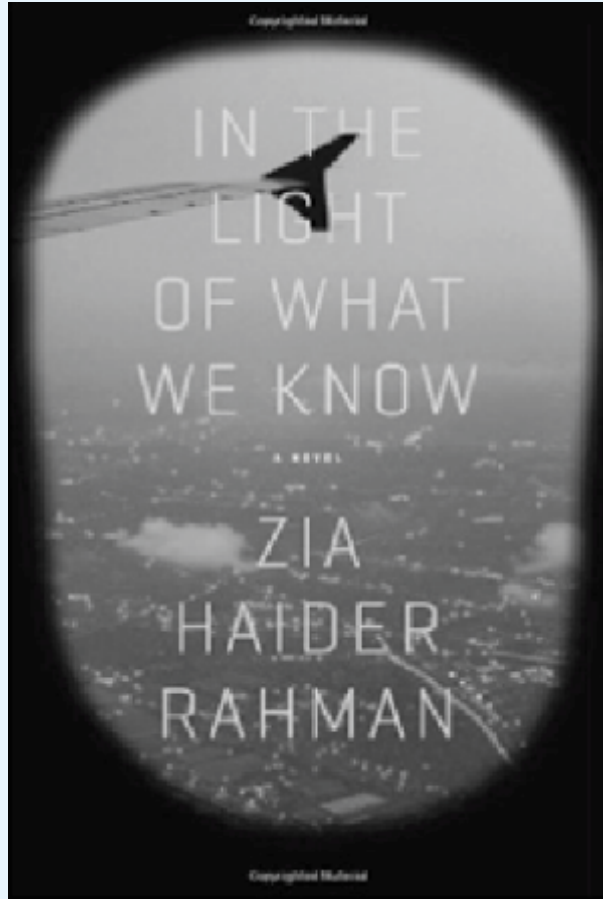


In the Light of What We Know: A Novel of Its Time

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In the Light of What We Know

Zia Haider Rahman

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It is not easy to define the boundary between knowing and knowledge. Being informed and being knowledgeable can be two different intellectual states. Knowing history can lead to a partial understanding of the present until one can interpret the present through history. Knowledge is the conclusion that one reaches after knowing and interpreting. For a novelist, his or her plot should inform the historical context and provide the readers with the scope to interpret the present through the facts of the past. A successful novel triggers constant interpretations as well as makes the readers doubt their interpretations. Also, a successful novel knows the necessity of its time. Keeping all these aspects in mind, it seems appropriate to coin Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* as a novel of its time. However, it is problematic to say that the novel offers knowledge or the scope of interpretation for readers. A novel needs to manifest the triggering events in its plot that fetches diverse interpretations from different cultures and countries. Rahman's novel seems to refer to a lot of intellectual works and historical facts, but it is not clear how the readers will interpret the events by connecting the references with the events of the fiction.

Knowledge illuminates, but it also becomes troubled for being incomplete and partial. Rahman's disconcerting debut novel is a thorough examination of global politics, identity crisis, and postcolonial remorse that roams from Bangladesh to Oxford, Afghanistan to New York, and that has already received comparisons with Sebald, Conrad, and Waugh, and been nominated for the Goldsmiths Prize. The novel has been distinguished by some in London and New York as a work of utmost acquisitiveness that wrestles with almost every major issue of modern times: migration, xenophobia, globalized capitalism, and the War on Terror. Yet, Rahman seems reluctant to include what should have been its most vital element: his protagonist's intellectual intensity and personal story.

With the most traditional beginning of any novel, the appearance of Zafar, suddenly knocking at the door in his disheveled and apparently homeless stature at his friend's extravagant home in west London, we are presented with a figure with a captivating story to tell: the child of pre-modern Bangladeshis, raised on an East End council estate, who wins his way to Oxford and then to Wall Street, before being entangled in shady trickeries in Afghanistan. Like the incomplete presentation of the character's personality, his story is also partially visible in the novel. Instead, the reader is confused with countless evasive digressions that discuss the world in imposing abstraction: through mathematics, biology, economics, psychology, physics, and history.

The narrative fails to make characters vivid and engaging. Zafar's involvement with the NGO in Afghanistan and his actions at Wall Street, which could provide a significant scope for critical interpretations, are not detailed for the readers' comprehension. Similarly, his banker friend in West London, the unnamed narrator, focuses at length on the corrupt practices that he is involved in without

ever saying what exactly his mischief is. The book has inconsistencies in such important narratives.

Whenever the story delivers a starting point for fleshing his characters out, Rahman consistently, albeit purposefully, fails to explain it. Zafar's uneducated parents visit him in Oxford, substantiating a painful moment of social gawkiness. His mother's friend — disapproved of because of her mixed-race children — throws herself from a tower block. His mother dislikes his use of English terms like “please” and “thank you” in the house. All of these relevant and interesting details are dealt with cursorily and left unexplored: Zafar thus never comes alive as a character.

Rahman, intentionally or unintentionally, makes his characters Eurocentric; a trait for which this novel became so popular in the west. The characters lack the respect for their roots in Pakistan or Bangladesh; rather they are quite obsessed with the UK or USA. “If an immigration officer at Heathrow ever said ‘Welcome home’ to me,” Zafar says, “I would have given my life for England, for my country, there and then. I could kill for an England like that.” The storyline presents Zafar's lack of empathy for Bangladesh and the attempt to create a bonding with England. Zafar is prone to associate his nationality with England and regrets to fail in his attempts. Similarly, the unnamed banker seems to be Eurocentric as well. Their intellectual affinity to their roots does not form any narrative in the novel.

Instead, the reader is lost among unremitting lofty assertions on the human condition and the perilous state of world affairs. Westerners are consistently exposed as naïve and soulless, while the darker skinned are awarded with a certain knowing and mystical nobility. “Unlike the Westerners, ours is not a spiritual poverty but a material one,” proclaims Zafar's Afghan colleague. This avowal, which does not identify how much of the Islamic world's economic inertia is predicated by its “spirituality,” goes unopposed.

Rahman's approach towards female characters is vague. The presentation of Emily, Payne, and Lauren does not provide any complete picture of their personalities. The reader seems to misunderstand or not understand their relations with the male characters. Zafar develops an infatuation for the wealthy young woman, Emily, who seems to induce in him a lust which is both sexual and social. There is a constant tension in their relationship. There are even references of pregnancy and marriage, but Emily is an obscure creature. The reader fails to grasp her accountability in the novel.

Zafar bounces and interlaces through various time periods and events, dropping mysterious suggestions about this or that – the Colonel in Pakistan, the envelopes in Afghanistan, the doctor in Britain – to return to them later. In theory, this is a convenient technique, allowing suspense to build while the reader waits impatiently for the big disclosure, and also has the useful effect of protracting what is after all a rather straightforward series of events. The drawback, however, seems

that much of the material used to delay the suspense is dull. Rahman also confuses us with a fair amount of material that is either tedious or simply oblique, such as the prolonged description of Emily's father, a character who hardly suits the story. There are narratives on other characters which turn out to be irrelevant to the progression of the story. Also, there is a four-page footnote concentrating on map projections, a discussion on the Poggendorff optical illusion, and long paragraphs on the navel-gazing prose, which seems to be irrelevant for the thematic development.

Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know* seems to present the incomplete story of the characters and inspire the readers to complete the story with their interpretations through the provided history and facts. It seems to lead the readers to comprehend the relationship between knowing and knowledge to motivate the readers to interpret the truth. Despite its compelling storyline, it fails to provide the spirituality of the truth and knowledge for the readers; rather, it turns into a series of research essays in the format of a novel loaded with footnotes and references.

