



Cognitive Narratology of Trauma in Nadeem Aslam's Fiction: Narrative Consciousness, Memory, and Reader Empathy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the cognitive narratology of trauma in the fiction of Nadeem Aslam, focusing on how narrative techniques evoke readers' cognitive and emotional engagement with experiences of violence, displacement, loss, and memory. While Aslam's novels have frequently been examined through the lenses of postcolonialism, trauma theory, and political violence, relatively little attention has been paid to the cognitive mechanisms through which his narratives construct traumatic consciousness and invite readers to simulate characters' psychological experiences. Drawing upon cognitive narratology, particularly the works of David Herman, Monika Fludernik, Alan Palmer, Lisa Zunshine, and Marco Caracciolo, this article analyzes *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), and *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013). Using qualitative textual analysis, the study examines narrative perspective, focalization, temporal fragmentation, memory reconstruction, interiority, and character consciousness to explore how traumatic experiences are cognitively represented and interpreted. The findings demonstrate that Aslam employs fragmented chronology, multiple focalizers, recursive memories, symbolic imagery, and polyphonic narration to reproduce the disrupted cognitive processes associated with trauma while fostering empathy and ethical engagement in readers. Rather than presenting trauma as a fixed historical event, his fiction portrays it as an ongoing cognitive and emotional process shaped by memory, imagination, and social relationships. The study further argues that Aslam's narrative strategies encourage readers to actively reconstruct fragmented experiences, thereby transforming reading into a participatory act of meaning-making. By integrating cognitive narratology with trauma studies, this research contributes a novel interdisciplinary framework for understanding the narrative representation of psychological suffering in Pakistani English fiction and expands contemporary debates on the relationship between narrative form, cognition, memory, and empathy in postcolonial literature.



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Background

The representation of trauma has become one of the defining concerns of contemporary world literature, particularly in societies shaped by colonialism, war, migration, religious extremism, and political instability. Literary narratives increasingly function as cultural archives that preserve individual and collective memories of violence while providing imaginative spaces for negotiating identity, loss, and resilience. In Pakistani English fiction, trauma is frequently portrayed not merely as a psychological condition but as a sociohistorical phenomenon intertwined with colonial legacies, sectarian conflict, displacement, and the global consequences of terrorism (Balaev, 2014; Caruth, 1996). Among contemporary Pakistani novelists, Nadeem Aslam occupies a distinctive position for his lyrical prose, complex narrative structures, and sustained engagement with the human consequences of political violence. His novels *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), and *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) depict fractured communities and psychologically wounded individuals whose lives are shaped by memory, grief, and moral uncertainty.

Trauma studies emerged as a significant interdisciplinary field through the pioneering works of Caruth (1996), Felman and Laub (1992), and Herman (1992), who conceptualized trauma as an experience that resists direct representation because it overwhelms ordinary cognitive and linguistic capacities. According to Caruth (1996), trauma is characterized by delayed comprehension, repetitive return, and narrative fragmentation, making conventional chronological storytelling inadequate for representing traumatic experience. Herman (1992) similarly argues that traumatic events disrupt an individual's sense of continuity, resulting in fragmented memory, emotional disorientation, and altered self-perception. These theoretical perspectives have profoundly influenced literary criticism, where fragmented narratives, disrupted temporal structures, and unreliable memories are interpreted as formal manifestations of psychological trauma.

While trauma theory has generated valuable insights into literary representations of violence, it has often emphasized the limitations of language and representation rather than the cognitive processes through which narratives are understood by readers. This limitation has encouraged scholars to adopt cognitive approaches that examine how readers mentally construct fictional worlds, interpret characters' psychological states, and experience narrative empathy (Herman, 2009; Palmer, 2004). Cognitive narratology extends classical narratology by integrating findings from cognitive science, psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience to explain how narrative meaning emerges through interactions between textual structures and readers' mental processes (Fludernik, 1996; Herman, 2009). Instead of viewing narrative solely as a formal arrangement of events, cognitive narratology conceptualizes storytelling as a dynamic process involving perception, memory, inference, imagination, and emotional simulation.

Recent developments in postclassical narratology have highlighted the significance of character consciousness, mental-state attribution, and experientiality in literary interpretation. Palmer (2004) argues that fictional minds are constructed through readers' continuous inference of characters' beliefs, intentions, and emotions, whereas Fludernik (1996) identifies experientiality as the defining feature of narrative discourse. Similarly, Zunshine (2006) demonstrates that literary reading depends upon Theory of Mind—the human capacity to infer the mental states of others—which enables readers to engage deeply with fictional characters. Caracciolo (2014) further proposes that narratives evoke embodied emotional experiences by encouraging readers to simulate the perceptual and affective worlds of

fictional characters. These perspectives provide valuable analytical tools for understanding how trauma narratives communicate experiences that are often inaccessible through direct description.

Nadeem Aslam's fiction offers particularly fertile ground for cognitive narratological investigation because his narratives consistently foreground fragmented memory, shifting focalization, nonlinear temporality, and multiple consciousnesses. Rather than presenting traumatic events in a straightforward chronological sequence, Aslam constructs intricate narrative architectures in which memories emerge recursively, perspectives shift among numerous characters, and emotional experiences are conveyed through symbolic imagery and sensory detail. Such narrative strategies require readers to actively reconstruct causal relationships and psychological motivations, transforming reading into a collaborative process of cognitive meaning-making. The fragmented narrative structures in *The Wasted Vigil* and *The Blind Man's Garden*, for example, mirror the disrupted temporal perception frequently associated with traumatic memory while simultaneously inviting readers to integrate dispersed narrative fragments into coherent mental representations.

Although existing scholarship has extensively explored Aslam's novels from postcolonial, political, feminist, religious, and trauma-theoretical perspectives (Ahmed, 2016; Gopal, 2015; Morey, 2011), comparatively little research has examined the cognitive mechanisms underlying his narrative representation of trauma. Most previous studies emphasize thematic concerns such as terrorism, migration, identity, nationalism, or religious extremism, paying limited attention to the cognitive architecture of storytelling itself. Consequently, questions concerning how readers process fragmented narratives, infer characters' psychological states, reconstruct traumatic memories, and experience narrative empathy remain insufficiently addressed within scholarship on Aslam's fiction.

The present study addresses this gap by integrating cognitive narratology with trauma studies to examine how narrative form shapes readers' understanding of psychological suffering in Nadeem Aslam's novels. Rather than treating trauma solely as thematic content, the study investigates how narrative perspective, focalization, temporal disruption, memory reconstruction, interior monologue, and character consciousness function as cognitive devices that guide readers' interpretation of traumatic experience. By combining postclassical narratological theory with contemporary trauma studies, the article contributes to emerging interdisciplinary scholarship that seeks to explain not only what trauma narratives represent but also how readers cognitively experience and emotionally engage with them. In doing so, the study offers a fresh framework for understanding the relationship between narrative form, cognition, memory, and empathy in contemporary Pakistani English fiction.

Statement of the Problem

Nadeem Aslam's fiction has attracted considerable scholarly attention for its exploration of war, terrorism, migration, religious extremism, and postcolonial identity. Existing studies have predominantly examined his novels through the frameworks of postcolonial theory, trauma studies, ecocriticism, political violence, and cultural identity. While these approaches have significantly enhanced understanding of the thematic dimensions of his works, they have paid comparatively little attention to the cognitive processes through which Aslam's narrative techniques represent traumatic experience and shape readers' interpretation of psychological suffering.

Moreover, traditional trauma criticism often focuses on trauma as an unrepresentable historical event characterized by memory fragmentation and narrative disruption, without sufficiently explaining how readers cognitively reconstruct fragmented narratives, infer

characters' mental states, and develop empathy for traumatized individuals. Recent developments in cognitive narratology offer a valuable interdisciplinary framework for examining how narrative perspective, focalization, temporal discontinuity, character consciousness, and memory structures engage readers' cognitive faculties to produce meaningful interpretations of trauma. However, this perspective remains largely underexplored in studies of Pakistani English fiction, particularly in relation to Nadeem Aslam's novels. Consequently, there exists a significant research gap concerning the intersection of cognitive narratology and trauma representation in contemporary Pakistani literature. This study addresses this gap by investigating how Aslam's narrative strategies cognitively construct traumatic experience and facilitate readers' emotional and interpretive engagement with the fictional worlds of *Maps for Lost Lovers*, *The Wasted Vigil*, and *The Blind Man's Garden*.

Research Objectives

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine how cognitive narratological devices—including narrative perspective, focalization, temporal fragmentation, and character consciousness—represent traumatic experiences in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, *The Wasted Vigil*, and *The Blind Man's Garden*.
2. To analyze how Aslam's narrative structures facilitate readers' cognitive processing of trauma through memory reconstruction, mental-state attribution, and narrative empathy.
3. To demonstrate how the integration of cognitive narratology and trauma theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between narrative form, cognition, and psychological trauma in contemporary Pakistani English fiction.

Literature Review

Trauma Theory and the Representation of Psychological Suffering

Trauma has become one of the most influential paradigms in literary and cultural studies for examining narratives of violence, displacement, war, and historical catastrophe. Early trauma scholarship was primarily informed by psychoanalytic theories that conceptualized trauma as an overwhelming event that exceeds ordinary cognitive processing and therefore resists immediate representation (Caruth, 1996). According to Caruth (1996), trauma is not simply the experience of violence itself but the delayed and repetitive return of that experience through intrusive memories, dreams, and fragmented recollections. Consequently, literary narratives frequently employ disrupted chronology, narrative gaps, silence, and repetition to approximate the psychological effects of traumatic memory.

Herman (1992) further expanded this understanding by identifying trauma as a rupture in an individual's sense of self, memory, and interpersonal relationships. She argues that traumatic experiences interrupt normal cognitive functioning, resulting in dissociation, emotional numbing, and fragmented recollections that resist linear narration. Herman's psychological framework has profoundly influenced literary criticism by encouraging scholars to examine how narrative form reflects disrupted consciousness rather than merely recounting historical events.

Felman and Laub (1992) shifted attention toward testimony and witnessing, arguing that trauma narratives function as acts of bearing witness in which storytelling becomes an ethical encounter between narrator and audience. Their work demonstrates that literary narratives not only document suffering but also invite readers to participate in reconstructing fragmented experiences. This emphasis on testimony has significantly shaped studies of postcolonial literature, where narratives often negotiate collective memories of colonial violence, displacement, and political conflict.

While early trauma theory emphasized the impossibility of fully representing traumatic experience, more recent scholarship has questioned this assumption. Balaev (2014) argues that trauma should not be understood solely as an inexpressible psychological wound but as an experience mediated by culture, history, and individual cognition. She proposes a pluralistic model that recognizes multiple forms of traumatic representation rather than privileging fragmentation as the only authentic narrative strategy. This perspective is particularly valuable for analyzing contemporary postcolonial fiction, where trauma is embedded within complex social, political, and cultural contexts rather than isolated psychological events.

The interdisciplinary development of trauma studies has therefore encouraged scholars to move beyond purely psychoanalytic interpretations toward approaches that integrate cognition, affect, ethics, and reader response. Such developments provide an important foundation for examining how literary narratives communicate psychological suffering through specific narrative techniques.

Cognitive Narratology: From Structural Narratology to Cognitive Approaches

Classical narratology, developed by scholars such as Gérard Genette (1980), Roland Barthes (1977), and Tzvetan Todorov (1977), focused primarily on the structural organization of narrative, including plot, narrative levels, temporality, and focalization. Although these approaches established important analytical categories, they largely treated narrative as a formal linguistic system and paid comparatively little attention to readers' cognitive engagement with fictional worlds.

The emergence of postclassical narratology during the 1990s transformed narrative studies by incorporating insights from cognitive science, linguistics, psychology, and philosophy of mind (Herman, 1999). Rather than viewing narratives as static textual structures, cognitive narratology conceptualizes storytelling as a dynamic interaction between textual cues and readers' mental processes. Herman (2009) argues that readers continuously construct "storyworlds" by integrating textual information with prior knowledge, memory, inference, and imagination. Narrative comprehension therefore depends upon complex cognitive activities rather than simple decoding of linguistic structures.

Fludernik's (1996) theory of natural narratology further emphasizes that narratives derive coherence from experientiality—the representation of human experience—rather than merely chronological sequences of events. According to Fludernik, readers interpret narratives by mapping textual information onto familiar cognitive schemas derived from everyday experience. This approach is particularly relevant to trauma fiction, where disrupted chronology and fragmented narration require readers to reconstruct coherent experiential worlds from dispersed narrative fragments.

Palmer (2004) extends cognitive narratology by proposing the concept of "fictional minds." He argues that readers continuously infer characters' beliefs, emotions, motivations, intentions, and perceptions throughout narrative progression. Rather than interpreting isolated

psychological descriptions, readers actively construct coherent models of fictional consciousness through distributed textual evidence. This perspective has become especially influential in studies of trauma fiction because traumatized characters frequently exhibit fragmented cognition, contradictory memories, and disrupted emotional states.

Similarly, Zunshine (2006) draws upon Theory of Mind research to explain why readers effortlessly attribute mental states to fictional characters. Literary narratives encourage readers to infer hidden beliefs, desires, intentions, and emotions, thereby producing emotional engagement and narrative immersion. Theory of Mind provides an important explanatory framework for understanding how readers empathize with traumatized characters despite the indirect and fragmented nature of traumatic representation.

More recently, Caracciolo (2014) has emphasized the embodied dimensions of narrative experience. Drawing upon enactivist theories of cognition, he argues that readers do not merely understand fictional events intellectually but mentally simulate characters' perceptual and emotional experiences. Narrative meaning therefore emerges through embodied cognitive engagement rather than abstract textual interpretation alone. Such an approach is particularly productive for examining Nadeem Aslam's fiction, whose rich sensory descriptions and emotionally complex characters invite readers to participate imaginatively in experiences of violence, grief, and displacement.

Collectively, these developments demonstrate that cognitive narratology provides a powerful interdisciplinary framework for understanding how literary narratives construct psychological experience and guide readers' emotional and interpretive responses. By foregrounding memory, consciousness, experientiality, and mental-state attribution, cognitive narratology complements trauma theory and enables more nuanced analyses of the relationship between narrative form and psychological suffering.

Character Consciousness, Narrative Empathy, and Memory Reconstruction

One of the most significant developments in postclassical narratology is the shift from analysing narrative structures to investigating how readers construct fictional consciousness. Rather than treating characters as static textual entities, cognitive narratologists argue that readers actively infer beliefs, emotions, intentions, memories, and perceptions through continuous mental-state attribution (Palmer, 2004). Narrative comprehension is therefore a dynamic cognitive activity in which readers integrate textual cues with their own experiential knowledge to construct coherent representations of fictional minds (Herman, 2009).

Palmer's (2004) concept of *fictional minds* fundamentally reorients narratology by demonstrating that narratives primarily represent networks of interacting consciousnesses rather than merely sequences of events. Readers continually infer characters' psychological states, even when these are only implicitly suggested through dialogue, silence, or behavioural descriptions. Such inferential processes become especially important in trauma fiction, where psychological suffering is often communicated indirectly through fragmented memories, disrupted speech, emotional withdrawal, and shifting perspectives rather than explicit explanation.

Closely related to Palmer's work is Zunshine's (2006) application of Theory of Mind to literary studies. Drawing upon cognitive psychology, Zunshine argues that readers instinctively attribute intentions, beliefs, and emotions to fictional characters in much the same way that they interpret real people. Literary narratives exploit this cognitive capacity by encouraging readers to negotiate multiple layers of consciousness, uncertainty, and intentionality. Trauma narratives intensify these interpretive demands because characters

frequently suppress, distort, or incompletely remember painful experiences, requiring readers to reconstruct psychological realities from fragmented textual evidence.

Fludernik's (1996) notion of experientiality similarly emphasizes that narrative is fundamentally concerned with representing lived human experience. Rather than deriving coherence solely from chronological plot progression, readers organize narratives around cognitive models of perception, memory, and consciousness. This approach is particularly relevant to traumatic narratives, where disrupted temporal order mirrors the psychological fragmentation associated with traumatic memory. Consequently, nonlinear narration is not merely a stylistic experiment but a cognitive representation of lived experience.

Narrative empathy constitutes another important dimension of cognitive narratology. Keen (2006) argues that narrative techniques such as internal focalization, free indirect discourse, detailed characterization, and shifting perspectives encourage readers to experience empathy toward fictional characters. Empathy in literature does not imply emotional identification alone; rather, it involves understanding another person's cognitive and emotional perspective while maintaining awareness of narrative mediation. Hogan (2011) likewise demonstrates that emotional structures embedded within narrative significantly influence readers' affective responses and ethical judgments.

Recent scholarship has expanded this discussion by emphasizing embodied cognition. Caracciolo (2014) proposes that readers mentally simulate fictional experiences through embodied imagination, allowing narrative worlds to become psychologically meaningful. Reading therefore involves more than intellectual interpretation; it activates sensory imagination, emotional engagement, and affective participation. Within trauma fiction, such embodied simulation enables readers to experience the uncertainty, fear, vulnerability, and fractured temporality associated with traumatic consciousness without directly undergoing those experiences themselves.

These theoretical developments are particularly valuable for understanding Nadeem Aslam's fiction. His novels consistently foreground fragmented consciousness, recursive memory, multiple focalization, and psychologically complex characters whose inner lives unfold gradually through nonlinear narration. Rather than providing transparent psychological explanation, Aslam requires readers to infer emotional histories from interrupted memories, symbolic imagery, silence, and dispersed narrative episodes. Such narrative strategies transform reading into an active process of cognitive reconstruction and ethical engagement, illustrating the explanatory power of cognitive narratology for analysing trauma narratives.

Critical Scholarship on Nadeem Aslam's Fiction

Critical studies of Nadeem Aslam's fiction have predominantly focused on postcolonial violence, terrorism, migration, religious identity, and trauma. His novels are widely recognised for portraying the human consequences of political conflict while resisting simplistic representations of Islam, nationalism, and global terrorism. Scholars have consistently observed that Aslam's narratives privilege ordinary human experiences over geopolitical narratives, foregrounding vulnerability, grief, memory, and ethical responsibility.

Monaco (2021) argues that *The Blind Man's Garden* and *The Golden Legend* construct an ethics of empathy through narrative fragmentation, shifting focalization, and temporal disjunction. Rather than merely depicting violence, Aslam employs formal narrative strategies that invite readers to recognise shared human vulnerability across political and religious boundaries. Monaco contends that these narrative techniques transform post-9/11 fiction into a space of ethical witnessing, where empathy emerges through readers' active

engagement with fractured narrative structures rather than through sentimental identification alone.

Similarly, studies of *The Blind Man's Garden* have emphasized trauma, identity formation, and the psychological consequences of the War on Terror. Khan, Noor, and Chaudhary (2021), drawing upon Ann Whitehead's trauma theory, demonstrate that the novel represents both individual and collective trauma through disrupted memory, emotional suffering, and fractured identities, highlighting how political violence reshapes everyday life.

More recent scholarship has increasingly examined memory as a central organising principle in Aslam's fiction. Hussein and Ali (2025) analyse *The Wasted Vigil* as a post-9/11 trauma narrative in which memory, identity, and historical violence interact through complex narrative structures. They argue that traumatic memory destabilises coherent identities while exposing the long-term psychological consequences of war, colonial intervention, and religious conflict.

Recent postcolonial analyses likewise stress Aslam's experimentation with narrative form. A 2025 study of *The Wasted Vigil* interprets the novel's fragmented structure and multiple perspectives as a literary counter-archive that challenges dominant geopolitical narratives by foregrounding mourning, memory, and subaltern experience. Likewise, a recent narratological reading of *The Blind Man's Garden* argues that historiographic metafiction, temporal multiplicity, and metafictional techniques function as epistemological strategies for representing postcolonial trauma beyond the limits of conventional realism.

Despite these important contributions, existing scholarship remains largely grounded in postcolonial studies, trauma theory, memory studies, and political criticism. Very few studies explicitly employ cognitive narratology to explain how readers mentally process Aslam's fragmented narratives, reconstruct fictional consciousness, or develop empathy through narrative form. Consequently, the cognitive mechanisms underlying focalization, temporal disruption, character consciousness, and memory reconstruction remain insufficiently theorised. This gap is significant because Aslam's fiction depends not only upon representing trauma as thematic content but also upon engaging readers in cognitive acts of inference, simulation, and emotional interpretation. The present study therefore extends previous scholarship by integrating cognitive narratology with trauma theory to provide a more comprehensive account of how narrative form mediates traumatic experience in contemporary Pakistani English fiction.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in textual analysis to investigate the cognitive narratology of trauma in Nadeem Aslam's fiction. The primary corpus comprises *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), and *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013), selected because they collectively explore the psychological consequences of migration, religious extremism, war, displacement, and collective violence. Data consist of narrative episodes, interior monologues, dialogues, descriptive passages, and memory sequences that portray traumatic experiences. The analysis employs close reading to identify narrative techniques such as focalization, temporal fragmentation, nonlinear chronology, narrative perspective, free indirect discourse, interiority, and character consciousness. These textual features are examined to determine how they represent trauma and guide readers' cognitive interpretation of fictional events. Rather than treating trauma solely as thematic content, the study focuses on the interaction between narrative form and readers' mental processes, exploring how fragmented storytelling encourages the

reconstruction of memory, inference of characters' mental states, and the development of narrative empathy. The qualitative approach is particularly appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth examination of the linguistic and narratological complexities through which trauma is represented in literary discourse (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study is theoretically informed by postclassical cognitive narratology, drawing primarily on Herman's (2009) theory of storyworlds, Palmer's (2004) concept of fictional minds, Fludernik's (1996) notion of experientiality, Zunshine's (2006) Theory of Mind approach to literary cognition, and Caracciolo's (2014) enactivist model of narrative experientiality. These perspectives are integrated with contemporary trauma theory, particularly the works of Caruth (1996), Herman (1992), and Balaev (2014), to examine how traumatic experiences are cognitively constructed through narrative discourse. The analytical framework conceptualizes trauma as both a psychological and narrative phenomenon in which disrupted temporality, fragmented memory, shifting focalization, and multiple consciousnesses mirror the cognitive effects of violence and loss. By combining cognitive narratology with trauma studies, the framework enables a multidimensional analysis of how narrative techniques shape readers' understanding of psychological suffering, ethical engagement, and emotional participation. This interdisciplinary synthesis provides a comprehensive model for examining the relationship between narrative structure, cognition, memory, and trauma in contemporary Pakistani English fiction.

Data Analysis

Fragmented Temporality and Traumatic Memory in *The Wasted Vigil*

One of the most distinctive cognitive features of *The Wasted Vigil* is its fragmented temporal structure. Rather than presenting events in a linear chronological sequence, the narrative repeatedly shifts between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban regime, the aftermath of 9/11, and the personal memories of the central characters. These temporal movements require readers to actively reconstruct the storyworld by connecting dispersed narrative fragments. According to Herman (2009), storyworld construction is a cognitive process in which readers organize discontinuous textual information into coherent mental representations. Aslam deliberately disrupts chronological order to reproduce the fragmented nature of traumatic memory, where recollections emerge unpredictably rather than sequentially.

Throughout the novel, characters recall episodes of violence through involuntary memories triggered by places, objects, and interpersonal encounters. Memories interrupt present events, demonstrating that trauma remains psychologically unresolved rather than confined to the past. Instead of functioning as conventional flashbacks, these recollections blur temporal boundaries, compelling readers to navigate multiple temporal frames simultaneously. This narrative strategy reflects Caruth's (1996) argument that trauma is experienced belatedly, returning repeatedly because it has not been fully integrated into conscious memory.

From a cognitive narratological perspective, these discontinuous narrative movements increase readers' inferential activity. Readers must continuously identify temporal transitions, infer causal relationships between past and present events, and reconstruct each character's psychological history. Palmer's (2004) concept of fictional minds explains this process by suggesting that readers actively assemble fragmented mental states into coherent models of consciousness. Rather than explicitly explaining trauma, Aslam encourages readers to cognitively simulate the disorientation experienced by traumatized individuals. The

fragmented chronology therefore functions not merely as an aesthetic device but as a cognitive representation of traumatic consciousness.

Character Consciousness and Fictional Minds in *Maps for Lost Lovers*

Maps for Lost Lovers foregrounds psychological interiority by presenting multiple characters whose perceptions are shaped by grief, cultural displacement, religious conservatism, and emotional isolation. Instead of relying upon an omniscient explanatory narrator, Aslam frequently shifts focalization among different consciousnesses, allowing readers to experience events from contrasting psychological perspectives. These transitions illustrate Palmer's (2004) proposition that narratives represent interacting fictional minds rather than isolated individuals.

Characters often interpret identical events differently according to their memories, beliefs, and emotional experiences. Consequently, readers cannot depend upon a single authoritative perspective but must integrate multiple viewpoints into a coherent understanding of the fictional world. This process reflects Herman's (2009) notion that readers continuously construct storyworlds through inferential reasoning. Narrative meaning therefore emerges from readers' active participation rather than passive reception.

Trauma within the novel is represented less through dramatic external events than through enduring psychological consequences. Bereavement, silence, guilt, and cultural alienation gradually shape characters' perceptions of themselves and others. Emotional suffering frequently remains implicit, requiring readers to infer psychological states from symbolic descriptions, fragmented conversations, and subtle behavioural changes. Zunshine's (2006) Theory of Mind provides an appropriate explanation for this narrative effect. Readers continually attribute beliefs, intentions, fears, and emotional motivations to characters despite the absence of explicit psychological explanation. Such cognitive engagement generates narrative empathy by encouraging readers to occupy multiple emotional perspectives simultaneously.

The novel's rich symbolic imagery further contributes to cognitive processing. Natural landscapes, changing seasons, birds, flowers, and weather conditions repeatedly mirror emotional states without reducing them to simple allegory. Readers mentally connect environmental descriptions with characters' internal experiences, illustrating Caracciolo's (2014) argument that literary narratives evoke embodied simulation rather than abstract interpretation. Emotional understanding emerges through the interaction of sensory imagination, memory, and narrative inference.

Multiple Focalization and Narrative Empathy in *The Blind Man's Garden*

Among Aslam's novels, *The Blind Man's Garden* most explicitly demonstrates how multiple focalization facilitates readers' cognitive engagement with traumatic experience. The narrative alternates among numerous characters whose lives are transformed by the global War on Terror. Rather than privileging a single ideological perspective, the novel distributes narrative authority across diverse social, political, and cultural positions. This polyphonic structure encourages readers to evaluate competing experiences of violence instead of accepting simplified moral binaries.

From the perspective of cognitive narratology, shifting focalization requires continuous mental-state attribution. Readers repeatedly revise their understanding of events as new perspectives reveal previously inaccessible motivations, memories, and emotions. According to Fludernik (1996), experientiality constitutes the defining characteristic of narrative because

readers organize stories around human experience rather than chronological events alone. Aslam's shifting focalization therefore foregrounds lived psychological experience rather than historical chronology.

Narrative empathy develops through prolonged engagement with vulnerable characters whose experiences remain emotionally complex and morally ambiguous. Keen (2006) argues that internal focalization and psychological access significantly enhance readers' empathetic responses. In Aslam's fiction, however, empathy is produced not through sentimentality but through interpretive effort. Readers must actively infer emotional suffering from interrupted conversations, silence, fragmented memories, and symbolic descriptions. Such interpretive labour deepens ethical engagement by transforming reading into a participatory cognitive process.

The novel also demonstrates how traumatic experiences reshape narrative perception itself. Characters frequently interpret present events through memories of earlier violence, causing perception to become inseparable from recollection. Consequently, the distinction between present reality and remembered experience gradually dissolves. This narrative strategy mirrors contemporary cognitive theories suggesting that memory is reconstructive rather than reproductive. Traumatic recollections continually reorganize present consciousness, producing unstable perceptions of identity, morality, and belonging.

Storyworld Construction and Cognitive Simulation

Across all three novels, Aslam constructs highly immersive storyworlds that require sustained cognitive participation from readers. Herman (2009) argues that readers actively build coherent mental environments by integrating narrative information with existing cognitive schemas. Aslam's fragmented narratives intentionally delay explanatory information, compelling readers to formulate, revise, and refine interpretations as new narrative details emerge.

Caracciolo's (2014) concept of experientiality explains why these narratives generate profound emotional engagement despite their structural complexity. Rather than merely understanding traumatic events intellectually, readers mentally simulate uncertainty, grief, vulnerability, and fear through embodied imagination. Rich sensory descriptions, symbolic imagery, and detailed representations of physical environments facilitate this simulation by linking emotional states with perceptual experience.

Furthermore, repeated narrative gaps encourage readers to become co-creators of meaning. Missing information, interrupted memories, and unresolved emotional conflicts require inferential reasoning that extends beyond explicit textual content. Such cognitive participation reflects contemporary postclassical narratology, which conceptualizes reading as an active process of constructing fictional consciousness rather than decoding fixed textual meanings.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Nadeem Aslam's fiction represents trauma through sophisticated cognitive narrative strategies rather than through direct depictions of violence alone. By integrating cognitive narratology with trauma theory, the analysis reveals that narrative form itself functions as a cognitive mechanism that enables readers to reconstruct fragmented memories, infer fictional consciousness, and experience narrative empathy. Across *Maps for Lost Lovers*, *The Wasted Vigil*, and *The Blind Man's Garden*, trauma is represented as an ongoing psychological process that reshapes memory, perception,

and identity. Instead of presenting traumatic events as isolated historical incidents, Aslam depicts trauma as an enduring cognitive condition that continually influences characters' interpretations of themselves and the world around them. This finding supports Caruth's (1996) argument that trauma is characterized by delayed and repetitive return while extending her theoretical framework through the insights of cognitive narratology.

The study further confirms Herman's (2009) proposition that readers actively construct storyworlds by integrating dispersed textual information into coherent mental representations. Aslam's fragmented chronology, recursive memories, and nonlinear narration require readers to engage in continuous inferential reasoning. Rather than reducing narrative complexity, these formal strategies reproduce the cognitive disorientation experienced by traumatized individuals. Consequently, readers become active participants in reconstructing narrative coherence, mirroring the psychological process through which traumatic memories are gradually organized into meaningful experiences. This observation reinforces Fludernik's (1996) concept of experientiality by demonstrating that narrative coherence emerges through readers' cognitive engagement with lived experience rather than chronological sequencing alone.

The analysis also substantiates Palmer's (2004) theory of fictional minds by illustrating how Aslam constructs multiple interacting consciousnesses instead of relying upon singular narrative authority. Characters' memories, perceptions, and emotional responses frequently overlap, conflict, and evolve, compelling readers to infer complex psychological states from fragmented textual cues. Such distributed consciousness enriches narrative interpretation by emphasizing that trauma is simultaneously individual and collective. In this respect, Aslam's fiction challenges simplistic representations of victims and perpetrators, presenting psychologically nuanced characters whose identities are continuously negotiated through memory, guilt, loss, and moral uncertainty.

Similarly, Zunshine's (2006) Theory of Mind provides valuable insight into the mechanisms through which Aslam generates narrative empathy. Readers repeatedly infer hidden beliefs, intentions, fears, and emotional motivations despite the absence of explicit psychological explanation. Empathy therefore emerges through interpretive labour rather than sentimental identification. Caracciolo's (2014) enactivist approach further explains how readers mentally simulate characters' sensory and emotional experiences, transforming reading into an embodied cognitive process. These findings indicate that Aslam's narrative strategies encourage ethical engagement by inviting readers to experience psychological vulnerability across cultural, political, and religious boundaries.

From the perspective of Pakistani English literary studies, this research contributes an interdisciplinary framework that expands existing trauma scholarship. Previous studies have largely examined Aslam's novels through postcolonialism, political violence, memory studies, and religious identity, whereas the present study foregrounds the cognitive architecture of narrative itself. By integrating cognitive narratology with trauma theory, the study demonstrates that narrative techniques—including focalization, temporal fragmentation, character consciousness, and memory reconstruction—are central to understanding how trauma is represented and cognitively experienced. The findings therefore contribute not only to Pakistani literary criticism but also to broader debates in postclassical narratology, cognitive literary studies, and trauma research.

Conclusion

This study examined the cognitive narratology of trauma in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, *The Wasted Vigil*, and *The Blind Man's Garden* by integrating postclassical narratology with contemporary trauma theory. The analysis demonstrates that Aslam's novels employ fragmented temporality, multiple focalization, recursive memory, symbolic imagery, and psychologically complex characterization to represent the cognitive consequences of violence, displacement, and historical conflict. These narrative strategies do not merely describe traumatic experiences; they actively reproduce the fragmented processes through which trauma is remembered, interpreted, and emotionally negotiated. Consequently, readers become cognitively engaged in reconstructing fictional worlds, inferring characters' mental states, and developing narrative empathy through sustained interpretive participation.

The study further establishes that cognitive narratology provides a productive theoretical framework for understanding how narrative form shapes readers' perception of trauma. Herman's theory of storyworlds, Palmer's concept of fictional minds, Fludernik's experientiality, Zunshine's Theory of Mind, and Caracciolo's model of embodied narrative experience collectively illuminate the cognitive mechanisms through which Aslam's fiction transforms psychological suffering into meaningful literary experience. Rather than treating trauma solely as thematic content, this interdisciplinary approach reveals trauma as a cognitive, emotional, and narratological phenomenon mediated through narrative structure. In doing so, the research extends existing scholarship on Pakistani English fiction by demonstrating that readers' cognitive participation is fundamental to the representation of traumatic consciousness.

The study also contributes to the growing field of cognitive literary studies by illustrating how postclassical narratology can enrich trauma research beyond traditional psychoanalytic models. It highlights the importance of examining not only what narratives represent but also how they guide readers' cognitive and emotional engagement with fictional experiences. Future research may extend this framework by incorporating empirical reader-response methods, cognitive stylistics, corpus-assisted narratology, or digital humanities approaches to investigate readers' processing of trauma narratives across different cultural contexts. Comparative analyses of Pakistani, South Asian, and other postcolonial literatures may further deepen understanding of how narrative cognition shapes the literary representation of collective memory, violence, and resilience. Ultimately, the integration of cognitive narratology and trauma theory offers a comprehensive model for exploring the intricate relationship between narrative form, human cognition, and psychological experience in contemporary literature.

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