

Tracing The Main Characters' Wounds and Healing in S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z*

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Abstract:

This study explores the psychological conflicts of the main character, Zayneb, in S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z* (2019) and how her relationship with Adam acts as a healing mechanism. Through a descriptive qualitative analysis supported by psychoanalytic concepts, the study attempts to analyze the psychological and traumatic experiences and the emotional weaknesses of the characters. Zayneb's psychological pain primarily results from her experience of discrimination and for Adam, it's his experience of illness; however, the source of emotional healing and acceptance for both of them is the love they share. The novel indicates that love, apart from the romantic trope, acts as a means of emotional restoration and therapeutic change. This study highlights the healing power of emotional bonds and encourages the novel's contribution to discussions around self-healing and identity in young adult fiction in contemporary literature.

Keywords: Trauma, Love, Healing.

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini mengkaji konflik psikologis tokoh utama yaitu Zayneb dalam *Love from A to Z* (2019) karya S.K. Ali, dan bagaimana cintanya dengan Adam menjadi mekanisme penyembuhan. Melalui analisis kualitatif deskriptif yang didukung oleh konsep-konsep psikoanalitik, penelitian ini mencoba menganalisis pengalaman psikologis dan traumatis para tokoh serta kerentanan emosional mereka. Rasa sakit psikologis yang dialami Zayneb terutama berasal dari pengalaman diskriminasi terhadapnya, sementara bagi Adam, rasa sakit tersebut merupakan akibat dari pengalaman sakitnya; namun, sumber penyembuhan dan penerimaan emosional bagi keduanya adalah cinta yang mereka bagi. Novel ini menunjukkan bahwa cinta, terlepas dari klise romantisnya, bertindak sebagai sarana pemulihan emosional dan perubahan terapeutik. Penelitian ini mengungkap kekuatan penyembuhan ikatan emosional dan mendorong kontribusi novel ini terhadap diskusi tentang penyembuhan diri dan identitas dalam fiksi dewasa muda dalam sastra kontemporer.

Kata Kunci: Trauma, Cinta, Penyembuhan.

INTRODUCTION

In literature, we examine various works that investigate human creativity, feelings, and thoughts. The term literature is most fitting when we confine it to the realm of artistic expression, specifically imaginative literature. According to Klarer (2004), "Literature is



referred to as the entirety of written expression, with the restriction that not every written document can be categorized as literature in the more exact sense of the word. However, literature is not just facts on paper; literature is not just the real events, though they may take place in life. Literature can create its own world as a product of the unlimited imagination (Wellek and Warren, 1949). It is usually written based on the author's imagination or experience in order to be able to create limitless new experiences for the readers. In this analysis, the researcher chooses a novel to be analyzed. Analyzing a novel involves examining various components to gain a deeper understanding of its structure, themes, characters, and more. The researcher chose a literary work, which is a novel entitled *Love from A to Z*, to be analyzed in this paper.

S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z* is a contemporary romance novel that discusses both the psychological and emotional journeys of its protagonists through the lens of human relationships. The story centers on Zayneb, a young Muslimah who believes passionately in social justice, and Adam, a young man whose struggles by multiple sclerosis shape his life. The story takes place in the stunning city of Doha, Qatar, where the two characters find ways not only to cope with their personal challenges, Zayneb's emotional racism scars and Adam's anxiety with his disease, but to connect on a deeper level. Zayneb and Adam's relationship is a remarkable example of the healing process, where love and compassion become a positive emotional experience. This illustrates how, in this instance, the love relationship positive emotional experience restoring one's inner world, fortifying a fragile sense of self, and revive hope.

The novel *Love from A to Z* by S.K. Ali has been extensively studied over the past few years in the context of social and cultural studies. Zayneb's experiences of Islamophobia and Adam's struggle with illness are the bases for the researcher's choice of this literary work in the context of their inner and emotional growth. The novel, based on object relations theory, can be interpreted as illustrating how prejudice and personal suffering destabilize the sense of self, while love and meaningful attachments heal and consolidate it. By focusing on the redemptive possibility of human connection, *Love from A to Z* is not only a cultural critique of discrimination and stereotyping, but a psychological novel that gestures toward the power of empathy and attachment to heal inner wounds.

Research Problem:

1. How does Zayneb experience the impact of Islamophobia in *Love from A to Z*?
2. How does Zayneb find healing through her relationship with Adam?



Problem Significance:

This study is significant as it explores of how love can be a healing agent in the novel *Love from A to Z* by S. K. Ali, aiding characters Zayneb and Adam in recovering from their pasts and reaching inner harmony. Using psychoanalytic theory as a framework, this study uncovers the ways in which emotional bonding and empathy as the psychological instruments for the healing journey, which also highlights the importance of the unconscious processes in the cure. The discoveries make a difference to the field of literary studies by depicting love not only as a romantic theme but as a vehicle for emotional rejuvenation, thus, giving plentiful insights about the ways that empathy and compassion can rally the human spirit, both in fiction and in reality.

Research Gap:

Previous studies on S.K. Ali's *Love from A to Z*, have focused mainly on social and cultural issues, particularly the topics of Islamophobia and identity, whereas the psychological side of the characters has been less investigated. Although these studies depict the characters' external conflicts, they do not explain how love is used as a tool to heal and accept oneself by Zayneb and Adam. This gap arises from the absence of psychoanalytic interpretations that examine the unconscious processes behind the characters' emotional recovery from the unconscious perspective. Therefore, this study intends to bridge the gap by employing psychoanalytic theory to suggest that love, as a therapeutic agent, enables the characters to face their traumas and attain psychological integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some studies examined S.K. Ali *Love from A to Z* in various perspectives with the primary consideration being the social and cultural themes of the novel. In her thesis entitled "An Analysis of Plot and Main Character in *Love from A to Z* Novel by S.K. Ali" by Li Izza Diana Manzil (2023), has studied the plot and characterization in the novel. Her work was able to trace the plot and show the transformation of behavior of the protagonist. Nevertheless, it mostly concentrated on the exterior character development and plot constructions without exploring the psychological motives and the inner world of the characters. In that way, although the study is a contribution to the knowledge of the narrative technique, it does not have the psychological aspect, which can define the inner struggles and recovery of the characters.



Similarly, Khikmatus Shoumi and Much. Khoiri (2022) In their journal article, "Islamophobia in S.K. Ali *Love from A to Z*", covered the topic of the role of Islamophobia as a cultural form of racism in the novel and how Zayneb as a Muslim woman copes with it. They applied the minority identity formation model suggested by Atkinson et al. to examine the opposition of Zayneb to discrimination. The work contributes a desirable understanding to the sociocultural background of the novel and the reflection of Muslim identity, however, the psychological impact of Islamophobia on the characters is absent. The emphasis is made on the outer oppression and not on the inner trauma and coping strategies that influence the emotional process of Zayneb.

Despite these contributions, there is still no particular analysis that uses the psychoanalytic theory in the study of S.K. Ali on *Love from A to Z* to analyze love as a process of therapy. The causality of the relationship between Zayneb and Adam as a kind of healing of trauma and alienation to oneself has not been yet investigated by previous studies. Hence, this study attempts to address this gap by using a psychoanalytic approach to examine the novel focusing on the effect of love in helping the two characters cope with their pain, their unconscious struggles and emotional balance.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design:

This study used the qualitative design as a descriptive approach because it provides a better insight into the psychological aspects that are presented in the novel *Love from A to Z* by S.K. Ali. Qualitative method was adopted due to the nature of the research which concentrated on the meanings, emotions, and psychological experiences but not numerical data. The central theme of this study was the protagonist in the novel, Zayneb, whose experiences in terms of inner Islamophobias and her recovery through love became the central point of the discussion. This study intended to understand the role of love as a form of therapy that could allow both Zayneb and Adam to overcome trauma and be accepting of themselves.

Research Instruments:

The main research instrument in this study was the researcher herself, which served as the primary tool of qualitative research to interpret, select, and analyze the data. In order to facilitate the analysis, the researcher applied textual documentation methods, that is, she concentrated on words, dialogues, and narrative descriptions that appeared in



the novel. The researcher conducted data triangulation in order to assure the validity and reliability by comparing the results of primary text with the secondary data, which included books, thesis, and journal articles and other academic articles that focused on psychoanalytic theory, object relations and Islamophobia studies.

Research Procedure:

This study was conducted through systematic steps. First, the researcher chose and read *Love from A to Z* intensively to get the relevant passages that present the experiences of trauma, emotional struggle, and healing of love. Second, the data were categorized based on psychoanalytic constructs that included defense mechanisms, object relations and emotional healing. Third, the researcher gathered secondary data and examined it to reinforce the theoretical framework and give wider contextual knowledge. Lastly, the textual data was interpreted using content analysis, the recurrent patterns, themes, and meanings that are associated with the psychological impact of Islamophobia and the significance of love as a source of treatment were examined.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Zayneb's experience of the impact of Islamophobia.

In the novel, Zayneb was a victim of social criticism at school:

“Then, two years ago ... I get angry for the right reasons. So I embraced my anger. I was the angry one. Though, *Marvels and Oddities*, the right reasons got me suspended from school yesterday.” (*Love from A to Z*, p. 10-11)

Zayneb's anger with injustice being a punishment of suspension that demonstrates the way these social systems interpret her rightful protest as a scandal. From the perspective of psychoanalysis, this external identification gets internalized, thus influencing her personality to be “the angry one” (Freud, 1923/2018). Besides, this shows how the criticism of the society in which Zayneb lives leads to the unfairly stigmatizes of her identity as a Muslim; hence, her protest turning into a cause of punishment.

Zayneb also firmly asserts that Islamophobia does not always take the form of physical attacks, but manifests as persistent micro-aggressions:

“What riles me is that people think Islamophobia is these little or big acts of violence... No, there's the other kind too, and it's a more prevalent kind: the slow, steady barrage of tiny acts of prejudice, these your-people-are-

trash lightsaber cuts that tear and peel strips off your soul until you can't feel your numbed heart any longer." (*Love from A to Z*, p. 17-18)

When Zayneb explains Islamophobia as "lightsaber cuts," she metaphorically depicts that microaggressions are minor but frequent assaults that affect her in such a way that she feels that she doesn't belong. Through this illustration, we can understand how ongoing discrimination can cause profound pain in a person's psyche, even if it is non-violent.

Additionally, Mr. Fencer also links anger to terrorism and genocide, and as Zayneb has been "angry" with the class, she takes the blow inside.

"Fencer talked to the class about rage and how much of a destructive emotion it is. And how rage is the root of a lot of world problems, namely terrorism and genocide, and how he wanted to apologize to everyone for how rage had disrupted the class yesterday.

I tapped my laptop keyboard furiously: So I'm terrorism and genocide?" (*Love from A to Z*, p. 43)

Mr. Fencer, in his class, associates anger with terrorism and genocide, and since Zayneb has already been classified as "angry," she types in response, "So I am terrorism and genocide?" This scene shows the process of how stereotypes from one rage to another, in which Zayneb is still seen as an angry person, hence she finds herself dehumanized, and prejudice is shown to have a negative impact on her self-esteem.

These quotes provide compelling evidence that Zayneb experienced the tangible impacts of Islamophobia. In the first quote, she emphasizes that Islamophobia is not just physical violence, but also manifests itself in repeated microaggressions. She talks about these small but relentless assaults as "lightsaber wounds" which gradually consume her soul, thereby, intimating the indelible psychological impact of the solitude, deep emotional scars, and low self-esteem that resulted from the experience. Contrarily, in the second statement, Zayneb's incidents at school exemplify how her wrath against unfairness eventually led to bad stereotypes and thus, her suspension. Besides that, Mr. Fencer compares rage to terrorism and genocide and since Zayneb has been called "angry" already, she takes the hit personally, writes in anger: "So I'm terrorism and genocide?" This event is a significant example of Islamophobia caused by stereotyping and biased associations which depict her as one who is aggressive and dangerous while she is actually the one who has been silenced and hence, she is among the victims of the double standard. Moreover, the moment illustrates how the Zayneb's rage is confined and interpreted as violent and threatening, thus, leaving her stripped of her humanity and

treated as a criminal for asserting, at the same time, confirming that prejudice contributes to the disintegration of her identity.

Zayneb's relationship with Adam.

From Adam's point of view, it demonstrates Zayneb's involvement in providing a cure through her action. Through her research on MS and the uncovering of resource groups, she is giving love, hope, and support to others.

"I've found some! I was researching MS treatments and therapy methods, and I found those forums. I'll send you links. Then we can see if there's some sort of support group right here in Doha."

"You researched MS?" I turned to her. Completely to her.

"Yeah? There's so much information! Hopeful information, Adam." She peered at me to make sure I saw how serious she was, enthusiasm taking over her face as she leaned forward in her eagerness to communicate her excitement. "You don't have to be alone."

Hope-she was trying to give me hope.

She was trying to light the way forward with hope. Amazing. To think I'd not been alone.

That she'd been thinking ahead for me too. (*Love from A to Z*, p. 251)

Adam, in this passage, comes to understand that Zayneb has been searching for information on multiple sclerosis treatment and support groups for him, not only providing the help he needs but also offering the emotional support: "You don't have to be alone." Her love is a reflection of how love can become a source of healing, as Zayneb turns her pain into understanding and hope for Adam. Through her "the way forward with hope," she becomes a safe haven that is both mutually comforting, demonstrating that their bond is not one-sided but a shared experience of love, strength, and healing.

Also, in the narrative, Zayneb and Adam's relationship is depicted as changing their lives through a genuine and naturally developing connection: One instance that vividly illustrates this is Zayneb's reflection:

"And then there are those who see the world as huge... huge enough to include vast differences... being the strongest connection between us all... Adam and Zayneb were on a course to becoming the third type of people. And they were doing it together." (*Love from A to Z*, p. 294)

Before meeting Adam, Zayneb often felt angry and isolated due to experiences with Islamophobia that left her viewed as "different" and unwelcome. However, through Adam's mentoring, she found a safe space to see differences not as a source of pain, but



as a force that unites. Adam's love and support helped rebuild a positive outlook on herself and the world, allowing Zayneb to experience emotional healing through their time together. Through Adam, she discovers that she can see differences in a new way, not as isolation but as unity, which shifts her perspective. This reflects Freud's (1930/2005) concept that compassion empowers the ego to overcome its wounds and thus become more connected to the world.

At the end of the story, Zayneb reflects on her self-image:

"I was okay seeing things through my own eyes. Not defensively, the way people who hate saw me. I was done with that.
I needed to be done with that now that I was starting law school in the fall. I would be studying the only thing I wanted to know the most about: human rights. For everyone. ---
Beside me, Adam straightened up after saying his own duas, and I glanced at his eyes, glittery with tears.
There was no one around, just us two in this desolate location, so I sank into him, and he stretched his arms to engulf me, his kisses covering my own tears." (*Love from A to Z*, p.290)

In this passage, Zayneb recognizes herself not through the eyes of those who hate her but by accepting her own character, indicating the evolution of her being and the recovery from the damage caused by Islamophobia. On the other hand, her sacred instant of prayer and tears with Adam exemplifies how their love sustains her and makes her strong, thereby creating a safe place where she feels comforted. Individually and collectively, these factors attest that Zayneb's connection with Adam is her support system, as it enables her to overcome by inculcating self-acceptance, strength, and a bright future.

CONCLUSION

Love from A to Z by S.K. Ali deals with the traumas caused by anti-Muslim hate, and the healing power of love in Zayneb's life is depicted in the character arc of Zayneb. The story of how she was suspended from school, continuously faced microaggressions, and was stereotyped by the people in authority to the extent of intrusion of prejudice into her inner world and resulting rage and feeling estranged and disconnected from her own self, reveals how deeply resentment affects her psyche. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, these interactions with the world depict negative "object relations", situations in which the hostility of the external world is internalized and, thus, characterizes her identity and her self-esteem (Klein, 1946; Said, 1978). However, Zayneb's bond with Adam becomes the necessary emotional support for the recovery of her painful self-image. Romantic



gestures, such as Zayneb giving Adam the will to live when he is dying, and Adam giving her love and support, become life-changing. Their relationship becomes the source of mutual recovery; thus, it enables Zayneb to view her anger from a different angle, accept differences as a way of connecting with others and regain her self-confidence. Psychoanalytically, love is charged with the roles of an enabling milieu, assisting her in the resolution of the inner struggles, the successful assimilation of the traumatic experiences, and the production of the ground of personality with the quality of survivability (Winnicott, 1965; Mitchell, 1988). Towards the end of the story, Zayneb's self-awareness is no longer dependent on the eyes of bigotry but rather on self-appreciation and goal, thereby, proving that love is a platform for the correction of the psychological wounds of discrimination (Ahmed, 2014).

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