



Research Paper

## Healing and Self-Recovery in Nadeem Akbar's *Love Without Borders*

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper seeks to explore the constructions of 'love' in the multi-stranded narrative of Nadeem Akbar's novel Love Without Borders. An initial reading of the novel might lead to the perception that its narratives rest on some of the most commonly stereotyped notions of 'love', primarily of love as a great healer of emotional wounds from painful pasts, and as an irresistible force that transcends all considerations of race, ethnicity, nationality, political tensions and attendant socio-cultural personal boundaries. The conditions of war, diaspora and loss, being common and constant motifs of Afghan - American political relations, form the setting of the novel and dramatise the development of 'love' amongst its main protagonists. As the novel's events unfold and play themselves out, this well-worn trope of 'love' is apparently underscored, being represented as both a healer as well as a destroyer. However, the paper argues that within these seemingly stereotyped notions of 'love', the novel projects a powerful argument against war, through building an idea of 'love' which offers a way out of personal trauma for the protagonists involved, while steering clear of the clichéd notion of love as an antidote to war, which often informs war-related narratives. The paper attempts to analyse the constructions and projections of 'love' in this novel by accessing the conceptual frames offered by transpersonal caring theory, which refers back to the notion of love as an agent which revivifies one's essential humanity, creating a love-ethic which restores and sustains it.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Love, healing, self-recovery, love-ethics, transpersonal caring theory.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Nadeem Akbar's novel *Love Without Borders* presents two separate but intertwined love stories, the narrative energies of which move in opposite directions: the chief protagonists whose relationships form these narratives are Shahnawaz (the expatriate Afghan successful businessman in America), the white American woman Claire, the white American soldier Peter Jenkins and Marriam, a prominent tribal leader's daughter. In alternating chapters which move between New York and Afghanistan's war-torn terrains, the chance encounters which bring these characters face-to-face also lead to a revelation of the ways in which their lives become interconnected.

Shahnawaz's present affluence and stability are haunted by the sadness of a tragic past, in which his parents, wife and baby daughter were murdered by a fellow-Afghan seeking revenge for a perceived wrong. His beloved only younger brother is also lost to him through the latter's decision to become a suicide-bomber to avenge their family's deaths. His present social isolation in the white American corporate world is all the more stark and complex since he carries unendurably poignant memories of his experience of familial love. Peter Jenkins and Claire have had a very ordinary love relationship which was supposed to culminate in marriage once he returned from his Afghan assignment; but during his brief leave back in America when he tries to pick up the threads of his connection with Claire, both realise that his experiences of war have alienated him to the point where he can no longer relate to people who care for him, and Claire cannot any longer recognise the man she had once thought she loved, enough to want marriage with. When he goes back to duty in Afghanistan, both understand that their former relationship cannot be sustained anymore, tacitly releasing each other from any mutually binding moral/ethical obligation.

The chance encounters which happen between Shahnawaz and Claire seem ordinary enough in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of affluent Manhattan. But Claire is drawn to Shahnawaz for reasons she herself barely comprehends; she remarks his dramatic good looks, and his obvious sadness and preoccupied air to her other white male friends, who remain unimpressed. Shahnawaz is attracted to Claire, not just for her blond beauty, but for reasons he too cannot understand. At this stage of their mutual attraction, each seeks out the

other for personal reasons linked with their individual pasts; Shahnawaz to move beyond his unbearably painful and loss-ridden memories, and Claire to get past the unpleasant soured relations with her former fiancé Peter. As their friendship develops, Claire quits her unsatisfying job with a frustrated fault-finding overseer and takes up Shahnawaz's offer of employment in his company, only to be persecuted by a white American male manager. Shahnawaz's timely and tactful intervention, meant to help Claire the employee, ends up nearly ruining their growing intimacy outside the workspace. Added to this, Claire feels frustrated by the fact that Shahnawaz habitually holds back from her, both in sexual terms and in terms of confiding in her entirely. As a white American woman, it takes her a while to understand the inhibitions of Shahnawaz, an expatriate Afghan whose emotional sensibilities (in relation to women particularly) are anchored to traditionally honed notions of family bonds. Shahnawaz also is troubled, in his turn, by the idea that Claire prefers Peter to him for reasons of race, religion, and their previous intimacy. Shahnawaz's selfless love for Claire is such that he even resigns himself to the idea of her possible reunion with Peter. Ultimately, their problems are worked out through the seemingly simple process of talking and listening, with a timorous yet growing mutual trust. Claire's willingness to listen with sympathy and without judgement induces Shahnawaz to come out of his shell and unburden himself of his painful and miserable memories. As she listens to his tale of loss, pain and suffering, Claire begins to heal from her own wounded self. In Levinasian terms of 'love' as an ethical principle, both Claire and Shahnawaz's need to be-for-the-Other is stronger than their need to be-with-each-other; each displays an ethical responsibility towards the other that transcends considerations of the commonly constructed attributes of mutual 'love' such as physical attachment, possessiveness, jealousy and attendant insecurities. It is this selflessness in their mutual relationship, of putting the Other before one's Self, that eventually leads to their happy marriage. Through their love-story, the emotional connection between them develops as a space in which an ideal 'love', free of prejudices of race, colour, nationality, ethnicity, religion and socio-cultural constraints, is actually possible, if worked at with patience and trust; not insignificantly, this love relationship occurs in America, a space onto which such a projection of 'love', in which perfect freedom of every kind can be exercised, is often inscribed.

The chance encounter which prefixes the 'love' relationship between Peter and Marriam is entirely opposite in its impulse: the initial physical attraction is almost entirely one-sided, and related primarily to Peter's need to possess Marriam, regardless of the obvious constraints of race, religion, ethnicity, and political identity positioning which operate here too. As an American soldier detailed by the U.S. government to provide military support to Afghanistan's brief return to a puppet democracy, Peter's encounter with Marriam happens in the context of an accident. A little schoolgirl is hit by a speeding car outside the school in which Marriam works, and Peter carries the child indoors, to be met by Marriam's cool efficiency. The impact of Marriam's strikingly coloured eyes and beautiful face lead Peter to develop an obsessive urgent desire for her. Viewed through the Levinasian conceptualisation of love, this moment of impact does not lead to the development of ethical responsibility for the Other; rather, it engenders a need to-be-with-the Other (contextually, against impossible odds), which takes precedence over any feeling of being-for-the-Other, a conundrum which prefigures a disastrous end even before the relationship takes off. Peter's 'love' is doomed right from the start for two reasons; firstly, the Self-centred nature of his impulse which urges him to ignore (against his better judgement) the obvious socio-cultural and political constraints to such a relationship; secondly, his racial and political identity, together with his talk of 'love' (as if it was a universally uniformly understood emotion) which position him as an enemy Other to Marriam. As far as she is concerned, he represents the bombastic American military presence which had prolonged the miseries of war in Afghanistan, killed her brother and laid her country in ruins.

Notwithstanding her unvarying rejections of his pleading 'love', Peter continues to obsess about the object of his 'love', and after a dramatically violent skirmish with a Taliban faction, he is conveyed to a nursing facility by Marriam in her father's compound in an almost-fatally wounded condition. The relationship that inevitably develops between Marriam and Peter through the happenstance of relative physical proximity can perhaps be best understood through references to Jean Watson's transpersonal caring theory, articulated in her essay "Love and Caring: Ethics of Face and Hand – An Invitation to Return to the Heart and Soul of Nursing and Our Deep Humanity". Marriam's decision to nurse him, against her tribal chieftain father's wishes, and against all traditional protocol, reflects an idea of love posited by Watson in the context of nursing: the idea that such love brings one back to a consciousness of one's own essential humanity, developed through the suffering one may have endured. In Marriam's case, the memory of her brother's death and the horrors of war do not embitter her when it comes to a question of caring for the wounded Peter. It is difficult to realise exactly at what point Marriam's feelings towards Peter reciprocate 'love' (as he understood it), and whether such a thing happened at all. When chastised by her father for talking to Peter at his bedside, she retires humbly, but not before reminding her father that Peter too was just another suffering human being like anybody else, even if he was a political enemy. In her essay Watson proposes that nursing as a vocation ought to enable us to seek out "what Wittgenstein called "reminders" – reminders of what we already know at some deep human, experiential level, but continually pass over in our day-to-day living. ... (and) It seems the task of nursing and health and

healing is related to the very nature of our shared humanity” (197). At this stage of their relationship, Marriam’s compassionate care of Peter’s comfort towards healing can perhaps be characterised as akin to the love/ethical responsibility towards a stranger-Other, which is identified in Levinasian thought as the highest form of human love. Peter’s own position (wounded and later, when healed) is similar to that of the Barthesian “wretched” lover, who knows that the Object of his love can never be aspired to, let alone realised. The only point at which Peter’s ‘love’ for Marriam transcends its characteristic Self-centredness is when their planned elopement ends in a gunfight, an overturned getaway vehicle and the accidental shooting of Marriam by her father’s men. As the stunned and injured Marriam moans by the roadside, Peter reaches out to grasp her hand in the dark: “Shhh, my love... not a sound ... Be still. I love you.” (Akbar 197). Though he still refers to Marriam as *his* love, she understands, even in extremis, that gesture, and immediately responds to his touch by grasping his hand. Peter’s gesture and Marriam’s response to it can be viewed through a conceptual framework in Watson’s essay, in which she invokes Danish philosopher Knud Logstrup’s views on love which according to her are similar to those of Levinas. Watson points out that Logstrup’s metaphor of “Hand” reminds us that “holding another person’s life in one’s hand, endows this metaphor with a certain emotional power ... that we have the power to determine the direction of something in another person’s life ... we’re to a large extent inescapably dependent upon one another ... we are mutually and in a most immediate sense in one another’s power” (198-199). Finally, this is what binds Marriam and Peter, though their relationship is doomed through capture and the eventual death of Marriam.

Peter’s position as a “wretched” lover, of which he is painfully self-aware, deteriorates further as he is identified by Malik Wajahat (Marriam’s father) as his daughter’s killer and ostracised from her funeral ceremony, which Peter begs to be allowed to attend. While he is refused this, Marriam’s father does not lose sight of what his daughter had said to him about one’s essential humanity and makes allowances for Peter’s feelings for his daughter by granting him a view of her face before burial. As a hostage American soldier in enemy territory, Peter’s vulnerability renders him a “borderless” body (Nayar 190), which could have been targeted as a site of political, ideological and personal hatred. Given that Malik Wajahat was treading a minefield of conflicting interests (he was in negotiations with both the Taliban as well as the American military forces for a peaceful exchange of hostages, in which Peter was a pawn) and that Afghan tradition dictated an honour killing of the man who had dared lead his daughter into an act of love jihad, his gesture of forgiveness towards Peter (which ultimately translates to his peaceful release) honours the memory of what had been Marriam’s ‘love’. In doing this, his own essential humanity is elevated to an unlooked-for ethical plane of its own. In this sense, Malik Wajahat’s gesture of peace transcends the borders that Peter had violated, and becomes a symbol of “sublime borderlessness” (Nayar 190), in the very opposite sense to which this notion was constructed in post 9/11 white American culture.

Relieved from active duty, haunted by the memory of his lost love, and beset with involved war-related guilt, Peter returns to America with no hope of resuscitating his life again. It is in his reluctant acquiescence to prescribed counselling for post-traumatic stress disorder that he meets Luke (the brother officer who had lost both legs to an IED in Afghanistan filling in for Peter on an assignment). Luke has taken up PTSD counselling and found some sense of balance and wholeness in attempting to help others heal and recover their selves, and this fact implies an opening up of a new world of possibilities to Peter. Peter realises that the way forward might be to move from his own miserable Self, towards the Other, in whatever form it came.

## II. CONCLUSION

When the two narrative strands of the novel are viewed through the frames of transpersonal caring theory, it is observable that the love relationships in each story go in opposing directions. The Shahnawaz-Claire relationship grows against almost impossible odds into a sustainable bond, mainly because each is ready to sacrifice personal satisfaction for the other’s sake. The Peter-Marriam relationship is doomed from the start, not just because of the unlikely contextual circumstances, but because Peter’s need to possess Marriam overrides all other considerations. There is no impulse to move away from self-actuated desire, and thus Marriam’s sacrifice goes in vain. The novel however celebrates the idea of love by juxtaposing selflessness with the often-ascribed quality of ‘borderlessness’ associated with the construct of ‘true love’.

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