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Beyond intimacy and territorial boundaries: The transnational subject in *The Book of Forbidden Feelings* by Lala Bohang

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Abstract: This study examines global intimacy and the formation of the transnational subject in The Book of Forbidden Feelings by Lala Bohang. The work is particularly significant from this perspective because it presents personal and emotional experiences through English, combined with visual aesthetics and themes of urban life intertwined with globalization. The study aims to identify how intimate/personal experiences are constructed as experiences that transcend geographical, cultural, and national boundaries, and to explain the formation of transnational subjectivity through representations of contemporary urban life. The findings show that The Book of Forbidden Feelings presents intimacy as an individual experience shaped by global cultural flows and contemporary urban dynamics. In addition, the use of English and the book's visual aesthetics expands its scope into a space of cross-cultural communication, while its urban imagery moves beyond national identity. In other words, Bohang's work presents a form of global intimacy rooted in personal experience, enabling the Indonesian literary subject to negotiate identity and global culture.

Keywords: *global intimacy; transnational subject; urban; poetry; The Book of Forbidden Feeling*

INTRODUCTION

Changes in social life in the era of globalization have penetrated deeply into highly personal domains, including how individuals love, build intimacy, understand themselves, manage loneliness, and seek recognition, while globalization continues to operate through economic sectors, politics, and human mobility. Consequently, the boundary between intimate experience and broader social structures has become increasingly inseparable. Intimacy is no longer merely a matter of interpersonal relationships within private space; it is also entangled with digital technology and global flows. This is consistent with Wilson (2012), for example, who positions intimacy as an analytical category for understanding globalization because forms of closeness are always connected to social power, economics, race, nation, and sexuality.

This transformation becomes more complex when intimacy encounters developments in digital technology. Contemporary social relations take place through various forms of mediation that reshape the boundaries between private and public, closeness and distance, presence and absence. Research on digital intimacy in Asia shows that digital technology also reshapes family, marital, friendship, and personal relationships through practices of boundary-making and the creation of intimate spaces within digital domains (Niranjana & Lee, 2022). Likewise, studies of platformed intimacy demonstrate that emotional attachment in social media cannot be separated from platform infrastructures that simultaneously enable and constrain how individuals relate to one another, present themselves, and obtain recognition (Soronen & Koivunen, 2022).

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This perspective is increasingly relevant to a field of literary study now commonly described as transnational literature. Literary studies have shifted attention away from works situated solely within national frameworks toward works that display mobility, exchange, identity, migration, diaspora, globalization, and decolonization. Transnational literature needs to be understood through various forms of boundary crossing, including mobility, travel, migration, cultural exchange, identity, and linguistic and aesthetic devices that enable literary works to move beyond national frameworks (Jay, 2020). Studies of transnational digital intimacy, for example, show that digital technology enables subjects experiencing cross-border mobility to manage emotional closeness, a sense of home, and affective uncertainty through smartphones and social media (Patterson & Leurs, 2020).

Lala Bohang's The Book of Forbidden Feelings (*TBoFF*) is one work through which these issues can be read productively. First published in 2016, the book brings together English-language verbal texts and visual illustrations created by the author herself. This poetry-and-visual work shows how personal experience focuses on love, solitude, anxiety, the need for attention, work, family, consumption, technology, mobility, and urban life. In the opening section, "Coming Out of Her Cocoon," human experience is positioned in tension among the past, the future, social expectations, compromise, and the desire to attain personal freedom. Globality in Bohang's work therefore does not simply mean openness to the world; it also involves the need to preserve private space, solitude, and personal autonomy.

Previous studies of *TBoFF* have opened several avenues of interpretation, but they have not directly explained the relationship between intimacy, transnationality, and the formation of subjectivity. Amir (2020), for instance, examines the artistic quality of the illustrations in the book through artistic form and the effectiveness of visual communication. The study finds that Bohang's illustrations employ decorative styles and simple, dynamic forms, and function to strengthen the atmosphere and meaning of the accompanying texts. Other studies of Bohang's works have also begun to address existential issues such as freedom, anxiety, and authenticity.

These studies indicate that the visual, linguistic, and existential dimensions of Bohang's work have received scholarly attention. However, relatively little attention has been given specifically to how intimate and personal experience becomes a medium for the emergence of transnational subjectivity—that is, how subjects experience a world permeated by mobility, technology, global language, urban culture, and the exchange of values. This is consistent with scholarship on the transnationalization of subjectivity, which emphasizes the need to examine how subjects are formed through cross-border relations and broader sociocultural configurations (Engel & Hummrich, 2023).

This study focuses on global intimacy and the formation of the transnational subject in *TBoFF* by Lala Bohang, while reading the verbal text and visual elements as an integrated aesthetic whole. The study aims to identify how intimate experience is constructed as an experience that transcends geographical, cultural, and national boundaries, and to explain how urban life, technology, mobility, consumption, and global language contribute to the formation of the transnational subject in the work.

Intimacy is not understood here conventionally as emotional closeness between two individuals. More than that, it is a social domain in which identity, affect, needs,

values, and power relations are negotiated. Giddens (1992) shows that transformations of modernity have also altered personal relationships, including how individuals understand love, sexuality, commitment, and the self. In modernity, intimate relationships become increasingly connected to individual reflexivity: people do not simply live through relationships but continuously evaluate, negotiate, and shape themselves through them. This view can be extended through Jamieson (1998), who situates intimacy within transformations of personal relationships in modern societies. Intimacy includes experiences of self-disclosure, understanding of others, emotional closeness, and the formation of personal relationships, but such practices are always shaped by broader social conditions.

The concept of intimacy must also be released from a simple dichotomy between private and public space. Wilson (2012) specifically proposes intimacy as an analytical category for understanding transnational processes. In her view, intimate life is connected to social, economic, political, racial, national, and sexual structures, so the relationship between the global and the intimate should not be understood as a relationship between two separate domains. Lowe (2015) likewise provides an important extension of the relationship between intimacy and transnational processes. By reading relations among Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas, Lowe demonstrates that global relations are shaped not only through formal institutions, trade, and colonialism, but also through affective domains and everyday experience.

At least three principal characteristics of intimacy are relevant here. First, intimacy as a relationship, because it involves relations between the self and the other. Second, intimacy as a process of subject negotiation, because closeness is always confronted with the need for autonomy, recognition, and personal boundaries. Third, intimacy as a social space, because it is a personal experience shaped by economic, technological, cultural, and global structures.

Vertovec (2009) defines transnationalism through various ties and interactions connecting individuals and institutions across languages and national contexts. The concept encompasses social, economic, political, cultural, religious, and identity practices that allow social life to operate simultaneously across more than one national context. In literary studies, the development of a transnational perspective shifts attention from literary models centered entirely on the nation-state toward mobility, global circulation, and cultural exchange. The transnational turn, a term associated with Jay (2010), concerns changes in the geographic and cultural frameworks through which literary production and circulation are understood.

Literature is increasingly understood through cross-border relations shaped by colonialism, decolonization, migration, and globalization. Jay (2020) also emphasizes that the transnational is an important principle in literary studies because literary works are in practice produced and circulated within transnational networks. This perspective differs from, yet is related to, the concept of world literature. Damrosch (2003) views world literature as a mode through which works move beyond their original environments. When a work moves from a national context into a global context, it occupies a space between its culture of origin and its receiving cultures. It is shaped by both, but cannot be fully reduced to either. This concept helps explain the position of

Bohang's work, which uses English and visual aesthetics to articulate experiences rooted in a national space while also circulating within transnational communication.

Sufian and Abdul Manaf (2023), in their study of Zia Haider Rahman's In the Light of What We Know, show how transnational subjectivity can be formed through migration, exile, translocality, and diverse cultural contexts. Their study provides an important basis for literary readings that connect transnationality with subject formation. Transnationality must also be approached critically so that it does not create a new dichotomy between the local and the global. Appadurai (1996) describes globalization as a condition characterized by flows of people, media, technology, ideology, and commodities moving across social spaces. Such flows produce configurations of life that can no longer be explained solely through geographical or national boundaries.

In the context of *TBoFF*, this framework allows technology, travel, consumption, media, and English to be read as parts of the flows shaping the subject's experience. Transnationality does not necessarily appear as a narrative of travel between countries; it may also emerge through objects, imagination, language, habits, and technologies that have become part of everyday life. Dobson, Carah, and Robards (2018) use the concept of digital intimate publics to explain how practices that are personal in nature can take place within digital public spaces.

The concept of digital intimacy in this context helps explain how digital technology enters networks of affect and self-formation. Emotion cannot be separated from social structures. Ahmed (2004), for example, understands emotions not simply as psychological states experienced by individuals, but as something that circulates among bodies, objects, signs, and social relations. Emotions have social consequences because they become attached to particular objects, connect subjects with others, and shape orientations toward the world.

Affect also helps explain a paradox that appears across these markers. The subject may desire closeness but also need solitude; need attention while simultaneously maintaining autonomy; remain connected through technology while feeling alienated; desire success while questioning the demand to always succeed. These patterns show that subjectivity is not a stable entity but is formed through continually changing affective orientations toward people, objects, spaces, and norms.

METHOD

This study focuses on the interpretation of texts, the representation of experience, and the relationship between textual and visual elements and their sociocultural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The primary data source is *TBoFF*, particularly its verbal texts and illustrations. The data consist of words, phrases, sentences, themes, visual objects, and textual-visual relationships that represent intimacy, affect, solitude, technology, consumption, urbanity, mobility, and boundary crossing.

Data were collected through intensive reading, note-taking, and thematic coding (Miles et al., 2014). Theme development followed the principles of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), particularly in identifying recurring patterns of meaning in the data. The interpretation was then contextualized through concepts of

intimacy, transnationality, affect, digitality, and urbanity. Data trustworthiness was maintained through sustained reading, consistency checks between textual and visual data, and theoretical triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The analysis was conducted reflexively so that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than imposing theoretical categories on the text.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

TBoFF presents intimate experience not as something separate from social life. Intimacy is constructed as a space in which the subject encounters norms, technology, mobility, and various forms of global interconnectedness. At least three interconnected patterns can be identified: (1) intimacy as a negotiation between closeness and personal autonomy, (2) the loosening of territorial boundaries through urbanity, technology, consumption, and mobility, and (3) the formation of transnational subjectivity through everyday experience.

The first pattern appears through representations of love, affect, attention, solitude, and vulnerability. The opening section, entitled "Coming Out of Her Cocoon," presents a subject confronting social expectations, compromise, the judgment of others, and the desire to attain personal freedom. The relationship with a loved one is likewise represented as an experience that opens the self to closeness as well as pain. The ambivalence is simultaneous: closeness produces connection while also increasing vulnerability and the need to maintain personal boundaries.

The second pattern can be seen in the expansion of the objects and spaces that enter intimate experience. Partners, solitude, work, children, friends, travel abroad, fast internet connection, and the iPhone are placed within a single affective network. Elsewhere, gadgets, money, work, health, sex, selfie culture, exercise, the body, urban toys, shoes, travel, and fame appear as objects of the subject's obsession. Intimacy therefore makes the boundaries between humans and objects, private and public, domestic and urban, and local and global increasingly permeable.

The third pattern emerges as a consequence of this loosening of boundaries. The use of English, representations of travel abroad, digital technology, consumer culture, urban life, and social networks show a subject interacting with spaces and values that do not originate entirely within a single national context. Yet this transnationality is not represented linearly as openness without conflict. The desire for a small house far from the city, for example, appears alongside representations of technology, mobility, and urban life. The transnational subject in the work is therefore formed through negotiation between global connectedness and the need for personal space.

Tabel 1. Interconnected Patterns in *TBoFF*

Analytical focus	Indicators	Findings
Intimacy and subjectivity	Love, affect, attention, solitude, vulnerability, social expectations	Intimacy becomes a space for negotiating the need for closeness, recognition, freedom, and personal autonomy.
Loosening of territorial boundaries	Internet, iPhone, selfie, followers, gadgets, consumption, work, travel, urbanity	Intimate space expands beyond interpersonal relationships to include technology, objects, consumption, mobility, and urban space.
Transnational subjectivity	English, travel abroad, global technology, urban culture, consumption, connectivity	The subject is shaped by cultural and material flows that transcend national boundaries without entirely losing an orientation toward domestic space.
Ambivalence of globality	Connectivity ↔ solitude; mobility ↔ home; freedom ↔ norms; intimacy ↔ vulnerability	Transnationality appears as a process of negotiation rather than a total detachment from locality or territorial boundaries.

Discussion

Intimacy as Negotiation

TBoFF constructs intimacy through tension between the desire for closeness and the need to maintain personal boundaries. This pattern appears from the section "Coming Out of Her Cocoon" (p. 7). The cocoon is used by Mia Maria in her introductory text as a metaphor for the "restraint" that one must, willingly or unwillingly, undergo in order to achieve a form of "liberation," namely, an honest acceptance of oneself and one's situation. Yet freedom is not a final destination, because afterward the subject continues to negotiate with things outside the self, including society. This reading can be explained through Giddens (1992), who views modern intimacy as part of a process of self-reflexivity. Personal relationships in modernity are not merely places where individuals seek closeness; they are also spaces in which identity is continuously constructed and evaluated.

Jamieson (1998) emphasizes that intimacy includes practices of openness, understanding, and closeness, but such practices cannot be separated from the social conditions in which relationships take place. Accordingly, the vulnerability represented in Bohang's book should not be understood merely as an individual psychological issue. Vulnerability emerges because openness to others simultaneously means opening the possibility of being judged, accepted, rejected, or hurt. Ahmed's (2004) affect perspective helps clarify this mechanism. Feelings do not reside entirely "inside" the individual; they move among subjects, objects, and social environments. Love, fear, anxiety, and the need for attention in Bohang's book should therefore be understood as affective relations connecting the subject to the world.

This finding relates to recent research on Bohang's trilogy, which identifies representations of angst, freedom, authenticity, and bad faith through a Sartrean framework (Sekartaji et al., 2026). That study positions Bohang's work as a

representation of individuals confronting uncertainty and the burden of personal choice. When situated within intimacy as negotiation, anxiety and personal choice do not stop at the existential level; they are also connected to changing configurations of intimacy. The subject experiences freedom not in a vacuum, but within an increasingly broad network of social and material relations. The "cocoon" can therefore be interpreted as a metaphor for the boundary of subjectivity. Leaving the cocoon does not mean eliminating all boundaries, but changing how the subject negotiates them. This is what makes intimacy important to a transnational reading: as subjects become increasingly connected to people, objects, technologies, and different spaces, the process of protecting and opening the self becomes more complex.

From Personal Relations to Urban-Digital Networks

The intimate objects in Bohang's work extend beyond human relationships. One of the most significant data clusters places partners alongside solitude, work, idealism, children, friends, travel abroad, fast internet connection, and the iPhone (p. 25) within a single affective sequence. Conceptually, this arrangement blurs the boundaries between humans and objects, local and global, and private life and technology. If intimacy is conventionally imagined as an "I-and-you" relationship, *TBoFF* shows that the partner is one center of connection but not the only one. Solitude itself has affective value; work becomes part of personal life; children and friends become part of a network of care; even the internet and iPhone acquire a position as objects of attachment. Intimacy in the work therefore does not take the form of a single relational line, but of a network connecting the subject with people, activities, objects, and spaces.

Patterson and Leurs (2020), for example, show that digital technology becomes part of how subjects experiencing transnational mobility manage emotional connectedness and a sense of belonging. Digital practices do not merely maintain existing relationships; they also help subjects negotiate emotional uncertainty produced by movement across spaces. Digital technology can thus function as an infrastructure of intimacy. The text, however, offers a somewhat different configuration. The book does not merely depict technology as a tool for connecting two individuals separated geographically. Fast internet connection and the iPhone appear as part of a list of things that are loved or considered important. Technology has entered the subject's affective environment; it is no longer merely a mediator of relationships but also part of what enables the subject to understand itself.

Recent scholarship on digital intimacy strengthens this reading. Niranjana and Lukose (2026) situate digital intimacy in relation to family, education, work, sexuality, and romance within digitally mediated urban Asian landscapes. They emphasize that intimacy, digitality, and subjectivity mutually constitute one another rather than functioning as three separate categories. This finding is relevant to Bohang's work because technology in the book appears alongside work, relationships, the body, consumption, and urban life.

This transformation also produces a loosening of the private-public boundary. The presence of selfies, likes, and followers indicates that the need for recognition does not occur entirely within private space. The subject does not seek recognition only from a partner or people close to them, but may orient the self toward a wider audience. In

this context, the selfie can be read as a form of self-presentation connecting the personal body with digital public space. Gilchrist (2026) shows that digitally mediated romantic and intimate practices are connected to the formation and re-formation of the self through fluid and layered representations. The territorial boundaries loosened by technology are therefore not only geographical boundaries, but also boundaries between the self and the audience, the body and digital representation, personal experience and public consumption, and local space and global networks. Intimate life becomes one of the most concrete sites for observing how globalization operates at the level of everyday experience.

Mobility, Consumption, and the Formation of the Transnational Subject

The transnational subject in *TBoFF* is more appropriately understood as a subject living within networks of global flows, consistent with Vertovec's (2009) view of transnationalism as ties and practices connecting individuals with more than one national space. Appadurai (1996), meanwhile, shows that globalization operates through flows of people, technology, media, commodities, and ideas. Applied to *TBoFF*, these perspectives reveal transnationality not as a single experience but as the product of multiple intersecting flows.

The clearest example is the list of various forms of "obsession": home, gadgets, power, domestic life, plants, achievement, money, work, health, sex, organic food, pets, selfies, children, exercise, religion, relationships, minimalism, the body, urban toys, shoes, travel, and fame (p. 96). Structurally, the list mixes domestic life, the body, economics, technology, religion, consumption, and mobility. No single category is fully dominant. This mixture instead reveals that the subject is no longer formed by a single cultural space. Home and children remain important, but at the same time the subject is connected to mobility, gadgets, selfies, urban toys, and fame. The local and the global do not replace one another; they coexist within the same experience.

Within the concept of world literature, works that move through the world undergo changes in their contexts of reading and circulation (Damrosch, 2003). *TBoFF*, for example, uses English as a medium of personal expression, while its author comes from Indonesia and is an Indonesian-language speaker. This contrast creates a representational space that cannot be placed entirely within either the category of "Indonesia" or "the global." Care is therefore needed not to equate the use of English automatically with transnationality. Language is only one indicator within a broader configuration. Jay (2010) argues that the transnational turn in literary studies enables works to be understood through mobility, exchange, diaspora, and cross-border relations. This framework can therefore be extended from physical mobility to symbolic and material mobility. Transnationality can thus occur even when the body itself does not move very far geographically.

Patterson and Leurs (2020) identify a similar paradox in their study of young subjects living with transnational mobility. Digital connectivity makes home-making and co-presence possible, but it can also produce emotional uncertainty. In Bohang's work, this paradox appears in more symbolic form. Travel and global connectivity coexist with the desire for a small space far from the city. Global connectedness therefore does not eliminate the need for home, solitude, or private space. This is important because it

prevents us from understanding transnationality as a condition of being "free from place." Instead, the transnational subject continually negotiates the relationship between connectedness and attachment to place. The small house far from the city can be read as a counter-image to urban-global intensity: as the world becomes increasingly connected, the subject also imagines the possibility of withdrawal.

The Ambivalence of Globality

One of *TBoFF*'s major contributions is the idea that globality is not represented utopically. Technology, travel, consumption, and connectivity do not automatically produce freedom. Instead, they appear together with anxiety, the need for solitude, demands for performativity, and questions about the ideal life. This can be seen in the relationship between solitude and connectivity (p. 25). On the one hand, solitude appears as something important and valued; on the other, digital devices are important for remaining continuously connected. This is the paradox: the subject desires connection but also needs distance; desires connectivity but also needs space for the self.

This paradox resonates with digital intimacy scholarship that treats digital space as an ambivalent arena for self-formation. Research on the digitally intimate everyday in 2026 shows that digital practices enable young women to manage trust, openness, vulnerability, and boundaries through differentiated strategies of platform use. Evans et al. (2026) likewise emphasize that contemporary intimate life unfolds within increasingly blurred public-private spaces as digital technologies, algorithms, and networked culture become normalized. *TBoFF* can be read in this context while retaining its own specificity. Because it takes the form of a poetry-and-illustration book, this ambivalence is conveyed through aesthetic construction.

Amir (2020) demonstrates that Bohang's illustrations have a communicative function and that each illustration forms a relationship with the text accompanying it. Therefore, bodies, domestic spaces, objects, and human figures that appear visually should be treated as part of the work's argument rather than mere decoration. Illustrations depicting domestic spaces, human figures, consumer objects, or particular landscapes can be read together with their accompanying texts to examine how personal space is constructed. The relationship between text and image thus produces two layers of representation: the text articulates feelings and ideas verbally, while the image gives material form to space, bodies, distance, and relations. In this study, their combination strengthens the argument that territorial boundaries are simultaneously geographical, social, and imaginative.

This ambivalence leads to an understanding that the transnational subject is not a subject that has already finished becoming "global." It is a subject that continually negotiates the consequences of global connectivity. It may desire travel and home, connectivity and solitude, attention and autonomy, freedom and security. Transnationality in *TBoFF* can therefore be understood as a process of becoming rather than a completed condition.

Intimacy as a Space for Producing the Transnational Subject

Changes in the configuration of intimacy constitute one mechanism through which the transnational subject is formed. Intimacy provides the space closest to

subjective experience, while transnationality explains the configuration of boundaries that emerges from it. *TBoFF* does not merely speak about "feelings"; it also reveals the social conditions that make certain feelings problematic. When individuals are expected to be successful, productive, attractive, healthy, happy, and constantly engaged in new experiences, feelings such as loneliness, anxiety, the need to withdraw, or the desire for a simpler life may conflict with the image of the ideal subject. Sections of the book that question perfection, achievement, and the demand to remain positive reinforce this reading (see pp. 47 and 138).

Forbidden feelings can be read as a form of affective resistance. Feelings considered incompatible with the ideal subject open a space for reflection on how that subject is formed. The "boundaries" that must be crossed are therefore not merely geographical boundaries, but also norms governing how a person should feel and live. If Amir (2020) reveals the strength of the relationship between text and illustration as an artistic communication system, while recent research highlights anxiety and authenticity as existential concerns, this study places both dimensions within a broader framework: text, illustration, and feeling work together to represent a subject living amid increasingly fluid boundaries.

Reading intimacy and transnationality together shifts the question from "What feelings are represented?" toward "How does a particular intimate experience form a subjectivity that exceeds national boundaries?" The answer lies in the network connecting intimacy, technology, mobility, urbanity, and affect. Within this network, globalization accompanies how subjects love, experience solitude, work, use technology, travel, consume, and imagine home. *TBoFF* can thus be understood as a representation of ambivalent global intimacy. On the one hand, globality expands possibilities for connection; on the other, it creates a need for boundaries. Technology expands closeness but cannot eliminate loneliness. Mobility expands the world but does not remove the need for home. Consumption provides forms of self-expression but also reinforces demands placed upon the ideal subject. It is within these tensions that the transnational subject is formed.

CONCLUSION

The territorial boundaries in Bohang's work do not actually disappear. Geographical boundaries shift into more fluid forms of distinction between local and global, private and public, humans and technology, connectedness and solitude, and self and world. Intimacy becomes the space in which all of these boundaries are negotiated. This explains why the most personal experiences in The Book of Forbidden Feelings can simultaneously be read as transnational experiences. Intimacy in *TBoFF* is a space of negotiation among closeness, vulnerability, recognition, and personal autonomy.

The reading of the book shows that transnational subjectivity is formed through everyday engagement with technological, cultural, and mobility flows, as well as global-universal values that transcend national boundaries. Yet transnationality does not proceed linearly as a process of limitless connectedness. Instead, it is ambivalent because global connection coexists with the need for solitude, autonomy, and personal spaces. In this context, intimacy offers a productive perspective for reading transnationality in contemporary Indonesian literature, because intimate experience is

a space where subjects continuously negotiate their relationships with the self, others, technology, culture, and the wider world. Territorial boundaries in literary works therefore refer not only to geographical or national boundaries manifested through particular languages, but also to social, affective, digital, and symbolic boundaries continuously negotiated in the formation of the subject.

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