

**Examining The Translocal In Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*****Siddharth Sharma**

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Cities provide immeasurable materials for investigations. They are the concentration of everything best created by man, the spaces of compounding complexities that offer multiple approaches of understanding. In contemporary times, their numerous and ever increasing representations in literary texts have encouraged the growth of literary urban studies. As such, the idea of translocality has gained popularity. Translocal spaces defy geographical constraints and allow the writers the freedom to exercise their imaginative faculties. Their movement across and through multiple places enhance the narrative structure of the fictional world. Within this scope, this study shall try to analyse Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*.

**Keywords:** City, Translocality, Space, Celebrity Culture.**Introduction:**

Cities are the centres of everything. Cities are achievements, the ultimate concentration of intellect, wealth, culture and power. They are the pride of every nation - ever extending its reach and influence. "Cities create connections across, through and beyond local spaces and places", "cities are translocal" (Mattheis, "Translocality" 479). Before moving forward, let us try to understand the concept of translocality. By virtue of its inherent relation to cities mostly, translocality rejects a specific definition. Further, the complexities of cities find endowment in the concept of translocality, thereby restricting any linear approach to its understanding. Using it as his preferred term over 'transnational', Mandaville advocates that translocal is "a space in which new forms of (post)national identities are constituted" (204). Translocal approach may serve as a tool that "helps to better understand and conceptualise connections beyond the local which are, however, neither necessarily global in scale nor necessarily connected to global moments". Further, from a research viewpoint "translocality generally aims at highlighting the fact that the interactions and connections between places, institutions, actors and concepts have far more diverse, and

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often even contradictory effects than is commonly assumed” (Freitag and Oppen 3, 5). Therefore, translocality is used to “capture complex social-spatial interactions in a holistic, actor-oriented and multi-dimensional understanding” (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 376).

Since translocality “has come into vogue” as it materializes in “the writings of scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds such as geography, history and area studies, cultural studies, anthropology and development studies”, its employment in the scope of urban literary studies is no surprise ( Greiner and Sakdapolrak 374). The unstoppable acceleration of urban growth, armed with the unprecedented advancement of technology demand constant investigations of urban consciousness and their literary representations. Primarily because, literature aims beyond the real. The use of more than one metropolis, in this context, adds to our argument that translocal approach in literature does not solely compare the urbanity of places. Contrary, their movement across and through multiple places enhance the narrative structure of the fictional world.

One of the best producers of city novels in contemporary times, Zadie Smith does not fail to offer us a plethora of opportunities to enquire the dynamism associated with urban living. Her novels like *White Teeth* (2000), *On Beauty* (2005), *NW* (2012), and *Swing Time* (2016) all demonstrate contemporary urban lived experiences in diverse forms. All set in urban settings, they are no less than literary biographies of the concerned cities. Likewise, her *The Autograph Man* (2002) is no exception. Although less popular when compared to her above-mentioned works, it is an example of her literary expertise. What is more, its engagement with multiple urban frameworks is different from her other novels in the sense that it tends to sideline the issues of immigrant experience. Focus is on the interactions between the diverse characters and the interplay of action between the two cities. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how translocal approach contributes in understanding the complexities of this narrative, and how it situates diverse urban experiences within a literary space.

First, let's us examine the relevance of the movement of action across places. Two mega cities, the two distinctive symbols of modern economic and political pinnacle, facilitate the transition of action. Their distinctiveness does not seem to hinder its progress. Rather, it opens up newer opportunities for the characters. Although the narration appears to be following the perspective of Alex-Li Tandem that is in turn characterised by his obsessive-compulsive approach of looking into things through religious lens, here distinguishing between everything that is Jewish and non-Jewish, translocal space seems to accept everything within its scope. Apart from Tandem's above-mentioned habit, the narrative does not cut across the lines of religion or political ideologies in a serious manner. Hence, no significant comparison or the assertion of superiority between the two urban giants. The result is the action's unbiased reaction to the changes in built environment. The transition is so smooth, in both times, that as readers we sometimes let it go unnoticed. Therefore, her

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novel transcends narrative boundaries, mixes and creates newness retaining both the originalities.

The novel transitions into its second part through one of the finest inventions of modernity - the aeroplane. An object occupying no specific location of its own, the flagbearer of what Augé terms as “non-place”, weighing “400-tonne” flying above the clouds “relying on equations of energy and velocity that no one aboard could sketch out in even their most basic form.” This ultimate signifier of urbanity encourages chance encounters and unfurls newer possibilities for those confined within it. It awakens newer realizations for Alex as he discovers during his flight that “no one has desired his comfort and sleep this badly since he was a baby.” This journey across international boundaries, with around four hundred strangers, sharing the “same meals, the same detritus (the missing sock, the broken biro, the twisted blanket, the plastic water glass quite exploded), the same angle of recline, the same TV screen showing the same father and son playing catch, the same vigilant mindfulness of one’s personal space” indicates the layering of shared experiences across individual consciousness (Smith, *The Autograph* 220-221).

According to Mattheis “translocal stories take specific local ties, experiences and behaviours and layer them with ties, experience and behaviours belonging to another place” (*Translocality* 6). These stories seek to inter-relate one place with another. In doing so, they widen their reach to the larger audience. Let us approach the translocality of the text, taking into consideration one place at a time. Mountjoy permeates in New York. This blunt statement, apparently subjective, is however, justified in the course of the narrative. Tandem and his friend Ian experience a familiarity, an immediate sense of belongingness as soon as they exit the airport and touch the grounds of the United States of America. Though never been to New York earlier, one of Tandem’s companions expresses his amusement on the sense of association - “Feel like I have been here before, a bit,...familiar, like from another life or something.” Further, Smith associates the suburb of Mountjoy, making her protagonist feel “a particular yearning for the suburbs between an airport and a city, he wanted to stop the car and knock on one of those pine doors...” (Smith, *The Autograph* 226-227). Fictional Mountjoy, a suburb of London, as Smith says, was not a promised land. It was in fact an accumulation of “cheap houses sitting directly in the flight path of an international airport” (8). The absence of a sense of alienation makes Zadie Smith’s novel progress towards its climax without any disturbances. Nor does it whine away the obsession of the protagonist for Kitty Alexander. Crossing international boundaries does not make it lose its intensity; arrival on the US adds fuel to his already ignited passion.

I argue that the introduction of Kitty Alexander, an American actor with Russian and Italian origins, contributes in widening the purview of Smith’s created urban space as it not only transgresses international boundaries but also encourages cultural affiliations. It compels the character’s motion through shared cultural traits, in this case, the world of

Anglophone cinema in which both England and US are major participants. Smith makes evident the power dynamics and influence associated with the celebrity culture early in the novel. Smith employs autographs, the signifiers of celebrity brand values. There is more to this, the autographs are sources of epiphanies for our protagonist. At the raw age of twelve, from a chance encounter while spectating wrestling match Alex Li Tandem discovers the world of autographs. Joseph Klein, a fellow spectator whose enthusiasm for autographs “was so strong it was viral; Alex had caught it and kept it ever since” (Smith, *The Autograph* 80). “Every week since he was fourteen, Alex has sent a letter to Kitty, to an address in Manhattan, her fan-club address” (66). Interest gives way to passion, and passion paved the path for profession. “At fifteen Alex started to sell seriously, at twenty he had a business” (80). He becomes a professional autograph trader whose “job fell into three compartments. Collecting. Trading. Verification” (59). And everything around Alex started to be influenced by his desire for Kitty Alexander. As a result, Kitty becomes, as Mattheis puts it, “local in more than one place at the same time” (*Translocality* 6).

The Hollywood, though a product of the US, has become a global phenomenon. Among the producers of movies in the English language, the US sits on the top of the pedestal followed by England. Due to the thinning line between the two cinema industries, their histories are continuously researched, questioned and rewritten. Layers and layers of representation flow from both sides opening up heterogeneous vistas of human understanding. We may use the term ‘palimpsest’, because just like palimpsests, this layered space “cannot be the branch of any one discipline” as it “admits all those terrains that write upon it to its body” (Dillon 2). Mattheis observes that, “in the translocal urban palimpsests, layers from different spaces can be used as foils, memories, historical remnants or even future projections of a city” (*Translocality* 53). Varied urban experiences are superimposed; each city contributing towards the climax. The representation of the Hollywood limelight, the nuances associated with celebrity culture beyond the local, and the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated characters with common interests between two nations allows Zadie Smith to “combine movement through time and space as well as related and unrelated layers” (Mattheis, *Translocality* 53).

The novel employs contested sites and ideas, religion and race, and churns them to give rise to a literary space where political, economic and geographical demarcations disappear. It encourages free movement of thoughts and actions, and this smooth manoeuvrability in space and time is made possible by, as we might argue translocal approach in literature. Alex-Li Tandem is Chinese by origin, Jewish by religion and English by nationality. He is all the three and none at once. Never in the novel do we encounter limitations imposed by these markers. Three diverse markers, carried simultaneously, with each of their distinctiveness, rather facilitate the narrative progression. Religious consciousness hovers at all times, but no particular nationalistic characteristic seems to be dominant. In contrast, shared cultures and common interests apparently become the order of

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the narrative. “Denying the idea that the nation is necessarily the most important mediator between the local and the transnational”, Zadie Smith situates celebrity culture as the prime instrument to steer her narrative (Slater 4). The whole created space centres around it.

Since cities are the concentration of everything best created by man, the spaces of compounding complexities, they defy any linear approach of understanding. Armed with this dynamism of city, Zadie Smith fabricates her own space, a world both within and outside the city, which she terms “peculiar”. “The curiously malleable nature of the urban fabric allows for the flexibility that is essential for the creation of a translocal space” (Mattheis, *Translocality* 7). Constructed by global flows and dominated by artistic and glamorous tendencies, this peculiar world of autograph trade is an urban product. Situating this professional space within the ambit of two real life metropolis, Smith justifiably extends the reach of literary art. Approaches with translocal perspective bring the ability to combine two or more seemingly distant worlds. In addition, we see that it can generate and develop a minutest trait into a significant area so much so that that particular area becomes open for further experiments and investigations. Not bounded by any pre-determined socio-political obligations or limitations, Zadie Smith’s autograph world enjoys the liberty to exercise its influence on anybody, anywhere simultaneously. This seems in keeping with Michael Peter Smith’s “understanding of translocality as a mode of multiple emplacement or situatedness both *here* and *there*” (181).

The element of translocality in the novel also encourages the question of “how power relations are differentiated in flows and movements and how power and powerlessness are experienced simultaneously in different locations” (Clemens 375). Before travelling to America Alex-Li Tandem was powerless as far as his dream of communicating with Kitty Alexander was concerned. Apart from his one-sided letters, he was able to find no alternatives. Kitty Alexander was too powerful, unattainable for him. We discover that Max Krauser, Kitty’s secretary, had held the reins of Alex’s powerlessness; for these long years, Max had been the mountain between him and Kitty. However, after Alex manages to meet Kitty in person we see shift in power dynamics. The seventy-seven year old Kitty, fully dependent on her secretary, appears to be as vulnerable a human can be. Gradually, Alex begins to hold the power as he succeeds in convincing Kitty to go with him to England. This movement enables Alex to steer everything around him to his profit. Max Krauser’s ineffectiveness to control the events that now have surpassed his outreach, as the action moves back to England, compels him to make one last attempt to exercise his dominance. Hence, he resorts to spread misinformation about Kitty’s death.

Max Krauser’s action in one part of the world (US), an event occurred at the local level, is an effort to achieve some kind of closure for his helplessness or loss. However, at the global level, accentuated by the medium of electronic media, it shook up personal and professional dimensions. Her death (fake) at US paved the way for immeasurable financial

gains for Alex and Kitty at London. The value of Kitty's autograph skyrockets and disrupts the happenings of autograph trade worldwide, as "for a long time Kitty Alexander's autograph has been one of the most sought after scribbles in this peculiar world. Most Autograph Men have given up the hope of ever getting one" (Smith, *The Autograph* 66). The two distant events instantaneously change the course of action. Similarly, Alex's most important business trip coincides with the heart surgery of his girlfriend Esther, as he lands himself in America ignoring the risk of losing her forever. Perhaps this is why Mattheis argues about the essentiality of simultaneity in the study of translocal and transnational narratives (*Translocality* 19). The employment of simultaneous spatial occurrences demands the need for connecting the dots. It glues the reader who has already started speculating about the next course of action. In doing so, the readers tend to identify only with the happenings in the text, letting go of any particular spatial association, thereby paving the way for translocal space.

In her novel, Zadie Smith aptly expresses the subjugation of the female characters. And what better purpose will translocal approach serve than highlighting that the most common societal problem is not confined to a certain place or belief? Be it in London or New York, female subjugation is omnipresent. Making the story occur in multiple settings, Smith expertly voices that this issue is universal and concurrent. Esther is "an almond-eyed girl with a bad heart in need of United Kingdom's free medical assistance"- such is her first introduction (*The Autograph* 11). Although bearing romantic associations with the protagonist, she seems to be neglected and taken for granted throughout the novel. Serious and life threatening matter, her heart surgery, pales into nothingness. Too powerless to be exerting any influence she just seems to accept her helplessness.

Kitty Alexander, the centre of the novel, powerful in England when viewed through the lens of imagined and abstract space of celebrity culture, who in reality should have been the symbol of cultural dominance as products of Hollywood generally tend to be, appears in reality a lonely, fragile old woman who is completely dependent on her secretary Max, a male. Everything about her seems to be controlled by males. Her representation exposes the hypocrisy of the world. Value reduced to autographs, she could not help herself but agree to Tandem and hope for a little financial stability. She is the victim of male manipulation. An antithesis to apparently strong character. First, Max manipulates her in the pretext of protecting her. This leads us to speculate: why does she need protection and from whom? Probably from the autograph traders; a profession that significantly seems to be dominated again by the male gender. Secondly, Tandem's idea not to break the fake news of her death shows signs of unethical machinations used to control someone's life.

On the other hand, Honey Richardson/Honey Smith in the novel is the only female character who seems to be driving her fate by herself. Though perceived as "an inexperienced dealer, a *woman* dealer, who bought stuff from Alex that he couldn't give away to anyone

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else”, she is a lone wolf in the autograph trade, Zadie Smith’s blunt statement against the gender centric notions (*The Autograph* 232). She is the agent through which the narrative moves back to London; the events that follow were possible only because of her intervention in Alex’s search for Kitty Alexander.

However, their inter-relationships represent strong statements in favour of universal sisterhood as we see that these three female characters display genuine concern and emotional support that defy spatial boundaries. Zadie Smith is able to invoke the experience of women in diverse professions. Smith seems to be employing the tool of *mimicry* advocated by Luce Irigaray - that “one must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it” (308). The characters do not challenge their predicaments. However, they do not suppress their desires. Kitty Alexander gladly accepting her exploitation and agreeing to move to England as it offered her larger and better opportunities in the form of freedom and money testifies to this.

Citing the work of Freitag and Van Oppen, Clemens Grainer and Patrick Sakdapolrak argue that they employ the perspective of translocality to challenge the regional limitations often implicit in area studies and emphasize that the world is constituted through processes that transgress boundaries on different scale, which results in the production and reproduction of spatial differences. A translocal perspective enables research into this processes in a more open and less linear way and captures the diverse and contradictory effects of interconnectedness between places, institutions and actors. (375)

The movement of events across spatial boundaries offer newer perspectives. Suddenly we see reversal of roles and questioning of morals. The characters seem to fail to exhibit strong ethical codes. The action in both the places together contribute in Smith’s caricature of the contemporary celebrity life. This mobility seems to connect the places rather than differentiate. Translocality in the novel enhances its analysis of morality and fame. Negation of spatial stagnation exposes modern realities, as we perceive the diverse personal motives that drive the consciousness of the characters. The values of home and family, love and death are side lined in the greater schemes of obsession and desires. The rapid ethical transformation is global, and affects everyone. The novel by associating itself with characters from both the central and peripheral occupations in both the cities clearly demonstrates that contemporary life is no longer a place-confined affair. Rather, it facilitates creation of new space where distance and boundaries seem to have no significant contributions, a space where the author is at liberty to drive his/her text towards broader literary connotations.

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