be significant in the lives of others. (Rahman 177)

Rahman's novel resonates with that of the German writer W. G. Sebald's famed novel, *Austerlitz* (2001). Rahman also incorporates a quote from Sebald's *Austerlitz* at the very outset of the novel. It demonstrates Sebald's and *Austerlitz*'s influence on the novel. Much like Jacques Austerlitz, the protagonist in *Austerlitz*, Zafar shares his life story, thoughts, and concerns to a friendly solitary unnamed narrator. Both Zafar and Austerlitz express themselves articulately and philosophically, and at the same time, they incorporate a myriad of ideas of and discussions on contemporary world affairs. Stunningly similar to Sebald's novel, Zafar speaks on his diasporic displacement, transnational homelessness, and his painful yet undeniable discovery of the fact that he is not his parents' biological son. However, Rahman's story demonstrates more personal in terms of narrative cadence and integrates some intimate revelations as regards to the author's private life. Undoubtedly, the author has adeptly channelled a multitude of personal and potentially distressing autobiographical elements into the fabric of the novel. This transformative act serves as a means of catharsis and healing for the author, allowing them to navigate and reconcile with their own past. By weaving these experiences into the narrative, the author not only grapples with their own wounds but also offers a platform for readers to engage with and reflect upon the complexities of personal growth and emotional restoration.

Through the masterful control of narrative cadence, Zafar's extensive dialogue with the narrator in the story takes on a remarkable quality, blurring the boundaries between two distinct characters and converging into a singular inner conversation with the self. In certain instances, the narrator and Zafar transcend their individuality and assume the role of a unified voice, as if they are different facets of the same persona. Thus, the author seems to have set out to dramatise "his own bifurcations: privilege and obscurity, belonging and homelessness, confidence and anxiety" (Wood, "The World"). Juxtaposed with the narrator, we can get the sense that all transmigrants' stories are not the same. While the unnamed narrator finds himself in a comfortable position and experiences a sense of belonging in the Western context, the protagonist Zafar presents a starkly contrasting account of a transmigrant's existence. Zafar's narrative unveils the complexities and challenges inherent in a life marked by migration and



transnational experiences. Unlike the narrator, Zafar's journey is fraught with a sense of displacement, longing, and a constant negotiation of cultural identities. His story is the reflection of anxiety, unease, confusion, and tension vis-à-vis his failing attempts to truly belong to the West.

The theoretical lens of transnationalism provides valuable insights into the experiences of individuals living in a state of transnational homelessness. The notion of 'transnational homelessness' encompasses a broad range of displacements and movements, including voluntary migration, social class mobility, and the challenges of navigating multiple cultural contexts (Wood, "On Not Going"). There is an importance of transnational networks and the fluidity of social, economic, and political ties that transcend national borders. These perspectives highlight the complex web of relationships and influences that shape the lives of transmigrants like Zafar in Rahman's novel. Zafar's transnational homelessness is not simply a consequence of geographical displacement but also a product of the intricate web of connections he maintains with both his homeland and his adopted country.

In understanding the experiences of transnational homeless individuals, it is crucial to consider the impact of globalisation and neoliberal ideologies. Saskia Sassen's book *Losing Control?: Sovereignty in the Age of Globalization* (1996) argues that globalisation and the resulting economic restructuring have given rise to new forms of displacement and dislocation, creating a global underclass that remains marginalised and excluded from the benefits of economic progress. This concept resonates with Zafar's predicament as he grapples with the contradictions and challenges of transnational existence. Despite his economic success, Zafar remains psychologically homeless, constantly negotiating between his dual identities and struggling to find a sense of belonging. The transnational experience depicted in Rahman's novel challenges conventional notions of home and prompts a critical examination of the social and political structures that perpetuate transnational homelessness.

### **Cosmopolitan transnationalism and transnational disenchantment**

The theory of transnationalism, generally speaking, is a concept for dealing with matters that go beyond a single nation and connect them with that of other(s), be it language, literature, politics, identity, economics, and culture. Theorists grappling with the concept of transnationalism, much like their counterparts exploring nationalism, face challenges in defining and delineating its precise meaning and scope. Transnationalism, as a theoretical framework, encompasses a wide range of interconnected phenomena that transcend traditional notions of nation-states and territorial boundaries. Its fluid and evolving nature poses difficulties in establishing fixed definitions and boundaries, as it encompasses various forms of transnational connections, networks, and processes. It receives more attention among the sociologists and anthropologists as its meaning has

intrinsically allied with “a kind of social formation spanning borders” (Vertovec 3). Apart from transnational activities like economics and politics, the influence of diaspora or migrant communities shapes the theory of transnationalism. However, Schiller et al. define transnationalism as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (1). Nonetheless, because transnationalism is such a broad term, it is difficult to “tie together the disparate aspects of its activities and multidisciplinary dimensions” (Tedeschi et al. 605-06).

Since the 1990s, when the word transnationalism first appeared in the field of migration studies (Faist 11), it has fuelled discussions and debates on many aspects of immigrants with special focus on the integration of immigrants in their hostlands. Although the term garnered attention of the researchers of social sciences, especially of migration studies, for more than two decades, it was in use as a term in economics since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps for the first time, Randolph Bourne used and popularised the term ‘Trans-National’ in the 1910s, mainly through his article titled “Trans-National America” (1916) published in *Atlantic Monthly*. Bourne utilises the concept of “trans-national America” to depict and explain immigrants’ transition into new American lives, mainly from an economic point of view (Bourne 90-91). Gradually, the term “transnational community” is understood as “a gloss for a transborder linkage of people” who share a common national ancestry (Schiller 54). This shift in understanding is notable, considering that early studies that initially introduced the term were primarily focused on examining specific translocal ties only.

Up until the early 1990s, transnationalism was mostly used to describe an economic process or phenomenon that deals with various phases of the production of goods taking place in two or more countries simultaneously. Such a representation of the term essentially portrays it “as an inexorable structural-economic transformation beyond and outside human practices and agency” (Jong and Dannecker 493-494). With the ground-breaking publication of the book *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (1994) by Linda Basch, Nina G. Schiller and Christina S. Blanc, transnationalism has undergone a process of redefinition, resulting in new meanings and implications for its theoretical framework. It defines transnationalism as a process “by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of residence” (1). The book does not merely explain some of the patterns of residing and living in multiple countries, but also formulates a social theory that is able to study transnational issues without using the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis (17).

Rahman’s *In the Light* is not only a novel of ideas but also a story that transpires the enticing life story of a nomadic cosmopolitan transmigrant whose identity formation is moulded by cosmopolitan transnationalism. Zafar makes a pivotal decision to leave his career as a banker behind and embark on a

transformative journey by relocating to Afghanistan, where he takes up the role of a Human Rights lawyer mandated by the United Nations. This significant transition reflects Zafar's commitment to engaging with the complex dynamics of transnational activism and his desire to contribute to the pursuit of justice in a global context. In every aspect, he is a transnational global citizen, having lived in Bangladesh, the UK, the USA, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. As a child of a raped woman during the war, his identity has borne a stigma since birth, and he has no solid ties to his birthplace, Bangladesh. As the narrator reveals, Zafar's mother lives in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh where paid a one-off visit when he was a boy. He is denied the care and love of the biological parents, rather is raised by other people including an uncle, adopted parents, and by his adopted home in London. These formative years marked by rootlessness, nomadism, and hardship have left a lasting impact on his temperament and personality. The adversity he faced during this period has instilled in him a deep sense of empathy and a heightened awareness of social injustices. One of the key markers and shaping forces of his personality type is anger. He cannot even think straight as a mathematician because of his rankling anger:

What can be more important to think about than something that is so overwhelmed by emotions that the act of thinking becomes hard? Yet how do you look at something that clouds your vision? *I have been full of anger my whole life*, and if I've seemed to you or anyone as having been as calm as the kind of thinking that mathematics demands, then it is only because the anger had yet to find expression. (Rahman 526 [emphasis added])

With transnational disenchantment in effect, Zafar is unable to orient himself to any place he visits or resides in or adopts as his imaginary home. All these places he lived are incapable of meeting his *homing desire*. Hypothetically speaking, if he could call any of the place *home*, perhaps his agitation, anger, and transnational disenchantment, as demonstrated throughout the narrative, would be far less or would be blunted entirely. His self-seeking journey for a home and a firm identity, therefore, "might have come to a hopeful end" (Hasanah 65). Experiencing painful exile and homelessness since his birth, "Zafar turns his life into a mission for truth or knowledge, home or hope" (Hasanah 65) as a cosmopolitan transmigrant. Studying at a top educational institute of the West, he finds his redemption and a place for reconciliation as well as refuge for his unsettled, unhomed disposition as an Asian émigré in the West. This knowledge-seeking proclivity and obsession with ideas also enhance the understanding of his exile status, which in turn, magnifies the sufferings. As the narrator records, Zafar's lack of home and "the unmooring of his body" lead to and results from "the unmooring of his soul, in one of those incalculable feedback loops that rule us beyond our limited wit" (Rahman 271).

As a cosmopolitan transnational immigrant, like Iqbal of Bangladeshi Australian writer Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994), Zafar finds a way to locate himself, and this in the 'Third Space of Enunciation' which is the locus of philosophical ideas and academic aptitude of unending desire for acquiring knowledge. It was greatly possible for Zafar due to his exposure to Western metropolises that harbour some of the best academic institutions in the world. As a subject of cosmopolitan transnationalism, Zafar is well-versed in international matters, including politically-charged issues like the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Not only the novel's two main characters are cosmopolitan and transnational in nature, the subject-matters of the narrative are also transnational and international in every way possible. The range of the topics brought into the conversation between the unnamed narrator and the protagonist Zafar foregrounds the novel into a transnational theme. The diversification of multidimensional, transnational, transcontinental, international and, most of all, intellectual topics is so mind-boggling that one will have to be, at least moderately, knowledgeable about transnational and contemporary issues in order to wrap the head around those topics. Some of such erudite and all-encompassing topics include ancient history and literature, contemporary literature, exiles and refugees, banking and the financial markets, the 2008 global recession, America and Britain, colonialism, war in Afghanistan, Muslim identity, post-9/11 anxieties, diasporic displacement, US imperialism, racism, classism, contemporary geopolitics, immigration, political correctness, and so on. Such wide-ranging issues of international concerns that go beyond national boundaries demonstrate how transnational the novel is.

### **Translocal subjectivity and cultural identity**

An exile, as the protagonist Zafar defines, "is a refugee with a library" (Rahman 51). According to the narrator, "Zafar was an exile, a refugee, if not from war, then of war, but also an exile from blood. He was driven, I think, to find a home in the world of books" (51). Without considering this side of the protagonist, we can delve into the core of his translocal subjectivity as well as his cultural identity. A term like *translocal subjectivity* is far from being straightforward and may appear overly developed, especially when compared to the commonly held concept of *cultural identity* (Cory et al. 19).

Translocal subjectivity is very much related to "ethnicity, race and nationalism" (Cory et al. 19). Culture theorist Stuart Hall defines transcultural identity as largely rejecting the Western idea of "an integral, originary and unified identity" (1). In a more recent study, inter- and cross-cultural academics, Webb and Lahiri-Roy reiterate Hall's definition, underscoring that when utilised as a concept detached from the "difference" that persuades it in the inception, 'identity' validates the frameworks of "static multiculturalism" (Webb and Lahiri-

Roy 192). In light of Hall's critical perspective on identity as a disputed concept "under erasure," a notion – as Hall argues – "cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all" (2). The critics emphasise the importance of acknowledging "the inherent movement and hybridity of migrants' experiences and understandings of the self" (Webb and Lahiri-Roy 192). As projected by theorist Edward Said in his *Out of Place* (1999), "the diasporic self" is still a significant reference point because it represents an attempt to theorise the migratory experience as "becoming-subject" (qtd. in Braidotti 7) with multi-voiced, transnational, and cross-cultural course of acculturation (qtd. in Cory et al. 19).

As regards Rahman's *In the Light*, it is observed that his "translocal subjectivity" is a complex manifestation of longing for a permanent home, while simultaneously discarding the past memories tied to his birthplace. For Zafar there is no *originary* and *unified identity*, neither at home nor abroad; rather his transnational diasporic disposition of identity is in a constant state of evolution. In other words, his cultural identity as a translocal subject is very much inclined to multiculturalism, globalism, and internationalism. His nationhood and nationality-driven ideologies are fragile, more fragile and fragmented compared to two other prominent protagonists in Bangladeshi literature in English, such as: Tahmima Anam's heroine Zubaida in *The Bones of Grace* (2016) and Khan's protagonist Iqbal in *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994). Zafar's identity is merged with no border of identity that we can draw with confidence. He has transformed into, to use Said's term, a "becoming-subject" (qtd. in Braidotti 7) having a multi-voiced, transnational, and cross-cultural identity, going far beyond any static multiculturalism or nationalist paradigm.

## Conclusion

Zia Haider Rahman's narrative presents a largely contrasting portrayal of transnational migrants through the character of the protagonist. To Zafar, "memoirs are stories of redemption" (Rahman 307), and he incessantly aspires to get rid of his past. Interestingly, many facets of the fictional character of Zafar are staggeringly similar to Rahman's life. It can be argued that Rahman's novel is a captivating narrative that provides deeper insights into the literary and theoretical aspects of nationalism and transnationalism. The novel accomplishes this by incorporating a complex portrayal of identities within the protagonist's transcultural and transnational settings.

In this paper, we have examined Rahman's novel, *In the Light* through the theoretical framework of transnationalism. Our analysis has highlighted the ways in which the novel explores themes of cultural identity, migration, and subjectivity within the context of a rapidly globalising world. Drawing on theoretical insights of transnationalism, we have argued that the novel's examination of transnationalism presents a valuable outlook into the intricate and

multifaceted nature of contemporary identity, and contributes to the ongoing debates about the relationship between nationalism and transnationalism. Through a close reading of the novel, we have identified and analysed the ways in which the protagonist's transnational subjectivity is shaped by experiences of migration, exile, and translocality, and how this subjectivity is informed by the cultural contexts in which he operates. Specifically, we have examined the novel's representation of transnational homelessness, transnational disenchantment, and the dynamics of cultural identity in translocal contexts.

Our investigation has brought to light the novel's exploration of the themes of cultural identity, migration, and subjectivity within the context of a rapidly globalising transnational world. We have identified and analysed the ways in which the protagonist's transnational subjectivity is shaped by experiences of migration, exile, and translocality, and how this subjectivity is informed by the cultural contexts in which he (the protagonist) operates. By situating the novel within a transnationalist theoretical perspective, the paper has presented fresh insights into the novel's examination of identity and subjectivity. It discusses the complexities of contemporary identity and provides a novel perspective on the dynamics of cultural exchange in our increasingly interconnected world.

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