

Friend or Foe? Re-visioning Friendships Beyond Borders

Abstract: Destruction is transnational: homes, places of worship, healing, and community are annihilated and the landscapes of countries are altered. Meanwhile, civilians are left to grapple with their new realities. However, the attention afforded to these disasters varies depending on factors of race, ethnicity, creed, and nationality—the ties that are held dear are the very bonds that determine friends from foes. In most cases, however, news of violence is met by indifference. Individuals are unable to empathize with strangers whose lives are being shattered. This paper analyzes a way forward: the road to empathy is filled with re-visioning the friendships that we forge. How is empathy formed for those who are long-gone, or for those whose faces one cannot see? How can friendship help bridge this gap? An ethical turn to analyzing friendships that can forge connections around the world requires a “re-visioning” of what it means to be a witness to another’s distress.

In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Kelly Oliver uses ‘vision’ to dismantle the structures upon which subjectivities and witnessing are built. Vision is the result of a “process of relationships between bodies in the world, between images, traditions, institutions, laws, myths” (222); it is a connection formed through circulating images, traditions, institutions, laws, and myths that results in a “positive vision”; and it is a key factor in transforming what we consider to be recognition and subjectivity (223). The need to dominate others who “lay always on the other side” becomes an illusion once it is understood that subjects are *not* separated from the world (222). This positive vision, a vision devoid of the need to dominate, reconstructs a positive *recognition* that is not based on the need to control others. Thus, recognizing others does not have to result in the need to create labels and groups that render others subordinate. This is

witnessing beyond recognition: where vision is a circulation of “energy through connections ...[that] allow[s] us to imagine our fundamental dependence on each other” (223). This results in an alternative view of subjectivity: one that is the result of a “process of witnessing that connects us through the tissues of language and gesture” (223). Here we can imagine a new basis for friendship across borders: a connection through tissues of language (and, when language fails, gestures). Subjectivity, especially through friendship, is the process of “addressing oneself to others, of responding to the address from others” (223).

This paper analyzes Atiq Rahimi’s novel *Earth and Ashes* (1999/trans. 2002) and argues that the friendships cultivated in this text, through methods of syntax and plot, offer friendships as a way of living life through trauma. The text narrates the story of a grandfather, Dastaguir, on the way to tell his son, Murad, of the destruction of their village. He undertakes this journey with the only other survivor of his family: his grandson, Yassin. The fleeting relations Dastaguir makes along his journey enable him to gain closure for his past, acceptance of his future, and strength for his present conditions. The text is mediated through the second person singular “you”—an ambiguous “you” which compels the reader to witness Afghanistan through the eyes of a civilian who has lost his family and his home. This view through another’s eyes pushes Dastaguir and the narrative’s “you” to conjoin in this tale of destruction and death. The only salvation comes from friendships that allow for Dastaguir to continue his journey both physically and emotionally. The physical journey is his trek across war-torn Afghan lands, while the emotional journey comprises the transit through the dreams, hallucinations, and nightmares of death and destruction until Dastaguir is able to find solace.

Michel Foucault in “Friendship as a Way of Life” discusses how friendships can cultivate alternative knowledge and futures. Friendships allow for the elaboration of the self and the

transgression of norms that are limiting and cultures that dictate an individual's sense of self and reality. According to Foucault, "A way of life can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized. It seems to be that a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics" (138). Norms of society and culture dictate that friendship be granted to those who have a similar sense of ethnic-national ties. However, these norms must be dismantled for one to ethically consider one's position in relation to witnessing transnational crises almost daily. From wars to genocides to ethnic cleansing, some part of the world is always in shambles while the rest of the world watches. Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* bridges that gap for readers and signals the need for a new type of friendship, one based on recognizing the differences that can be used as a bridge towards each other rather than a tool to separate one from the other. The novel accomplishes this by stimulating friendships between Dastaguir and those he encounters on his journey. These are individuals who connect him, and the reader, to past literary traditions, to those who have passed away, and to the possibility of an altered future. These vehicles come in the form of the narrative mediated by a shopkeeper (Mirza Qadir), the truck driver (Shahmurad), and the second-person singular "you."

Rahimi has been situated by other scholars as one of the many Afghan writers who have created works that engage "dynamically with [Afghan] history and society" (Kingsbury 638) while in exile. In *Earth and Ashes*, he weaves a tale of travel in the wake of destruction. Rahimi states that the purpose behind using a second-person narration is to portray the ways in which Dastaguir is alone to the point that he has also been removed from himself. The purpose of the "you" also reflects the fragmented consciousness caused by trauma that Cathy Caruth outlines in her work. For Caruth, trauma is an event that fragments consciousness—this is evident in the

distance between, on the one hand, Dastaguir as the narrator operating through a second-person singular “you,” and, on the other hand, Dastaguir the character. Thus, Dastaguir is alienated and removed from himself. The “you” also operates to dismantle the superior position of the reader—a position which is built on the idea of witnessing the narrative of another and having access to their stories. However, by encountering Dastaguir and the war-torn nation through the perspective of an authoritative “you” that reflects Dastaguir’s position to the reader, any distance to the narrative, or prior knowledge about the characters, their stories, and Afghanistan, is stripped away from the reader.

The opening pages set the tone for the reader as Dastaguir appears to be speaking to himself through the vehicle of the narrator as “you”: “What is this Dastaguir? Moments ago your heart was heavy. You wanted to talk to anyone about anything” (Rahimi 19). The narration bridges the gap between a distant reader and the characters: the reader is compelled to feel the emotions and the story of Dastaguir. This solidarity, a connection between the reader and the narrator, allows for a glimpse into the displaced Dastaguir’s experience—to imagine, think, and feel as Dastaguir is made possible by a solidarity that is built by “you.” The reader is and simultaneously is not Dastaguir: a further fragmentation of the reader’s position that results in heightened uncertainty of what it entails to be a reader of this text. What are the ethics of reading a world literature text in which the reader is situated as a character, and a potential friend, to Dastaguir? How might the responsibility conferred to the textual reader reflect on the empirical reader?

Expressing the present conditions of an Afghan man who is crossing across the tumultuous war-torn Afghan land with his grandson to relay the news of his family’s death to his only living son is a feat Rahimi accomplishes through the use of a poetic “you” that centers the

narrative in the historical and poetic roots of Afghanistan. Although the “you” in *Earth and Ashes* is violent and demanding (the textual reader is instructed to look through the eyes of Dastaguir), Rahimi hopes that the “you” can also be poetic through its reference to the (Persian poetic tradition of writing about an absent or “transcendental [beloved] you” (Kingsbury 640 ; Qader 119). The narrative addresses the textual reader as well as the empirical reader that is transcendental, distant, and foreign. Yet, there is a solidarity that is built through this relationship: a branch of friendship built by witnessing the plights of another to whom one would not be able to do so otherwise.

The “you” becomes an ally to Dastaguir, accompanying him along his journey through the destroyed village in Afghanistan. Along his way, Dastaguir meets Qadir, the shopkeeper. It is Qadir’s tales and camaraderie that allow for Dastaguir’s uncertainty to be comforted. Qadir engages Dastaguir with discussions of the Persian epic *The Shahnameh* by Abolqasem Ferdowsi. *The Shahnameh* is an inter-generational narrative centred on themes of courage and war that revolves around the relationships between fathers and sons and an eventual infanticide. Through the epic, Dastaguir is given an answer to the question that Murad persistently asks Dastaguir in his dreams and hallucinations: “why have you come?” This question operates both as a reflection of Dastaguir’s inner turmoil and as a method of confronting the reader. Thus, the ethics of reading this text lies in accepting actions that seem impossible to understand or fathom. In the midst of a war, most are not afforded the time or space to wonder the reasoning behind their actions . The why is a luxury and what is a reality.

The Shahnameh has great importance in Afghan literary and oral traditions and allows for the central wisdom of Qadir’s advice to be comprehensible to Afghans of different backgrounds, who can connect through shared narratives and trauma. Trauma, for Caruth, prevents direct

linguistic representation, is damaging to the psyche, and exists beyond the limits of understanding. Thus, its latency and dissociation disrupt the ability to be fully understood or represented. The way forward, for Caruth, is to turn to literature's figurative language, since this language informs readers both of what they know and of what they do not know. Literature is able to paint images of past traumatic events through figurative language and characters that transcend time and space. The epic functions as a vehicle that transmits these images and themes from the past to the present. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the epic as a genre has "long since completed its development" (3). He defines the epic according to three features: the subject of the epic is a "national epic past"; the source of the epic derives from a national tradition; an "absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality" (13). The epic, in Bakhtin's terms, is a genre upon which "we come upon...when it is already completely finished" (Bakhtin 14).

The novel displaces and inverts the epic. First, while in the epic fathers kill their sons, in the novel, in reference to Qadir's past and Dastaguir's inner turmoil, it is the sons who are harming their fathers. Second, the epic is inverted in its theme of fathers and sons being aware of one another. In the epic, Rostam is unaware of his son, and it is this unawareness that leads to his son's death. In the novel, however, Dastaguir is told that Murad is aware of the fact that his village was destroyed. This hints at the possibility that the son has moved on even with the knowledge of his village's destruction. Thus, while the epic might be unchanging and reflect a world that is complete, the novel engages with the possibility of an altered future for the Afghan father and son: while the epic conveys uncertainty regarding whether Rostam continues to fight after the death of his son, Dastaguir and Murad *do* move on in the text. The father appears to have accepted that he might never see his son again. This acceptance is highlighted by a critical

scene in the novel that helps to forge a stronger connection between Dastaguir and the land. As Dastaguir makes his way back from the coal mines, he decides to leave his pack of naswar behind for his son in hopes that his son might see it, realize that he is alive, and come find him. In its place, Dastaguir bends down and pinches the grey earth between his fingertips and places the dirt under his tongue. A stark re-visioning occurs at this moment, as he now holds the same dirt that, someplace else, has buried his family. Used on the most painful day of his life to separate him from his loved ones, the earth is the very thing that now provides him comfort. The path ahead for Dastaguir and Murad is not one of happiness but rather one of an “undefeated despair,” a type of despair that is subsumed by the earth and its wilderness, despair that is without fear, without resignation, and without a sense of defeat (Berger 16). The land and its people are forever connected through life and death, comfort and pain. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish illustrates this point beautifully: “there is nothing left of us in the wilderness save what the wilderness kept for itself” (Berger 16).

Dastaguir’s third friend comes in the form of Shahmurad, the truck driver, who plays a critical role in re-visioning his future and his past. Shahmurad becomes a witness to Dastaguir’s pain as Dastaguir recounts all that he has lost to his new friend. He speaks of his past and thinks again of the image of one of his daughters-in-law, Zaynab, that is seared in his mind throughout the novel—the image of her engulfed in flames, hurling towards her death, stark naked. The shame of seeing his daughter-in-law unclothed has haunted Dastaguir. In response to Dastaguir’s story, Shahmurad remains silent. His silence, a quiet moment used to pay respect to the grief of another, is based on a positive vision Oliver advocates for, one centred on connection to those who “lay always on the other side” (222) without the need to dominate their narratives. His only words are a prayer, the Fatiha, often recited to pay respect to the dead. It is at this moment, after

expressing his story to another, of manifesting as a witness to his family's death, that Dastaguir closes his eyes and dreams of his family. Now, the persistent images are finally re-shaped: his daughter-in-law no longer stands naked in his memory as, engulfed in flames, she is covered with the dust of the truck. This moment not only re-visions his image of Zaynab but also alters what honour meant to him and his society. He can regain the honour he thought he lost by seeing his daughter-in-law in that manner. In the presence of a silent witness, Dastaguir's journey to acceptance has reached its destination.

The journey from the truck stop to the mines, across the road in an unnamed village in Afghanistan, is filled with dreams, hallucinations, and haunting of the past. It is one of the most difficult, almost impossible, choices of the present. These choices are not meant to be comprehensible to the reader, for the ethics of reading world literature texts relies on being comfortable with the unknown, the uncertain, and the unpredictable. Herein lies the challenge of *Earth and Ashes*, a text that reflects the importance of an ethical friendship between the self and the other. The novel portrays the ways in which the friendships Dastaguir makes produce new ways of being for him that allow him to reach back to the literary traditions he grew up listening to in order to re-vision what they meant for his future.. This re-visioning gives him the strength to move forward on his journey. Along the way, Rahimi grips the reader with the second-person narrative and brings "you" down the road of destruction, annihilation and alienation, transferring these emotions onto the reader and emphasizing the responsibility of a (potential) friend. The textual reader operates as a vehicle for new ways of expressing and being for Dastaguir, throwing out all that the reader thought they knew of war, of destruction, and of reading narratives of both. The unlearning and re-visioning the textual reader encounters is fostered by the friendships in the text that hopefully will also extend to the empirical reader. This text points

to the urgency for a new kind of friendship, one that dismantles the ties that are built on ethnic nationalism in favour of those that ethically bear witness to the bonds that are created beyond borders that seek to control others.

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