

# From Meaning to Metaphor: Reading Exile and Faith in Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know*

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## Abstract

Zia Haider Rahman's acclaimed novel *In the Light of What We Know* has been interpreted as a nuanced negotiation of exile, belongingness, and the limits of epistemology carried out in the backdrop of events like the 9/11 attacks and the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. What most commentators have missed, however, is the nature of the 'consolation' that its protagonist Zafar achieves as its narrative comes to the point of conclusion.

The present paper argues that Zafar's realization—that humans are essentially incapable of grasping the nature of things—is not only the consequence of his exilic circumstance marked by disruptive global events. Rather, the awareness is also on account of his coming to experience and invest his faith in someone outside of himself. This paper suggests that Zafar comprehends the limits to human endeavor and agency, and expresses his faith in metaphors, metaphors like trust and faith, that provide him the bare minimum to continue with the business of living.

**Keywords:** exile, knowledge, meaning, metaphor, faith

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Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.

(Said, "Reflections on Exile," qtd. in Wood, "On Not Going Home")

In the speech "On Not Going Home" that was later published in the *London Review of Books*, the acclaimed critic James Wood takes issue with Edward Said's characterization of 'exile' as marking an "unhealable rift" between a human being and a native place. Wood reads Said's well-known essay "Reflections on Exile" as an attempt to distinguish among exile, refugee, expatriate, and émigré subjects and establish that exile is another name for "tragic homelessness," a situation akin to the banishment accorded to individuals in ancient societies. He suggests that Said's emphasis on the self's "true home" in the passage that serves as the epigraph to the present essay betrays a theological and Platonic undertone. This entails, according to him, a primacy accorded to "unwanted homelessness" as having an inextricable relationship with the "true home," the point of "pure origin" over "voluntary homelessness" for which the home could not have been "very true after all." Hence, Wood

contends that for Said, exile necessarily calls for the imagination of primal belonging, as if the two are “held in a biblical clasp” (Wood, “On Not Going Home”).

In juxtaposition, Wood argues for certain kinds of postcolonial literature to be recognized as having significant critical implications for questions of homelessness, displacement, emigration, and tourism. He suggests that fictional work by the likes of Teju Cole, W.G. Sebald, Taiye Selasi, Aleksandar Hemon and others interrogates the distinctions that Said had sought to establish among different experiences of displacement in “Reflections on Exile.” According to Wood, the second half of the twentieth century and thereafter has been marked by great movement of peoples across continents facilitated mostly by the invention of the jet engine. The consequent ease of travel since World War II brings “a Nigerian to New York, a Bosnian to Chicago, a Mexican to Berlin, an Australian to London, [and] a German to Manchester.” Hence, in place of Said’s tragic homelessness, Wood asserts that “secular homelessness” may be an accurate moniker for the times we live in—a homelessness that not only entails travel among categories like exile, expatriate, émigré, and refugee but also refuses to claim “the theological prestige of the transcendent.” Wood prefers secular homelessness as it expands Said’s imagination of exile as forced homelessness by encompassing within itself voluntary movement from the provinces to the metropolis, as well as journeys out of one social class into another. For him then, secular homelessness “moves along its axis of departure and return, [and] can be banal, necessary, continuous” while exile is “acute, massive, [and] transformative” (“On Not Going Home”).

In the present paper, I read Zia Haider Rahman’s 2014 novel *In the Light of What We Know* within terms established by Wood’s criticism of Said. I suggest that the novel’s protagonist Zafar embodies the kind of homelessness that the critic identifies as being paradigmatic of exile in our times. However, I go on to qualify this homelessness as not being necessarily secular for, I argue 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. Unsurprisingly, Wood’s own review of Rahman’s work rightly compliments it for being “deeply suspicious of our claim to know things” and for attempting “to tell us, again and again, that we know much less than we think we do, that intellectual modesty in the face of mystery and complexity may be the surest wisdom” (“The World as We Know It”). Yet, the review makes no mention of the significant metaphorical role that faith and trust play in the text.

Accordingly, I have divided the paper into three sections. The first part reads selected passages from *In the Light of What We Know* to suggest that the novel is a realistic and moving portrayal of exile and (un)belongingness in the contemporary world. The second section reveals how the novel’s portrayal of exile simultaneously involves a movement away from according meaning to events like the 9/11 attacks and the 2008 Financial Crisis, and towards underlining the role of ‘metaphors’ like Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem and faith. In the final section, I argue that the novel’s investment in the metaphorical at the expense of the necessarily denotational entails a recognition of postsecular belongingness and critique as significant phenomena for the present.

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The narrative of *In the Light of What We Know* is set in the middle of the 2008 Financial Crisis and works through conversations between two friends who have met after a long time. Zafar, the novel's enigmatic and polymath hero, suddenly turns up at the doorstep of the unnamed narrator. The curious narrator asks him where he has been all this while. Zafar's response—reserved, digressive, and lengthy at the same time—comes to the narrator in the form of notebooks that he has kept through the months of his disappearance and through the conversations that they have. Rahman's novel, in this sense, is a record of the conversations between Zafar and the narrator interspersed with the notebook jottings of the former.

These recordings reveal, however, that though the narrator and Zafar have been classmates at Oxford and then colleagues at financial-analysis firms, their respective family and class backgrounds could not have been more different from each other. The narrator has been born in an elite household which has made a name for itself in the arenas of business, diplomacy, and academia. His grandfather, for instance, has been the Pakistani ambassador to the US while his parents have been academics at Oxford. Zafar, on the other hand, is an emigrant in the west, in New York and London, as his parents migrated from Sylhet in Bangladesh to the latter megapolis.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the narrator reveals that Zafar was actually conceived when his mother, who still lives in Sylhet and whom Zafar visited once when he was a boy, was raped by a Pakistani soldier during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. His mother's brother brought him up as his own son and carried him along to London. Unsurprisingly, all such twists and ironies of fate render Zafar remarkably self-conscious of his unbelonging and make him yearn for freedom from the weight of the past. Quite naturally, he searches for truths that must always remain certain, unchanging, and complete. The narrator attests to this acute sense of deracination that afflicts Zafar and refers to him as “a human being fleeing ghosts while chasing shadows” (Rahman 16). As subsequent discussion in the present paper will make clear, this is a remarkably prescient comment by the narrator as Zafar's search for stability and meaning will (and has to) remain unfulfilled throughout the narrative.

One of the ways in which Zafar tries to achieve a stable sense of identity and freedom amidst the painful state of homelessness that he endures is by having a successful, healthy, and long-term relationship with Emily Hampton-Wyvern. The Hampton-Wyverns are elite British aristocracy whose name carries significant socio-political clout even in the twenty-first century. Their economic standing may have declined but they remain important in long-standing networks and connections among the British bureaucracy, judiciary, and estate owners. Zafar, however, does not seek to take advantage of the social importance of the Hampton-Wyverns as he genuinely admires and loves Emily since their time together at Oxford. He desires 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. So, as soon he gets to know that Emily is expecting their child, he decides that the child will be christened Hampton-Wyvern when born. The resolve will of course not provide Zafar with any advantage but will most likely ensure that the child would not carry the painful baggage of the past that he has had to. In a particular circumstance in the novel's narrative, he

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<sup>1</sup> Sylhet came to constitute a part of East Pakistan when British India was divided into India and (East and West) Pakistan in 1947. Its people, however, had expressed their strong desire to continue being a part of the Indian province of Assam even after the Partition.

identifies this baggage in terms of “bondage” inflicted through his family name and explains his choice to the narrator as: “The truth was that names meant something to me and her [Emily Hampton-Wyvern’s] name meant everything ... 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 414). Zafar’s comment, marked by usage of the strong, religion-inflected noun “cleansing,” indeed reveals the desperation with which he looks to make himself at home in England—psychologically, emotionally, and experientially.

It would be an understatement to say, however, that Emily and her family do not reciprocate either Zafar’s warmth for them or his expectations of the proposed alliance. The Hampton-Wyverns never accept him as one of them and Emily, specifically, is remarkably reserved in expressing her feelings to him. The first time that he proposes marriage, for instance, she just laughs and does not say a word. Consequently, Zafar fears a similar outcome every time and never gathers the courage to repeat the gesture. The rudest shock that he receives in this context, though, is when he realizes that the child she is expecting cannot be his.<sup>2</sup> His agony is doubled when he comes to know that Emily has aborted the child without even informing him of her decision. Unsurprisingly, the relationship comes a cropper and the prospective marriage is called off. Many months later when Emily and Zafar meet again in Afghanistan where they are overseeing the reconstruction and rehabilitation-linked activities of the AfDARI organization in different capacities, Emily suddenly proposes marriage. Even as Zafar fears and half-expects things to go awry again, he agrees to the suggestion for he still loves Emily. Zafar’s fears of the worst come true, however, and he is left terribly disappointed. Emily keeps him waiting for hours on end by not showing up at the appointed place at the appointed time.

Zafar is too intelligent and well-read to not realize that the attitude of the Hampton-Wyverns towards him is not so much a reflection of a choice they have made, but rather an indicator of the privilege of class and social status that they enjoy. In fact, it fills him with sadness and anger to understand that such class snobbery might not be confined to the erstwhile aristocracy in England as it has come to afflict the nouveau-riche as well. At Oxford University, for instance, he finds no appreciation for knowledge that people actually work hard to acquire by overcoming major disadvantages of social position and privilege. Rather, he finds that a put-on all-knowing attitude is highly regarded there. He thus tells the narrator:

Therein lies the heart of the matter: England and an English education, in which to carry knowledge was a social act, a statement of class and position ... In England, the root of true, rightly guided power, the essence of authority, was not learning but the veneer of knowledge, while projecting genuine ignorance of all that is vulgar. This applies to the new aristocracy as much as it ever did to the old, to the *neo-aristocracy*, an international elite waving passports bloated with visas and residence permits, permanently everywhere, shielded from the vulgar by fast tracks and VIP lounges. (Rahman 109-110)

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<sup>2</sup> There is a suggestion in the narrative of *In the Light of What We Know* that the child could be the narrator’s as he was the one who met Emily when Zafar had to be suddenly admitted to hospital.

Emily Hampton-Wyvern and young students at Oxford—representing the old and the new aristocracy in England respectively—therefore mirror each other according to Zafar. He feels that they serve the same purpose of working as impediments in the path of those like him who are born without any socio-economic advantages and privileges.

The above discussion of Zafar's situation in Rahman's novel, when put in terms of Wood's criticism of Said as discussed at the beginning of the present article, would rightly reveal that his homelessness and deracination are perhaps even more painful and precarious than the sense of unbelonging that tragic or secular homelessness can convey. Zafar can certainly not imagine Sylhet in Bangladesh as a stable and primordial point of origin while he faces discrimination in metropolitan spaces like London and New York. He cannot even be said to have overcome his class and parental background by finding love in the megacity as Emily Hampton-Wyvern spurns him on multiple occasions.

The terrible situation that Zafar endures in exile pushes him towards majoring in abstract mathematics at Oxford. Mathematics, according to him, is the only domain of knowledge that is not subject to an individual's judgements, likes, and dislikes. Nor is it relative to the individual's sense-perception. Additionally, it does not even depend on the person's capability to perceive things around him or her, or on the capacity to recollect incidents from the past. In other words, Zafar's sense of mathematics is of a discipline that provides incontrovertible truth and certainty to its students. However, as will become evident in the following section of this essay, Zafar's belief in abstract mathematics as a bulwark against human fluidity and uncertainty gets tested rather sharply in the course of *In the Light of What We Know*.

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Much like his belief in the strength of love, Zafar's confidence in the power of abstract mathematics as being able to provide certainty and stable direction gets shaken when he encounters Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem.<sup>3</sup> The theorem uses mathematics to say something that radically challenges Zafar's perception of the discipline. It suggests that within any system, including abstract mathematics, there will always be claims that would be true, but it would not be possible for them to be proven to be true. In other words, even mathematics cannot provide a definitive and uncorrupted sense of certainty and indisputability to students like Zafar, as contingency lies at the discipline's very heart. The narrator succinctly explains the epistemological importance of Gödel's proposition when he states that its message is "that the farthest reaches of what we can ever know fall short of the limits of what is true, even in mathematics" (Rahman 10).

Zafar not only appreciates the impact of Gödel's Theorem on mathematics but also comes to be guided by its inference in his own struggle to achieve a sense of freedom and belonging. The theorem, with its pithy but powerful conclusion suggesting that what is true will always exceed what we can prove to be true, forces him to give up looking for unblemished

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<sup>3</sup> Kurt Friedrich Gödel (1906-1978) was a major figure in the landscape of twentieth century mathematics, logic, and analytical philosophy. An Austro-Hungarian by birth, he moved to Princeton, United States in 1940 after Austria came to be a part of Nazi Germany in 1938.

certainty. He thus comes to acquire an attitude that invests in understanding phenomena which can take him closer to the elusive truth, a truth that can show the right way forward even as its validity will, perforce, always elude his grasp. In other words, he eventually understands the significance of contingency in his life and becomes aware of the fact that unknowability lies at the very heart of all human attempts to give meaning to and comprehend different phenomena in the world.

Zafar's stout refusal to perceive historical events like the 9/11 attacks and the Financial Crisis of 2008 as happenings whose nature and impact can be completely understood by anyone is perhaps the strongest indicator of his changed attitude in the light of his encounter with Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. He argues that 'events' are manifestations of the unexpected and the unforeseen, whose existential import cannot be borne by men and women. As a result, most people make attempts to rob events of their inherently unpredictable character and domesticate them by placing them as logically coherent links between what has happened before and that which is likely to happen in the future. Zafar, in other words, refuses to read historical events as ciphers designed to be transparent in providing their meaning to humans. He demands that there be a recognition of the 'fact' that events are intrinsically *metaphorical* in nature, that their inference can always be understood only partially and incompletely, even with the advantage of hindsight. He relates the following anecdote from the life of the former Prime Minister of the UK, Harold Macmillan, to explain his point to the narrator.

When a journalist asked Harold Macmillan what he feared most in politics, his reply was, *Events, dear boy, events*. The event defines everything, changes everything, not just afterward but also before. People can't bear the unexpected, they won't let it stand and they'll change their memories to make what was unexpected now expected. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, men abhor the vacuum in history, the discontinuity wrought by the unexpected, and they'll go back and fill it out, go back and try to figure out how it happened, try to identify what we didn't see before, that to which we once were blind but can now see. We go back and revise our understanding of the world, with the benefit of having experienced the event. (Rahman 119)

Another way of appreciating Zafar's view is to understand that he is no longer interested in finding a stable meaning to events and happenings. As he encounters Gödel's Theorem, he realizes that occurrence is not under anyone's control and that events will never yield a static principle that could be used to guide his life in London and New York. Events, therefore, are inherently metaphorical in nature as they never make themselves transparent to the epistemologically enterprising human subject by disclosing the nature of their working.

A good example of the way Zafar resists yielding to commonplace meanings of events like the 9/11 attacks and underlines the inherently metaphorical character of their impact is his description of his engagement with Islam. Even as his family is utterly devout without indulging in any bigotry, he explains to the narrator that he himself has never been very attached to the faith. He does not, for example, follow even the most common of its doctrines like praying to Allah five times a day. He also reports that he has not ever felt the desire to know more about Islam—what it stands for or, how its followers are supposed to conduct

themselves. Yet, he is not inclined to pass pejorative judgement on those who, in the wake of the attacks, have turned towards the religion and enhanced their involvement with the same. He suggests that some of these people may be genuinely curious about their faith without having any interest in (mis)using it to achieve violent ends. He thus tells the narrator:

When people say that religion is only a crutch, I have to wonder what the *only* means, for I can't imagine anyone would dispute that a crutch allows us to carry on the business of living, half bobbling but better than without it, while taking the weight off the wound to aid the process of healing. I know that it is invoked only as a metaphor, but it seems to me that metaphors are never *only* anything. (Rahman 166)

It is not a coincidence that in describing (Islamic) faith, Zafar uses the metaphor of a crutch which assists in facilitating everyday lives. Underlying his refusal to judge those who show greater affinity towards the faith after the 9/11 attacks is actually a connection—a link that he (un)consciously makes between events which are metaphorical as they cannot be understood and metaphors like religious faith that help people in getting on with their everyday lives.

In one of the poignant ironies constituting the narrative of *In the Light of What We Know*, Zafar himself comes to appreciate that faith is capable of providing him with some sense of direction, stability, and calm during a time of great stress, despondency, and anger. Having spent some time in Bangladesh as a civil rights and anti-corruption lawyer, Zafar comes to oversee affairs at AfDARI in Kabul. Here, he gets exposed to the dark underbelly of America's much-publicized efforts to rehabilitate and rescue war-ravaged countries like Afghanistan. He not only bemoans a lack of sincerity in the effort of the collective at AfDARI but also criticizes individuals like Emily for their insensitivity towards what he perceives to be the real needs of the Afghans.

Emily's sudden marriage proposal which Zafar suspects will not lead to their wedding adds to his emotional upheaval. He is then in Dubai, waiting for her to come and initiate the process for solemnizing the match. As hour after hour passes without any sign of her arrival, he leaves the compound of the lavish hotel in which he is staying and begins to walk through the city's streets and alleys. Zafar does not quite know where he is going until he experiences a moment of epiphanic lucidity. Unsurprisingly, he finds himself thinking of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem at the moment—the most pithy and coherent statement, according to him, that he cannot know the depths and extent of that which is true. As he gives in to the force of the unknown and the unknowable informed by thoughts of the theorem, he feels that he needs the support of someone who is cognizant of the tumultuous situation in which he finds himself. He subsequently finds himself reposing faith in some external force who is benevolent and generous enough to accept him as he is. This someone is not necessarily God, some supreme being, or higher power. He is, to the extent that He can be described, someone who makes it easier for people like Zafar to accept that they cannot determine the course of their lives and cannot, therefore, assume that events in their lives will be transparent in meaning and significance to them. Even as Zafar's gesture of submission is reserved and tentative, what is clear is that Gödel's Theorem and the act of entrusting oneself in a being beyond one's cognitive grasp come to play a crucial metaphorical role in Zafar's life. Their role is metaphorical in that they offer a cognitive "crutch," to draw on Zafar's

aforementioned metaphor; they support and supplement Zafar's own realization that not everything can be controlled by (his) human will, agency, and determination. Zafar confesses as much to the narrator when he says:

There are churches in the eastern tradition where they say a version of the Nicene Creed that differs from the one that you hear in an English-speaking Anglican or Roman catholic church. They do not say *We believe*. They do not even say *I believe*. Rather, they say *I trust*. I've heard that the use of the word *believe* in the English creed only reflects a failure to find an effective translation. At any rate, I cannot talk of believing. I cannot say that I believe in the god whose name shall not be uttered or whose prophet died on the cross or whose archangel commanded an illiterate man to read. I cannot even say that I believe in the one true god. But in that Dubai night, on my knees, not for the first time and most likely not for the last, I wanted to put my trust in Him. The thing of greatest worth that we can give is our trust. Abraham's offering was not Isaac; it was trust. (Rahman 444-45)

In order to understand the importance of Zafar's investment in the metaphorical power of trust, rather than in a formal belief system, i.e. Islamic religion, an engagement with James Wood's writing on literature and belief may prove enlightening. In his introduction to his 1999 study *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*, Wood argues that (literary) fiction demands a certain kind of belief from its readers, but its economy of working is constituted by doubt—the assumption that the reader may withdraw his or her belief at any given moment of time. The reader's belief in novelistic fiction and the novel's own belief in itself is “not quite” belief then, it is serious and earnest but marked by the awareness that it is not belief as such. If there is belief as such, according to Wood, it is reserved for religion. The religious is not a space that allows belief that is tentative, belief only “as if,” that can be withdrawn or negated at any moment. As Wood underlines, in religion the loss of belief is often the prelude to a total loss of faith or is an instance of bad faith. The reality of religion, in other words, is affirmative and assertive while fiction allows its readers to judge reality by giving them the freedom to withdraw belief whenever they like (Wood, *The Broken Estate* xii).

In the chapters that constitute *The Broken Estate*, Wood reads novelists ranging from Herman Melville and Nikolai Gogol to Gustave Flaubert and Virginia Woolf as negotiating the above underlined dynamic between literary belief and religious belief in different ways in their works. In Woolf's novels, for example, he argues that literary belief subtly marries a kind of religious or mystical belief. Woolf's novels, however, do not give up their “sceptical, inquisitorial function” for they show that the godhead cannot be reached, “for the godhead has disappeared” (Wood, *The Broken Estate* xiv). It is in the same vein that I would like to argue here that *In the Light of What We Know* makes Zafar invest in trust instead of belief. Believing in Islamic religion would not only render the importance of Gödel's Theorem redundant but would also rob Zafar of what is perhaps his most defining characteristic i.e. asking difficult questions of people and things that he encounters. Hence, faith can only play a metaphorical role in Zafar's narrative, a role that provides some kind of emotional solace to Zafar in the light of his realization that he will never be able to establish all truth to be true;



or, put differently, that he will never be able to know as much as he would like. The role of metaphorical faith is undoubtedly crucial then, but it is certainly not as dogmatic and doctrinaire as that of religious belief.

The question of religion, religiosity and faith plays an important role throughout the novel's narrative however, and is not limited to shaping only Zafar's worldview. It works, for example, as a source of intergenerational negotiation and conflict in the novel. The narrator's parents, as stated above, are academics at Oxford University. They are second-generation migrants from Pakistan and hardly reflect any inclination towards religious observances and practices. Zafar's migrant parents in London, on the other hand, are inclined towards Islamic faith in a more conventional way as they believe that Allah guides them in their (economically deprived) lives and takes care of their loved ones. When they visit Zafar at Oxford in the presence of the narrator, for instance, Zafar's father sports a skull cap and his mother a simple sari. Moreover, they offer gentle greetings of *asalaam-u-alaikum* to the narrator when they see him. For the parents' generation, religion does not have a strict bearing on their sense of displacement. The narrator's parents are too privileged to care about religion, while Zafar's family is too low on the class-ladder to either not believe in Allah's kindness or wonder if they are actually ever at home in the Western metropolis and hence in exile. In other words, it is only for Zafar in the novel that homelessness, exile, and faith come to be linked with each other. He is, of course, also the sole character who achieves class mobility, and his upward growth seems to be the condition for such a connection between exile and faith as metaphor to come about.

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The academic Clive Cazeaux rightly underlines in the study *Metaphor and Continental Philosophy: From Kant to Derrida* (2007) that Nietzsche is the first philosopher to have conceived of humans as metaphorical beings. For Nietzsche, our being does not draw its fundamental identity from a Platonic, eternal essence or from any Cartesian thinking substance. Rather, it emerges from a complex of tensional interactions among competing drives and perspectives (Cazeaux 104). If one takes 'truth' to be the guiding principle of one's life, for example, then one would believe that there must be complete and exact correspondence between what one knows and what is real. Nietzsche disputes such an understanding as he argues that truth is 'in fact' constituted by "a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms" (Nietzsche 55). This is because, according to him, all concept-formation (such as truth) is necessarily *metaphorical* and involves a series of creative leaps from nerve stimulus to retinal image (first metaphor), to sound as signifier (second metaphor). Such creative leaps that constitute our perception entail that our critical and comparative categories, as well as the judgements we reach by processing the latter, can never correspond to things in themselves. "There is no causality, no correctness, and no expression," in other words, that may connect the first stage of perception, i.e. stimulus, with the last, i.e. concept; rather, our concepts, critical categories, and judgements are formed through transformations which are metaphorical in nature (Nietzsche 58).

Nietzsche's argument and Cazeaux's astute elucidation of the same suggest that even if humans may believe their lives to be marked by a necessary and complete coherence between

knowledge and reality, and between perception of things and things in themselves, their entire being is constituted in or by metaphors. Zafar in *In the Light of What We Know* comes to be aware of the necessity of metaphors for human beings not only in such ontological terms, but also in socio-political terms once he encounters Gödel's Theorem. The recognition leads him to invest in faith and trust instead of Islamic religion as such, especially because he finds himself emotionally and culturally unmoored in all the places that he either stays in or visits in the course of the novel's narrative. Unsurprisingly, even as Zafar invests faith in Him who is outside of himself, as evident from the long quotation cited above, it is in the form of a metaphor. Isaac is indeed a metaphor for Zafar, "the greatest thing of worth" that was offered to Him, instead of the real, physical being who is supposed to have been the dearest to his father Abraham.

Zafar's recognition of the metaphorical import of both Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem and faith entails that he cannot, and would not, think of the Theorem or 'God' in Islam as new truths that could guide him in his painful state of exilic existence. His engagement with Islam, then, is at the level of a very loose personal identification with someone that is beyond him, an offering of trust that does not translate into a systematic following of the rules and principles of the religion. Hence, in the novel's narrative, he repeatedly asserts that he is not a believer of Islam, that he cannot—to repeat phrases from the same quotation above—"believe in god whose name shall not be uttered or whose prophet died on the cross or whose archangel commanded an illiterate man to read" (Rahman 445). The investment in trust instead of belief interestingly makes Zafar one among several protagonists found in contemporary fiction who invest *partially* in religious systems. As John A. McClure has argued with regard to protagonists of fictional works by writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, Bessie Head, and Leslie Silko, Rahman's characterization too signifies "the turn of secular-minded characters back towards the religious" in the contemporary situation where "the rearticulation of the religious has been weakened with secular, progressive values and projects" (3). Stated in McClure's terms, Zafar does not invest in "the triumphant reappearance of a well-mapped, familiar, religious cosmos" and does not understand "sacred discourse to be a complete and authoritative representation of the real" (4, 5). Instead, what trusting in Him provides Zafar with is some kind of stability and assurance that "make[s] life more bearable" (McClure 6) in the light of his recognition and knowledge that he will never be able to know that which makes all truth true.

How can we make sense of the significance that Zafar attaches to the metaphorical import of the Incompleteness Theorem and of faith? Why does he say that he trusts but does not believe? Manav Ratti's impressive study of the postcolonial novel (2013) contains a significant discussion of faith vis-à-vis religious dogma that may be useful for our purposes here. Ratti suggests that works like Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) call upon the imagination of a conceptual language that critiques both secularism and religion. They ask for a space that can articulate faith without taking recourse to organized religion—a configuration that goes beyond oscillating between the familiar binary of reason and mysticism (Ratti 18-19). As an instance of what such a space may look like, Ratti refers to Jacques Derrida's conception of "messianicity without messianism" (qtd. in Ratti 18). Here, Derrida imagines a space, a "desert" that can inscribe the religious sans the historicity of

religions. For Derrida, the desert leads to messianicity which is a “faith without dogma which makes its way through the risks of absolute night” (qtd. in Ratti 18). This faith is open-ended and deconstructive, devoid of any teleological orientation. It is, in other words, “an opening to the future ... but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration” (Derrida qtd. in Ratti 19).

In the context of McClure’s suggestion about the partial investment of characters in religious systems in contemporary fiction and Ratti’s Derridean argument about the need to imagine a space that conceives the religious almost without “history” as expressed by the postcolonial novel, I would like to argue that Rahman’s novel too forces its readers to ask if we can trust in someone outside of us without allowing the trust to develop into belief. In other words, the narrative of *In the Light of What We Know* can be read as asking its readers to realize the significance of the metaphorical in their lives that leads to propositions of faith and trust instead of accordance of meaning to each and every event that happens around them, thus generating problems of belief. Rahman’s novel then can be seen as a negotiation, an engagement that seeks to propagate a certain openness towards questions of faith, belief, and trust in the contemporary period.

It is this very openness that can be identified as “postsecular” according to James Hodkinson and Silke Horstkotte—that which underlines the need to rethink both the religious and the secular, as well as their relation with each other. Hodkinson and Horstkotte suggest that instead of conceiving the postsecular as necessarily highlighting a break from modernization, or as a temporal marker between the “irreligious” and the “communal,” we need to think of it as “a mode of engagement, a way of thinking about religion and secularity in the present with strategic and productive ambivalence” (319). The strategic and productive ambivalence that Hodkinson and Horstkotte identify as the characteristic of the postsecular has a bearing not only for the current reading of Rahman’s novel but also for our practices of reading in general. Clearly, if we come to appreciate the import of the significance of the metaphorical for the narrative of *In the Light of What We Know*, we cannot deny its inextricable relationship with trust, an investment of faith in someone that is beyond Zafar’s imagination and perception. His need to offer his trust in itself, as stated earlier, is accentuated by the deracinated state in which he finds himself on account of increased global mobility for individuals since the end of World War II. As a result, despite the reluctance of critics such as James Wood, we might have to consider the possibility that exile, even in today’s globalized world, may not be secular in its entirety. This does not mean, of course, that we need to go back to Said’s imagination of exile as tragic homelessness, as space that necessarily separates the exiled individual from the point of his or her primal origins. Instead, we need to think of exile in the contemporary world in postsecular terms—as a productive negotiation of this binary between tragic or theological homelessness and secular homelessness.

The narrative investment of Rahman’s novel in trust, and not in belief, should also make us reconsider the usual and conventional manner in which we peruse literary texts. If indeed the critic is supposed to be secular in order to be able to provide an apparently objective reading of the text at hand as argued by Edward Said, we then need to ask if such a position would even be desirable or effectively unbiased. In the well-known essay “Secular Criticism,” Said does contend that “[c]riticism ... is always situated, it is skeptical, secular,

reflectively open to its own failings” (qtd. in Asad, “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism” 47). As argued by key scholars associated with postsecular thinking such as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, Said’s suggestion assumes stable meanings for secularism as well as critique—meanings that do not quite hold when considered from different points in time and space. In his own work, Asad has demonstrated that our commonplace conception of the secular is based on a culturally specific comprehension of religion. So, for instance, being secular or underlining the need for secularism in the Christian world can be very different from what such a claim signifies in the Islamic world, as even the latter has long-lasting traditions of thought about cultural, educational, and scientific practices as well as legal procedures. According to Asad, the religious and the secular thus cannot be defined precisely as their meanings fluctuate in relation to each other as well as to contemporaneously existing systems of government and control (*Formations of the Secular* 1-8). Mahmood, in a similar vein, takes issue with Said. She suggests that the acclaimed critic’s understanding of criticism is suffused by suspicion towards the text or activity under scrutiny—in the tradition of “masters of suspicion” like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Hence, he does not attach a lot of significance to the metaphysical and epistemological commitments of religion. In contrast, Mahmood proposes that we renegotiate the problem of the relationship between metaphysics and epistemology in (Islamic) faith. She asks if distinct traditions of critique indeed require that there be one specific and uniform conception of the subject who is to undertake critique. Hence, Mahmood contends that Said’s criticism happens in “empty” time as it were—a time devoid of any consideration of the particular historical juncture in which we as subjects and critics may be located. His critical gesture, according to her, thus sidelines alternative and equally significant conceptions of time that we live through and experience in the contemporary period—conceptions that usually get clubbed under categories such as “non-Western,” “illiberal,” “communal,” and “premodern” (90-92).

In conclusion, it would only be fair to underline that Rahman’s novel *In the Light of What We Know* makes its readers reconsider several key questions. By presenting its protagonist Zafar as someone who travels all over the globe and yet does not cease investing his trust in someone outside of himself, it makes us ask if exile in the contemporary period is necessarily involuntary and secular. Moreover, it makes us wonder as to how we reimagine ourselves and the places we occupy in the world in the light of knowledge that, ironically, our knowledge is and must always be limited. The work also makes us reflect on the various implications of the possibility that meanings often attributed to terms like ‘secular,’ ‘critique,’ ‘self-reflexive,’ and ‘modern’ may not be independent of socio-political and historical contexts. It is of course up to us as readers of Rahman’s novel to respond to these questions—as individuals, peoples, as well as communities. The shape of the world in the future, needless to say, will depend on whatever the answers will be.

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