

## SPECTRAL VOICES: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF GHOST CHARACTERS IN NADEEM ASLAM'S FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

*Nadeem Aslam creates a realm besides the tangible physical realm which sometimes superimposes and sometimes is integrated in it. In it he places his "invisible" characters. All of such characters, like Zameen in *The Wasted Vigil*, Judge Anwar in *Season of the Rain Birds and Chanda* and Jugnu in *The Maps for Lost Lovers* are dead when the story begins and so they are ghosts – both literally and figuratively. The technique employed in forming these characters is worth discussing. When a writer constructs characters that appear during the action of the novel, certain things act as devices to build the character like the reference that other characters make to the character, the characters actions and conversation. However, to make an absent character convincing is not as simple, for the writer cannot use the most important device – the character's own voice. Aslam makes these characters convincing by using various narrative strategies. These shall be examined in detail. Aslam's craftsmanship lies in the representation of such characters as an active part of his novels despite their absence. This aspect of Aslam's writing is worth examining in detail as it marks a new development in the art of fiction writing, for it allows Aslam to create multiple planes of space and time, breaking away from the convention. This technique opens new possibilities in characterization which in turn creates still more diversity, adding versatility to his writing by providing multiple perspectives. This paper analyses Aslam's techniques in representing and concretizing ghost characters in his fiction.*

**Key Words:** *Absence, Presence, South Asian fiction, Nadeem Aslam, Maps for Lost Lovers, characterization Ghost Characters*

### Introduction

"Ghost characters" is a term that defines the characters who are mentioned but do not appear physically during the course of Nadeem Aslam's novels. Their presence is felt although not "seen". Such characters have an important bearing on these novels. Aslam's novels are a feast for the senses – he achieves this effect through the imagery that adorns his work. But, like the house in *The Wasted Vigil* that represents the human body with the perfume factory meant to represent the soul, the novels have souls too. The "ghost characters" are these souls.

"'Oh! I don't mean the usual sort of ghost', ... 'The ghost that is common to Scotch castles and English manor houses, and that appears in an orthodox nightgown, screams, rattles chains and bangs doors at libitum ... My ghosts are those that move about among us in social intercourse for days, months, sometimes years according to their several missions: ghosts that talk to us, and altogether comport themselves like human beings'" (Corelli qtd. in Moody 80).



Nadeem Aslam creates a realm besides the tangible physical realm which sometimes superimposes and sometimes is integrated in it. In it he places his “invisible” characters. All of such characters, like Zameen in *The Wasted Vigil*, Judge Anwar in *Season of the Rain Birds* and Chanda and Jugnu in *The Maps for Lost Lovers* are dead when the story begins and so they are ghosts – both literally and figuratively.

The technique employed in forming these characters is worth discussing. When a writer constructs characters that appear during the action of the novel, certain things act as devices to build the character like the reference that other characters make to the character, the characters actions and conversation. However, to make an absent character convincing is not as simple, for the writer cannot use the most important device – the character’s own voice. Aslam makes these characters convincing by using various narrative strategies. This paper seeks to examine these techniques in detail.

Aslam’s craftsmanship lies in the representation of such characters as an active part of his novels despite their absence. This aspect of Aslam’s writing is worth examining in detail as it marks a new development in the art of fiction writing, for it allows Aslam to create multiple planes of space and time, breaking away from the convention. This technique opens new possibilities in characterization which in turn creates still more diversity, adding versatility to his writing by providing multiple perspectives.

Absence is a lack that disrupts or defers full presence ... Within metaphysics of presence, primal “truth” is equated with “being”, and being is equated with “presence”; to be true, or truly to be, is to be originally and fully present (Carlson1)

Nadeem Aslam’s skill lies in the fact that he has concretized physically absent characters in his novel. Absence has a very powerful presence in *Maps for Lost Lovers*. The ghost characters who are absent per say nevertheless haunt the minds of the characters present, plot and the setting. Chanda and Jugnu are already dead when the novel begins, however, they are an important part of it as characters. Other characters who appear only as a memory in the novel are Mahtaab and Chakor – Shamas and Jugnu’s parents.

Such characters are not an exception to *Maps for Lost Lovers* only; they also feature in the other two novels by Aslam – *The Wasted Vigil* and *Season of the Rainbirds*. The main difference however is that Zameen, Benedikt and Qatrina in the former and Judge Anwar in the latter exercise a marginal role in the respective novels, while in *Maps for Lost Lovers* they “haunt (Dasht-e-Tanhaii) and the lives of those who occupy it until the final pages” (Shamsie). In *The Wasted Vigil*, they are instrumental as peripheral characters as they do not play a central role in it. Chanda and Jugnu on the other hand are fully developed characters who grow and expand as the novel progresses and are very important to the basic story line. Their construction as characters therefore is an inseparable aspect of Aslam’s craft. The chapter addresses the narrative devices Aslam uses to concretize these characters. The perspectives from which they are explored in the narrative form, their impact on the other characters and other techniques employed by the author to develop their roles in the novel.

Absence is a running theme in the novel and is significant for the understanding of ghost characters. Death and hence absence of these characters is linked to the general theme as they are interdependent and it is due to the absence of Chanda and Jugnu in



particular and to a lesser degree to Chakor and Mahtaab that the characters like Shamas feel the emptiness in their lives. Death is in the air as soon as the novel begins and although we know of their disappearances, the reader is introduced to the deaths of Chanda and Jugnu by the end of the first segment. The snowfall section which opens the novel is devoid of any cheerfulness despite the fact that it describes such light-hearted activities as children playing. The thoughts of the character Shamas who shares his consciousness with the reader at this point in the story are however bleak and sad and due to this reason he can only infuse absence and death in the atmosphere. The snowflakes have an “impaired pace” (MLL 3) with which they “sink” in water and so, figuratively in oblivion. Death is reminded of, through the icicle that falls like a “dagger”, narrowly missing Shamas and like the dagger in Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”, this metaphorical dagger materializes in the characters of Chanda, Jugnu and Shamas’ father to some extent. It haunts him through the novel till towards the end when he imagines that he is dead and his ghost haunts Dasht-e-Tanhaii. His actual death marks the culmination of the novel.

Shamas is shown capable of seeing only absence – the garden is where “in May and June there will be rose-buds” (MLL 3) which are missing now or “where his children had buried a dead finch many years ago” (MLL 3) – hence he sees it as a grave.

The absence becomes a void, a black-hole which pulls a character’s thoughts towards itself, no matter what they are engaged in. The narrative draws attention to the incense (the very use of the word reminds one of death) as present “even when absent, drawing attention to its own disappearance” (MLL 3). This line serves two purposes: first, it draws attention to the absence and secondly, to the nature of this absence – its surreal quality.

The emptiness produced due to Jugnu’s absence is concretely manifested in Jugnu’s empty house. A little further in the novel. “Shamas sees the faint shimmer of heat haze clinging to, the roofs of all but one of the houses in his street – Jugnu’s” (MLL 28). The pattern of alternating absence and presence is repeated here although the presence here is of a translucent quality – incense, a haze.

This presence becomes more tangible when it is given voice by the characters. More than once, a place is described without Jugnu first and then with him, enhancing his absence and presence at the same time – Shamas is suddenly reminded of Jugnu approaching Safeena to look for a butterfly. The narration of this epiphanic moment is in first person, giving it immediacy. One gets a similar feeling when Kaukab remembers the names Jugnu had given certain things jokingly, as she uses them during cooking.

The dreariness of spirit in the first section grows as the segment progresses and then as the novel moves forward, turning into dampness of the spirit to terror “his chest solidifying into heavy stone, in terror” (MLL 6) on hearing taps on his window early in the morning, to restlessness, relating that he had been “imprisoned ... in a shadowy area between sleep and waking for almost five months... not knowing when time would stir again and in which direction it would move, tip him into darkness or deliver him into light” (MLL 6). These lines serve as a connector at once drawing a bridge between the reader and the subject, taking us further into the past, by making the reader relate to the nature of terror that Shamas experiences and to the cause of his anxiety – Chanda and



Jugnu's disappearance. Furthermore, an alternating pattern of darkness and light is introduced, which is extended as the story proceeds – the difference between their absence and presence is explored and in this way Chanda and Jugnu are built as convincing characters. After describing how Jugnu's absence has affected Shamas's life directly and the whole atmosphere indirectly, the narrator moves on to describe how his arrival had produced the opposite effect – “he soon filled the days and nights of his niece and two nephews with unexpected wonder” (MLL 11). and at another place, “He was thirty-one, and the children whose spirits he began to revive immediately upon arrival were thirteen, eight and four” (MLL 28). Aslam re-affirms this fact while revealing another fact about Jugnu with the repeated information about his age. By showing this contrast Aslam enhances the sense of the absence more while at the same time makes one aware of Jugnu's presence, thus reflecting life in a character that is stated to be physically dead. After this emotional and subjective account of Jugnu, the narration turns to a rather distant account of Chanda. Their relationship is explored, they were “living a sin” (MLL 15). Chanda was a “wanton whore in most people's eyes ... for setting up a home with a man she wasn't married to” (MLL 15). This distant narration is appropriate since at this point in the story we share the gaze and thoughts with Shamas who is very close to Jugnu but only knows Chanda as his brother's girlfriend. This distance however does not make the account any less convincing since the negativity is not shared by the narrator and as a result the reader automatically sympathizes with Chanda who is not liked by “most people” – the term cleverly exempting Shamas from the list.

From here the narrative moves on to a rather objective account of Jugnu's profession – he was a lepidopterist, the fact that his hands glowed, how he spent his time “calling the moths out of the darkness with his upraised hand...” (MLL 17) and that he wrote for the local paper – The Afternoon, thus spinning a cocoon of solid fact around Jugnu's image, giving him a context and making him a character rather than a skimpy shadow.

Jugnu's character is more developed in the novel as compared to Chanda's. We know Chanda only in reference to her past and through her relation with her family, Jugnu's family and Jugnu himself. As far as her own personality is concerned, we know very little, only that her eyes changed colour with seasons, and she smelt like her mother, till almost the end of the novel, when the reader gets to ‘see’ Chanda for the first time during the glimpses that the narration gives into the couple's last day alive. Jugnu however is fully developed as a character. We are given minute details about him such as the fact that he kept “Sheridan Multi – Cruiser speed – boat [named] The Darwin” (MLL 28), that he was good looking ... he was called “Flesh-and-blood TajMahal” (MLL 31) by Kaukab's neighbours. The route he followed during his first three years in America with “migratory bee – keepers”, the time it took him and that “the truck [he drove] hummed with the three million bees in the back and he reeked of banana oil long into each year” (MLL 27). Other than that, there is the fact that he was remembered due to his witty remarks; by the characters long after his death [for instance Kaukab remembers Jugnu's reference to a large pan as “An elephant's foot – print” (MLL 290).

Shamas and Jugnu's father is different. He does not come across as a live flesh and blood character as Chanda and Jugnu do, due to the choices they make, things they



do and the impacts they have made on their surroundings as discussed earlier. He is more of a two-dimensional figure, merely a fragment of Shamas' and somewhat of Jugnu's imagination. The only information we come across about him is that he was kind and loving (through Kaukab's narration) without any particular reference to his acts of kindness. We are however, given a detailed account of his background, his accidental migration from India and his death. This serves to reveal more about Shamas and Jugnu than about himself for the information does not shed any light on any action of Chakor's whereas it does reveal the religious and consequently the social standing of the two brothers. Mahtaab is merely a shadow who is Chakor's spouse and does not serve any function worth mentioning other than explaining perhaps Shamas' and Jugnu's birth. Chakor is therefore, one of the background characters whom Philip Stevick distinguishes further as "fecille characters" (247) and "the card" (ibid). The cards are more of gestures – Chakor fall into the category of fecille characters.

While a fecille character is not at the immediate forefront, it has nevertheless its own functions to perform – "through him the world in which the protagonist gains his individual contours can be given the necessary mass and density" (Stevick 247). Shamas and Jugnu stand aloof from the general society of Dasht-e-Tanhaii. They appear as non-conformists as they have their own ideas of morals and set of values. Although Muslims, they are nevertheless non-believers allowing themselves and others alcohol and sex outside of marriage which is considered a sin by people living in their vicinity. Kaukab complains of their lax behaviour regarding religion time and again, and even a woman from their neighbourhood is told to have remarked that they were an unconventional family and she would not be surprised if one of the brothers stood up after their burial refusing to be shrouded traditionally. Without an explanation of their extraordinary background they would have seemed inappropriate and out of place. Chakor's presence in the narrative gives these two characters a solid standing, giving their story a context and explaining their individuality in a society inhabited by the orthodox. Sociocultural issues are a complex yet integral part of human life (Akram & Abdelrady, 2025, 2023; Ramzan et al., 2023; Ramzan & Khan, 2019; Nawaz et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2017). They can range from challenges related to cultural integration (Akram & Yang, 2021; Javaid et al., 2023), social inequality, and systemic discrimination to issues surrounding gender norms, identity, and generational conflicts (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2024), trauma, or personality disorders (Javaid et al., 2024; Ramzan & Javaid, 2023; Ramzan et al., 2020, 2021).

By supporting the central characters, Chakor's story also serves the function of "buttress, supporting and extending the real meaning" (Stevick 247). *Maps for Lost Lovers* has a message of liberalism, understanding and flexibility in religious terms at its core. Chakor's plight and his heart rending predicament "supports and extends" this central meaning by warming the readers' hearts towards him making one question one's capacity to be judgmental and unforgiving to others. A fecille "may be the moral touchstone by which we judge the aberrations of others" (Stevick 243). Chakor becomes just that – his eldest son's treatment of him and later of the entire community who would not let him live or even die in peace. After death his corpse is dug out time and again refusing to allow him to be buried like a Muslim. Later the reader knows without being



explicitly told that Kaukab is deluded when she thinks this very son's son was a loving and tender husband to MahJabin.

Categorizing Jugnu and Chanda as a type of character is more complex – they support the qualities of protagonists while they are dead when the story starts and so they are physically absent and inactive from it. Protagonists are

“those characters whose motivation and history are most fully established, who conflict and change as the story progresses, who engage our responses more fully and steadily, in a way more complex though not necessarily more vivid than other characters. They are the vehicles by which all the most interesting questions are raised; they evoke our beliefs, sympathies, revulsions; they incarnate the moral vision of the world inherent in the total novel” (Stevick 235).

The narrative in “Maps for Lost Lovers” gives an emotional account of Chanda and Jugnu as discussed earlier. However as the story progresses, the narrative changes to an objective account of their histories so that we come to know subtle details about Jugnu's personality in particular. We are told for example that during the nights in which he collected his specimens of moths, he kept himself alert “with a flask of coffee into which he had dropped a curl of orange peel and two green cardamoms” (MLL 17). Similarly, almost all is related of his history, his age “He was thirty-one” (MLL 28) when he arrived in England, what he studied, from where, why he came to England, when exactly he arrives there, his relationship to his family, his past love-affairs, the account of the sexual disease he catches from his white girl-friend and his affair with Chanda. Similar is the case with Chanda. We know the story of her past marriages, how she meets Jugnu, why her relationship with Jugnu is considered illegitimate and how the society and her family became hostile to her as a result of that.

One may argue that the characters of Chanda and Jugnu cannot possibly develop as the novel progresses because they are not really present in it. This however, can be contested. In the case of Chanda and Jugnu what develops are not the characters themselves, but our vision of them. Almost all the information about Chanda and Jugnu is revealed at the very beginning of the novel so that no mystery remains ... from there onwards, the information is further developed and we are given various accounts of what they stood for, for others. In Chanda's case for one, we are told that she was nothing more than a “wanton whore” (MLL 15) for most people, but as the story develops the reader is made more aware of her true plight ... her third husband would not divorce her and she could not have married Jugnu until he did. The idea keeps developing till towards the end we get the entire picture in the chapter entitled “A Leaf from the Book of Fates”. The characters of Chanda and Jugnu develop in this way as the story progresses. The chronicle of Chanda and Jugnu is present throughout the novel and it is the culmination of their predicament which makes almost all the other characters of the novel and its reader question the “moral vision of the world inherent in the novel” (Stevick 235).

Many perspectives serve to give the characters a multi-dimensional identity and a depth which makes them concrete ... Stevick defines perspective as “the perception of one character in terms of many diverse characters” (232), according to him “it is by the approach through a variety of perspectives that we establish a character's reality” (ibid). There are two kinds of perspectives in a work of fiction according to Stevick,



“perspective of range these derive from the greater knowledge bestowed on us as readers” (ibid 234) and perspectives of depth ... in which certain characters become important because “they stand out from, or are immersed in, a work of other human beings seen briefly, shallowly or in fragments” (235). This however holds true for characters that are in the background and are used more as a technique to give a dimension to the work of fiction than significant characters. The kind of perspective that makes these characters complete is the perspective of other characters ... or in other words, the human context.

Chanda and Jugnu are mere shadows without the human context they are placed in. The omniscient narrator only gives us objective facts like Jugnu’s vocation, his age and others similar to these, which may construct a skeletal framework for the character and give it a backbone by making it believable but what makes it a flesh and bone character is the emotional relationship he shares with the other characters and their recurrent reference to it. What relationship they have with each other, what they mean for them and for each other and thus how they fitted in their context. It is this human context which establishes their identities as rebels and makes them stand out from the crowd. “it is by the approach through a variety of perspectives that we establish a character’s reality” (Stevick 232). Authors e.g., Ahmad et al. (2022), Amjad et al. (2021) also affirm this.

The effect created is somewhat like a movie camera which brings into focus a character sometimes for the briefest of moments so that an audience might get a mere glimpse of them and sometimes for an extended period of time for us to take in the detailed account of them. In writing the discourse of the characters and their gaze serve similar function ... “it is by the approach through a variety of perspectives that we establish a character’s reality” (Stevick 232). In *Maps for Lost Lovers* for example Shamas’ consciousness becomes the main consciousness of the novel, it is through it that the reader gets a detailed account of Chanda, Jugnu, Mahtab and Chakor. As long as the narrative dwells on Shamas’ thoughts and deliberations the focus remains on them. However, as soon as the inner eye of the novel detaches itself from Shamas’ mind and dwells on the general happenings and life in Dasht-e-Tanhaii, Chanda and Jugnu go somewhat in the backdrop. They are not however pushed into oblivion altogether. What keeps them throbbing in the narrative are the comments by the main characters like Kaukab and MahJabin and others who seem to be unable to go through their daily routine without being reminded of them. Even as Shamas lies on the ground beaten up by bullies, the thought that occupies his mind is that of his missing brother and his girl-friend “He lies there with an ear pressed to the ground (down there where Chanda and Jugnu are turning into clay)” (MLL 254). But this is where even the minor characters serve their purpose and by commenting on Chanda and Jugnu they throw random glances on one aspect of the personalities or another. In *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Ramsay remarks that even “fifty pairs of eyes” are not enough to scrutinize a person fully. In *Maps for Lost Lovers* all other characters become eyes through which a reader analyzes multiple facets of Chanda’s and Jugnu’s personalities and make them concrete, “different people see different things in what has happened” (MLL 137).



Another technique that Nadeem Aslam employs is that of contradiction, “heterogeneity – variety of points of view and temporal locations is contained in homogeneity” (Health qtd. in Belsey 78). Shamas and Kaukab are presented as opposing minds. While Shamas gives a positive picture of Chanda and Jugnu’s relationship, Kaukab gives it a negative colour. This is woven into the narrative as such that it does not present a clash. What it does however is that it first makes an image and then breaks it – this is where the comments by minor characters gain utmost importance. By hearing all the sides of the story the reader is able to form an image which appears to be more authentic in his/her mind. The text interpolates the reader as a transcendent and non-contradictory subject by positioning him or her as “the unified and unifying subject of its vision” (Health qtd. in Belsey 78). In the case of Chanda and Jugnu’s setting home together ... we have the nonchalant attitude of Shamas who rarely ever mentions it as compared to the individual aspects of Jugnu’s personality. As opposed to this we have Kaukab’s unwavering stance on it, to add to these two voices we have the points of view of Chanda’s family, Shamas’ children and the neighbours (mostly women like Kaukab who support her view). Contrary to these somewhat harmless opinions are the view points of Ujala (Shamas’ son) who became emotional enough to use words like “cunt” for his mother and call his father “spine-less” when interviewed by the local newspaper regarding Chanda and Jugnu’s disappearance (MLL 72), and Chanda’s brothers who boast proudly of killing their sister for honour.

Aslam however very cleverly controls the final image that is borne in the minds of his readers. What govern it then are the personalities of the characters who make these comments ... while Shamas and his children are all presented as educated and broad-minded individuals; Kaukab and her supporters are all uneducated, orthodox in their vision and narrow-minded individuals. Apart from this a very subtle comment by the narrative also tips the movement in one direction or the other. In this case for example, we are told that Chanda’s husband disappeared without divorcing her, consequently, she could not have legalized her union with Jugnu in anyway acceptable to her opposers (In this way all the voices combine to form a final picture). Towards the end “the reader is invited to construct a history which is more comprehensive still” (Belsey 72). The final segment culminates what the first section generates, by transforming the ghost into flesh and blood characters by relating their last moments in present tense and therefore lifting the fog that the first scene spreads.

With the chapter titled “A Leaf from the Book of Fates” the narrator and the reader’s position gets merged and like the narrator hitherto, the reader becomes omniscient. Aslam does this by showing us the past and the present simultaneously, sometimes in a single sentence. The chapter starts with the line, “On the last day of his life” (MLL 334) and at another place we are told that “As her dark-green eyes closed last night, Chanda had no inkling that she would never see Jugnu again” (MLL 335). The title of the chapter “A Leaf from the Book of Fates” and the very first line “On the last day of his life” (MLL 334) reveal that this chapter is transcendent from the inherent world of the novel and lives that its characters lead. The privileged position of the reader at this point is also reinforced by the fact that Kaukab desperately wishes to get a glimpse of the Book of Fates a little before this chapter but is unable to, of course.





The world gets divided into three parts as Shamas and Kaukab are shut out (which explains their utter ignorance of the event throughout the story) due to the closed door of their house. This becomes impenetrable for Jugnu towards the end of his life. We have Chanda and Jugnu, Bara and Chotta (Chanda's brothers and murderers) up-close and the rest of the town seen from a distance, through Jugnu's eyes.

The movement of the chapter is from the present (we are reminded that Jugnu is already dead at the very beginning) to the past (the scene of the death of Chanda and Jugnu) to the very beginning of Chanda and Jugnu's relationship. This gives the readers a chance to see the whole affair in retrospect and as a result 'picture' what the author knows already. This technique allows one to get a first hand encounter with the characters as if they were physically present like regular characters. This glimpse into the past enables us to understand the characters of Chanda and Jugnu more fully and enables the writer to develop them to the fullest.

The chapter is full of irony (like chotta's murder of his sister because of a crime he is committing himself too) and certain happenings and comments by other characters and their causes serve as a yard stick by which we can scrutinize the characters of Chanda and Jugnu first hand instead of relying on the information by other characters. The cleric's death for instance serves multipurpose: first, it becomes the distraction due to which Jugnu passes apparently unnoticed through the middle of the town. Secondly, it puts Jugnu at a pedestal higher than the manipulative and rather foolish people of the town who continue to believe staunchly in the cleric's so-called piety and in order to maintain his image as such decides to hide certain facts from the towns' people which may put it into question. Thirdly, their comments like "Only the pious die on a Friday" (MLL 338) and again as if to reassure that what has been already said has been noticed, Aslam puts similar words in the mouths of other characters, "Only the very fortunate people die on a Friday: it's not for the likes of us sinners", Shafkat Ali said" (MLL 352) clearly state Chanda and Jugnu as pious and clarifies the writer's stance on the subject.

The values become reversed "fair becomes foul, and foul, fair" to put it in Shakespearean language. Aslam deliberately puts the scene of the cleric's death in comparison with that of Chanda and Jugnu's. While the former is somewhat of a caricature, the latter no doubt serves to gain more sympathies for the two lovers in this section. The cleric dies from a heart-attack on knowing that his call to Islam has been shunned by the president of the United States. The main attraction in it for the town was the gain of immense fame for being responsible for converting the head of the most powerful state to Islam ... that is, they had selfish and petty motives. Chanda and Jugnu on the other hand do not die for selfish reasons; they are rather killed, by Bara and Chotta who could not come to terms with their own grievances (Bara's unborn son had been aborted by doctors by mistake when he went to have his girl child aborted and Chotta had been cheated by his lover). Their killers and in turn the whole town (including people who had seen Jugnu on the day of his death but failed to testify in front of the police for their own selfish reasons) has been termed petty by Aslam in this chapter and as a result the characters of Chanda and Jugnu get exalted automatically. They die for a noble cause, or killed as MahJabin later corrects her mother. The final scene of their lives thus serves



to gain sympathies for Chanda and Jugnu and also helps us gain insight into their bond of union.

The most telling aspect of Chanda and Jugnu's characters is perhaps their mutual relationship, they exist in harmony, this is evident from the fact that they got along despite their age differences. Chanda was almost a child as compared to Jugnu. This fact is however not revealed by the author, but is mentioned only in passing until the very final pages of the novel when we are shown Chanda's entry into Jugnu's house and thus his life. This selective information makes us see the couple on an equal footing and not judge their union as an emotional decision on Chanda's part. Throughout the narrative one sees Chanda as a mature woman capable of making the independent and difficult decision of living with Jugnu despite all society's opposition including her own family's as well as of Jugnu's. She is also shown to be wise enough about marital affairs to be able to make a decision for herself and disregard others' views. To complement this, Jugnu is told to be thirty one years of age when he arrived in England, on top of this he is told to be very highly educated which removes his chances of making a rash and ill calculated judgment. At the end when we are literally "shown" their first meeting we become a little surprised to find out Chanda's physical age. "She was eight when Jugnu arrived from America – twenty-three years younger than him – and had grown up thinking of him as an uncle like almost every other child in the neighbourhood" (MLL 361). This information however validates the strength of their bond in our eyes because in the segment before, we see Chanda boldly standing up for Jugnu in the face of death. The effect created is that we are able to see how much strength and courage the relationship has given to Chanda's character. At an instance even before this, Chanda confronts Kaukab about their relationship. Chanda and Jugnu are thus shown to mature and grow as characters during the course of their relationship. They thrive on each other and give and take from each other. Chanda gains maturity of character, stability and respect which the failure of past marriages seems to have taken from her. Jugnu on the other hand gets love, conjugal felicity and the stability of a family life for which he is told to have come to England ... we get this idea from the fact that he comes to England on feeling loneliness after hearing of his mother's death and from the fact that he had had a failed relationship with a white woman before that.

The names of the two lovers are very suggestive in terms of their characterization also and are quite telling. Chanda is like a moon, pure but at the same time tinted in the eyes of the society due to her three failed marriages. She even becomes luminous literally in the end when her belly is said to be glowing with Jugnu's baby posthumously. "Chanda was pregnant at the time of murder and ... like Jugnu's, the foetus's hands were luminous, that they could be seen glowing through Chanda's stomach and clothing" (MLL 161). She does not however attain her full bloom, although she waxes, that is, grows as a character as mentioned above, yet her life is cut short before she could shine to her fullest. Jugnu too is literally a firefly is his own right, his hands, glow "he painted radium dials in a clock factory one winter and it was there that a spillage had left his hands with the ability to glow in the dark" (MLL 27). Jugnu on the other hand is also a hunter of moths and figuratively runs after fire ... that is rebellion to the society, Chirag in a fit of anger tells his mother that "Jugnu taught me that we should try to break – away



from all the bonds and ties that manipulative groups have thought – up for their own advantage” (MLL 321), and while running after the light of the highest order, that is, the moon (Chanda), burns himself.

The ghost characters in *The Wasted Vigil* occupy as much of the narrative as the other characters. This is done by providing David with a vivid memory which can remember very minute details from the brief time that he had spent with Zameen, and Marcus with good storytelling skills. David and Marcus’ mind is a space in itself which occupies one-third of the total action in the book. David lives as much in the past as in present. *The Wasted Vigil* is just as much about characterization as about plot.

“Characterization is the method used by a writer to develop a character. The method includes 1) showing the character’s appearance, 2) displaying the character’s actions, 3) revealing the character’s thoughts, and 4) getting the reaction of others” (“Characterization” nellen.com). Aslam has employed almost all the techniques mentioned above in the creation of his ghost characters, it is due to this that his characters come out as well-rounded and adequately formed.

Aslam has also projected the physical appearance of Qatrina, Zameen and Benedikt, he does this by employing multiple strategies. Lara simply reports his brother’s appearance in order to launch an inquiry into his disappearance. She also narrates that he had a leaf of cosmos oak on him. The only fact the reader comes to know about Qatrina’s physicality is her height, she was very tall for a woman in Afghanistan, “She had told Marcus how ... some women in her family had shuddered as she became taller with each passing year, her height too immodest for a woman”(TWV 244).

The details of these two characters’ appearances are not discussed too much since their existence is only reported by other characters, except of a large episode of Benedikt’s moments before death which is reported directly in the narrative. A reader comes to know a little more about Zameen because of the nature of relationship she shared with David. David is reported to be unable to come out of the grief of Zameen’s death, therefore he keeps remembering intimate details of her physiology. He remembers Zameen wearing “a light-pink tunic pattern with saffron flowers, over narrow white trousers, and combined with a long stole of white chiffon resting on the left shoulder”(TWV 178). He also reports her hair to be long, her face to be expressive on times, and a mask on one particular instance when she wished to hide things from him, and her voice to be sweet enough for her to sing songs to him. He also remembers her hand to be decorated with henna, the first time he saw her (TWV 156). These details of Zameen’s physical description bring quite a vivid picture of her appearance to the reader’s eye.

The second device that is used is the narration of their actions. The most physical image that portrays the action of a character is that of Qatrina, narrated by Marcus. A man kept making his twenty-two year old wife pregnant year after year, so that she gave birth seven times in six years, when he brought her for the eighth time, she was almost dead. In giving vent to her feelings Qatrina tore a young apricot plant in two, “It’s possible she wanted to break off a branch to thrash him” (TWV 95) says Marcus. This action of hers speak a lot for her nature ... she is bold in her actions and also one with a soft heart. Her acts of trying to help any Afghani of either gender while in a warlord’s

custody, her defying the Taliban when ordered to cut off Marcus' hand and then losing sanity when she was forced to do so, carve out Qatrina's personality for the reader's benefit, she was brave in spirit but also tender of heart.

Benedikt's actions are mainly revealed through his own narrative, his hesitation to assault a young Afghani girl physically due to his inexperience in the matter, his consequent humiliation by his fellow soldiers and colonel, his repeated assaults of Zameen and his escape (TWV 360-366). A most detailed account of Zameen's actions is given by David, how she was tormented by the memory of Benedikt raping her, in her dreams. How she cut herself out of her dress during one such night, how she took pleasure in nature's bounty (like the time she shows the beauty of a water droplet falling off a leaf), how she migrated from Afghanistan to Pakistan and eventually how she died.

Aslam has structured the narrative of the novel in such a way that the reader is able to access the thoughts of the ghost characters as well. The characters of Zameen and Qatrina are introduced gradually by David mostly, through his remembrance of some little incident related to them, for example, he narrates Zameen's thoughts on seeing a poor version of Mona Lisa and her shock on finding out that women in the West can wear veils (TWV 71). Similarly, he reveals Zameen's thoughts on reading *Repanzal*, she and her friends thought it odd that the prince should climb her hair because in the Afghan version when the princess lets down her hair for the prince to climb, he cannot think of climbing it. Similarly Qatrina's thoughts on religious and social issues are also narrated.

The reaction of the other characters towards the ghost characters is the most prominent aspect of their characterization, because it is mainly through them and their reactions to the ghost characters that the writer is able to carve out a three-dimensional image of them. These relationships are explored in a later chapter.

"The common denominator between all good characters is that they are multifaceted ... and their personalities pose questions and challenges that keep us turning the pages" writes Karen Bernardo, in her article *Characterization in Literature*. Ghost characters in Aslam's fiction aptly fulfill this criterion. It is mainly due to diversity in these characters that makes them worth discussing.

Qatrina poses certain questions openly and clearly by herself like the prevalent belief that the marriage ceremony has to be conducted by a male and the presence of God among the rest, but there are also certain questions that are posed by her presence in the plot. Her character brings into focus the atrocities of the Taliban regime. In fact, much of the plot is brought into motion by her presence. Marcus' long quest in search of Qatrina and his hand being cut by her, it is because of trying to obtain Qatrina's paintings that have gone missing and were found in a patient's house. If it were not for Qatrina's decision to get married by a woman, their marriage would not have been called into question by the Taliban regime and she would not have died as a result. Her decision to nail the books on the ceiling of the house to save them from Taliban when she turned senile also plays an important role in creating the mood and atmosphere of the novel, it helps Aslam to incorporate various writers like Virgil and others in the narrative of the novel, as the books gradually keep falling off or are consciously taken down by the characters.



Zameen's character is more important in this regard. She becomes a link between the past (Marcus) and the present (Casa). She also becomes the embodiment of the atrocities of the Russian forces in Afghanistan, the predicament of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the cruel selfishness of the Afghan warlords and finally the role of CIA in Afghanistan. She is raped by Benedikt and on reaching Pakistan she is forced to sell her body in order to save her infant's life. She is kidnapped by GulRasool, a war lord in Afghanistan who lured her to his house, claiming he had a message for her from her father and finally killed by Christopher Palantine, an agent of CIA and a friend of David's. She is then at the centre of the plot of *The Wasted Vigil*. The novel is the story of the American, Russian, intervention in Afghanistan and she is at the cross-roads of this relationship. She is the mother of an Afghan, who is the son of a Russian soldier who assaulted her (Benedikt); the lover of the American, David who claimed to love her yet becomes the cause of her death. She therefore becomes the embodiment of the central irony that lays at the crux of the novel, that is, the role of Russia and America in Afghanistan and its consequences.

Although Benedikt's character is not as well formed as that of the other two, he still has an important role to play in the novel. He serves to highlight the atrocities of the Russian forces in Afghanistan especially through his narration of what the Russian soldiers did to the fourteen year old girl who had come to collect the 'flesh' of her father and brothers whom the Russians had killed (TWV 364). He also becomes the reason for Lara, one of the main characters of the novel to come to Afghanistan later. The ghost characters in *The Wasted Vigil* are then well-crafted and thoroughly constructed who become one of the reasons why a reader's attention remains riveted to the novel. A writer has two options while creating characters, according to Terry W. Erwin II, indirect and direct characterization. In direct characterization, "the writer makes direct statements about a character's personality and tells what the character is like". One might assume that while referring to a ghost character, this is the only approach that a writer can possibly take. Aslam's craft however, lays in the very fact that he has employed both direct and indirect characterization, to create his ghost characters.

Sometimes he simply tells his readers about a particular ghost character, through other characters. Qatrina for instance, is often remembered because of her certain personality traits. Marcus for example, introduces Qatrina as somebody who painted. Similarly, he also narrates certain aspects of her personality like the fact that she would have politely but openly challenged notions that stood against her beliefs. On breakfast one day when Marcus keeps quiet on hearing Casa's incorrect beliefs about Islam, the narrative takes over and reports directly what Qatrina's reaction would have been to the situation. She "would have gently but firmly challenged" (TWV 229), the narrative then continues to report other notions of Qatrina. Indirect characterization however is, the one in which, "the writer reveals information about a character and his personality through that character's thoughts, words, and actions, along with how other characters respond to that character, including what they think and say about him" (Erwin II).

Although this holds true for Zameen and Qatrina's personalities too, however the use of this technique can be best understood in reference to Benedikt's character. Benedikt's character is hardly shown in detail anywhere in the novel except for the past



where the detailed account of his death is given. After Benedikt hands himself over to the Afghan dukhis on defecting from the Russian army, he is kept in captivity, on waking up from unconsciousness he starts thinking about multiple details of his life. He remembers the day he was recruited in the army and the day that he was told he was going to Afghanistan. He remembers his sister's name and his own. He remembers his friends and then a joke he made to one of his friends ... when somebody told him that it was their photograph when he/she was young Benedikt replied by saying ... technically all photographs are our photographs we were young "ha ha" (TWV 361). This incident from Benedikt's life shows his youth and a certain boyish innocence that he possessed, later when he relates the incidence of a young Afghani girl being raped, he relates his inexperience in sexual matters, again indicating his young age.

Until then a reader only knows Benedikt as the assaulter of Zameen ... a main character of the novel who undoubtedly controls a reader's sympathies. This fact, somewhat makes a reader judge the character of Benedikt, later however, when one is given a full account of Benedikt's predicament, one is compelled to revise one's one-sided views, and when he is "shown" to be killed by GulRasool's men in a most heart rending fashion, the whole of one's sympathies lie with him, although his character appears in only a number of pages, Aslam does not leave him hanging in the middle, the drawing of his character is given as much thought and attention as any other character in the novel. He gives Benedikt's character a detailed account and by doing so does complete justice with it. "A well-developed character is one that has been thoroughly characterized, with many traits shown in the narrative" ("Characterization" Wikipedia). "A well developed character act according to past instances provided by its visible traits unless more information about the character is provided. The better the audience knows the character, the better the character development". The best aspect of Aslam's ghost characters is that they are complex characters with conflicting traits, who are driven by fate as in the case of Zameen, in being abducted by the Russians, Qatrina in being abducted by Taliban and Benedikt in being summoned by the Russian army, but who in the end make their own choices and take responsibilities of their own actions which make them complex and at the same time likeable and undeniably more human than not.

Characterization is one of the best features of Aslam's novels, especially the construction of the ghost characters, who are actually absent from the physical world of the novel; still these characters are just as convincing as the others. The ghost characters therefore become one of the criteria by which we can judge the mastery of Aslam's craft, for the techniques employed are certainly par excellence. The careful construction of the ghost characters make them spine of his novels.

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