

A Critical Review of Ahmadi's Characterisation in Akh Watana Novel

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – Many contemporary Pashto novelists depicted realistic pictures of Afghan society. However, Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi has effectively and pragmatically presented a vivid depiction through his literary creations, particularly the novels and stories. Among 25 works, Ahmadi's novels are well-read by large audiences inside and outside the country. This study critically examines the symbolic representation of animal characters in Akh! Watana (Oh! Homeland) is a novel that highlights how these characters serve as powerful allegories of the social, cultural, and moral realities of Pashtun society. It also analyses animal characters that embody human traits and societal issues, such as corruption, tribalism, ignorance, and ethical decay, rather than merely serving as literary embellishments.

Method – This qualitative study is conducted through literary research that enriches our perception of nature and human life. Various authentic books, BA students' monographs, literary essays, and online scholarly databases, e.g., Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and others, were also used as data sources. To interpret the data, the literary and thematic analysis techniques were employed to meet the objectives.

Results – This study explored the layers of meaning embedded within the symbolic characters, demonstrating how they reflected both individual and collective struggles. The study further contextualised Ahmadi's narrative within the tradition of allegorical literature, underscoring its significant contribution to contemporary Afghan literary discourse.

Practical Implications – Ultimately, the novel's use of animal characterisation not only critiques prevailing social injustices but also calls for moral awakening and societal reform. It also helps to invite readers to engage in deep self-reflection and heightened social consciousness, not in the original language, such as Pashto, but in English.

Originality/Novelty – This research provides a critical analysis of Ahmadi's novel 'Akh! Watana' not only fills a knowledge gap but also a methodological one, offering new insights and perspectives on Pashtun writers and experts.

Keywords – Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi, Akh! Watana Novel, Animal characters, Symbolism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Novel is a term derived from the Italian Novella (Hashemi, 2010). It is the most important gift of bourgeois, or capitalist, civilisation to the world's imaginative culture: its grand adventure and the discovery of man (Fox, 1956). A novel is an extended narrative work of fiction that often focuses on character development and complex plotting (Abrams, 2012). In addition, a novel is a storytelling medium that allows authors to explore 'the secret life' which each of us lives inwardly (Forster, 1927).

The art of writing novels emerged at different times across nations and cultures, as Sayedee (2022) writes that the beginning of Pashto novel writing in Afghanistan is also debatable. It is so because some claim that Mahmoud Tarzi was the first to write, but he usually wrote in Dari. Others say that Abdul Hai Habibi was the first to write a Pashto novel, but it was a translation from Persian. In fact, the first known Pashto novel, 'Pata Mina' (The Secret Love), was written by Burhanuddin Kashki and published in 1938, containing 84 pages. Even though its content was about foreign themes rather than Pashtun society, in this year Mohammad Rafiq Qani wrote 'Dwa Sara Mayan Worona' (English: The Two Loved Brothers). In his viewpoint, the credit for Pashto novels goes to Noor Mohammad Taraki. After Taraki, the process of novel writing continued worthily and fortunately until today, sufficient pure Pashto novels have been written, among which the most fantastic novels are of Sir Shpoon and those of youth belong to Ahmadi (Sayedee, 2022). Essentially, a novel is not a creative literary genre of Pashto literature. Pashto novel writing at this stage in the world of fiction has amazingly evolved, and there are now various types of Pashto novels. There are numerous readers of it throughout the country (Adabpal, et al., 2025), as Sayedee (2022) writes that there are two main categories of novels based on 'fann' or art, such as 1) the character novel and 2) the realistic novel. However, there are various types of novels based on their content, such as ideological, reformatory, romantic, spy, historical, dramatic, police, social class, sci-fi, sexual, political, and psychological novels.

One of the most indispensable elements of a novel is its character, as Nisar Ahmad Arya writes that, linguistically, the word 'character' refers to a person's unique traits, nature, and personality. In general terms, it denotes the collection of qualities that emerge as a result of various social conditions, representing the outcomes of an individual's instincts and hidden inclinations. In literature, the term 'character' refers to a created figure who possesses traits similar to those of a real human being and appears with these traits in a fictional genre such as a story, novel, or drama (Arya, 2019).

Regarding characterisation, Zolmai Halimi writes that it is essential in fiction because writers consider character more important than other elements of the story. Based on their views, it is the character that drives the story forward; events unfold through their actions, and the story's complexity or simplicity depends on them. To introduce a character to the reader, the writer reveals the character's physical appearance, moral values, psychological state, social background, and other traits through what the character says and does—this process is called characterisation. The better a character is portrayed, the more believable their actions become to the reader, and the more convincing the story appears (Halimi, 2018).

Many writers and literary scholars have provided guidelines and valuable suggestions to help fiction writers with characterisation. For adequate characterisation, a writer must think comprehensively about their character (hero), including their name, gender, age, clothing, language, physical features, inner traits, and social characteristics. This ensures that the writer does not encounter difficulties when describing the character. A story writer should study their character thoroughly and understand them in every sense.

In literary terms, characterisation is the art or technique used in stories, novels, and dramas to organise and portray the actions, behaviour, personalities, and psychological structures of characters. Every story in the world is written about either someone or something. In a narrative, these "who" or "what" elements serve as characters. When these characters are presented in an organised, artistic, and skilful manner within a story, novel, or drama, the process is referred to as characterisation (Siddiqi, 2017).

Characters based on personality are generally classified into four types: protagonist, antagonist, symbolic, and type characters. Likewise, there are two types of characters based on their actions: positive and negative. Moreover, in this regard, the writer should allow characters to develop naturally, just as real people do, with both good and bad qualities. The negative traits of a character should not be hidden from the readers, nor should they be entirely condemned. Instead, the character should be portrayed as a realistic human being with both strengths and flaws (Arya, 2019).

A character can be presented in a story through three key aspects: physical appearance, including facial expressions, clothing, body language, and overall physical description. The Psychological Traits refer to the character's thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and personal struggles, which shape their decisions and actions in the story. Moreover, the Social Status highlights the character's relationships, social position, profession, and interactions with others in the community (Halimi, 2018).

Among the many essential elements of characterisation, one of the most crucial is the character's language. A character must speak in a manner that aligns with their social status, personality, and profession. In a story or any fictional work, if a character is not given a voice, the reader cannot fully believe in their existence. It is through dialogue that the character's presence is truly established.

Giving a character voice is a challenging task. Suppose a character's speech is either too elevated or too simplistic and does not correspond with their behaviour, thoughts, or personality. In that case, the reader will perceive the character as unrealistic or artificial. However, if the character's speech aligns with their identity, context, and needs, they appear genuine and believable to the reader. Many writers fail in this aspect—their stories feel incomplete because the characters' speech does not match their situation. In contrast, experienced and skilled writers ensure that their characters speak in a manner consistent with their level and background. For example, if a character is a farmer, he should speak like a farmer; if he is a scholar or a writer, his speech should reflect that. Similarly, if the character is a rural young man, his language must differ from that of an educated urban youth. The villager should speak in a rural dialect, using expressions common to everyday life in his community. It would be inappropriate to make such a character speak like a teacher or a highly educated person.

If the writer has already convincingly portrayed the rural character's external appearance, the reader will be inclined to believe in his authenticity. However, suppose the same character is made to speak like a doctor or a teacher, well above his level of experience. In that case, the story will not only seem unrealistic, but the character will also appear artificial and imaginary.

Another important aspect of a character's language that requires attention is their dialect and manner of speech. Every character should speak in their own natural dialect and style. Regional expressions and idioms should come naturally from their mouth. A villager must speak in the rural dialect, while an urban character should use the language of the city. In short, every character should speak in a way that reflects their background, region, and identity, so that their language feels natural and authentic (Halimi, 2018).

Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi (1974- 2021) in Pashto contemporary literature is a prominent Afghan novelist who began his primary Islamic education at the local mosque and later enrolled in Sultan Mahmood Ghaznavi High School and Habibia High School. Afterwards, he was admitted to the Faculty of Agriculture at Kandahar University and later left due to economic issues. He began his professional career with BBC Radio's Educational Department. Initially working as a producer, he later became an editor of feature publications, especially for children and adults. Ahmadi's contribution to Pashto modern literature, particularly for prose narrative and novel writing, is of great importance. It is because he frequently employed modern narrative techniques, such as internal monologue, nonlinear storytelling, and flashbacks, that reflect the psychological struggles, identity crises, and social hardships (Adabpal et al., 2025).

Ahmadi's writing is distinguished by its imagery-rich descriptions, village-based settings, and social realism. He sought to capture the soul of Afghan society, highlighting the consequences of conflict on ordinary lives. His stories call for moderation, unity, and national development. Many literary critics,

such as Mr Pasarly, believe that Ahmadi introduced Afghans to the art of reading stories and familiarised them with the habit of literary reading.

In this direction, for example, Meena Nazari writes that Ahmadi's novels often revolve around the lives of women. Even if the central theme is different, he still gives attention to women and highlights their deprivations. While this is partly true, I argue that Ahmadi has not only written about women's lives but has powerfully portrayed all the corrupt aspects of Pashtun society. His storytelling is so vivid that the reader feels as if they are a member of that very society, witnessing its injustices firsthand. For example, Ahmadi did not seek freedom and education for his neighbour's daughter, but started from his own home. Ahmadi's novelistic language is known to everyone and his fans. He focused more on the story's language. He valued the natural structure of sentences. He preferred the language that could evoke imagination. Additionally, she writes that images appear on all the covers of Ahmadi's works. These images show his imagination on the cover pages (Nazari, 2023).

Gul Noor Shafaq writes that Ahmadi is well-known for his simple, flowing, and imagery-rich style in Pashto prose narratives. Moreover, he is supposed to be a writer of a unique style. In his short life, he has published approximately 25 works. According to some literati, it is his tendency toward writing; however, his works need further research, as his experiences will be helpful for prose narratives.

In the same way, Shafiqa Khpalwak, under the title of 'Hamza Baba Rejuvenated Pashto Ghazal and Ahmadi Prose Narrative', writes that Ahmadi was not inclined to writing due to his enthusiasm but as a responsibility. She also adds that Ahmadi has written for each category of people. Each category of people read him and understood his language. His language was very simple and common to everyone; he employed themes in his writings that incorporated the daily lives of our people.

Similarly, Muhibullah Zgham, under the title 'What Would Ahmadi Write, You Would Perceive Them', writes that Ahmadi's simple, flowing and figurative language, full of suspense, is said to be one of his writing's important characteristics, which, according to many Pashto literary reviewers, is a unique property. His most important feature is his pictorial prose. His other perfection and maturity were evident when he used terms from his own dialect that do not appear in other dialects of Pashto. I think it is best because if someone has not heard such terms, they will definitely understand them from the narrative's context. This gradually increases the storage capacity for words in Pashto. He adds that his prose was like watching a movie. You would see everything. You would perceive everything with all your senses. He hears all the sounds; he entangles the smoothness and harshness by himself. That means, you will perceive all by your five senses (Shafaq, 2023).

Baheer writes that Lat. Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi was the pioneer of the Pashto novel, whose substitute may not exist in Pashto literature. The peculiarity of his novels or stories in general was that they did not relate to only one stratum of society but depicted the lives of all the individuals of society. If someone wants to see a realistic picture of Pashtun society, the novels of Ahmadi offer fantastic tableaux (Gahiez, 2023).

Ehsanullah Karimi writes that the novels of Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi are the best texts for awakening national perspectives, mindset, and social reform among nations. Moreover, his creative works can compete with other novels from the region and the world based on practical criticism. He is famous for his story writing because he employs a sweet language. That is, how many critics have turned their attention to his short stories and novels. One of his characteristics is his use of rural imagery. Ahmadi has, in his short stories and novels, ever tried to portray a realistic picture of the lives of oppressed Afghans (Karimi, 2021).

Similarly, Asadullah Ghazanfar and Najeeb Manalay argue that characterisation holds special significance in reflecting social realities. Many writers in Pashto and Dari literature strive to depict the moral, political, and cultural conditions of society through their characters. Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi is one of the prominent writers of contemporary Afghan novels, renowned for his distinctive approach to characterisation in storytelling (Ghazanfar & Manalay, 2025). Additionally, Ahmadi (2011) writes that a successful writer puts great effort into characterisation, carefully shaping a character in their mind until it transforms from an imaginary figure into a lifelike being. The writer becomes deeply familiar with both the external (physical) and internal (psychological) aspects of the character before

introducing them into the story. This detailed approach ensures that the character feels real and relatable within the narrative.

Ahmadi and others have shown the true nature of culture and literature, particularly prose narratives. For example, *Jo-Jo*, *Baghdadi Pir*, *Taal*, *Akh! Watana* and other novels by Ahmadi reflect the voices of indigence, poverty, and oppression in the nation. These introduced the imposing traitors and betrayers of this country to the nation. They revealed the supporters of foreign countries and the destroyers of this country. All this was done with artistic perfection, without any harm to it (Sayedee, 2022). According to literary critic Saeed, Ahmadi made significant contributions to the development of modern Pashto novel writing and offered a voice of balance and reason in Afghan literature (Saeed, 2021). More importantly, Ahmadi, in his very short literary life, has authored fourteen novels, five short stories, four biographies, and four translations, among which '*Akh! Watana*' (Oh! Homeland, 2018) is known for its animal characters. To analyse this novel, particularly its characters, is the main objective of the study. This study is limited only to *Akh! Watana* novel, more specifically, the description of animal characterisation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi, who had worked as a playwright on BBC radio, has presented numerous novels and short stories to his nation. He is supposed to be a pioneer and a unique figure among contemporary short story writers in the novel form. He has written novels on various subjects and the values of his country (Sayedee, 2022).

This famous writer of Afghanistan, Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi, is considered to be a famous writer in Pashto narrative literature due to his simple, flowing and figurative language (Selab, 2022), as Zgham also upholds that Ahmadi's most important characteristic was his imaginative and pictorial prose which is feels like watching a movie, seeing everything, understanding it with all the senses. Ahmadi's novels encompass diverse genres, including detective, historical, police, and love stories, reflecting societal realities (Shafaq, 2023). Ahmadi used words from his own dialect in his stories (Omari, 2020), as he himself said that, in every piece of writing, whether a short story or a novel, two aspects should be considered. One is that the reader should enjoy it, which encourages him to read, and the other is that it should have a moral lesson. What I write should convey a big message and some small ones as well; it should also address societal reform (Katib, 2020).

Ahmadi became one of the unique writers in the field of artistic prose (Nasrat, 2017) because he wrote novels for all strata of society. Due to his simple, everyday language, all understood it very clearly because he wrote in accordance with their daily lives (Jawed, 2022). Many stories need to be written as stories (Mayar, 2021). Similarly, writes that when Ahmadi's prose is viewed, it is characterised by a vivid and pictorial language. Ahmadi's prose often conveys a tragic dimension, leaving a profound emotional impact on the reader. His writing realistically portrays the hardships, challenges, emotions, love, culture, and everyday life of Pashtun society. Realism is another key feature of his prose. He consistently presents truth, whether directly or indirectly, which makes him a realist writer. His subjects are mostly new or offer a fresh perspective on traditional themes. His prose is rich with moral lessons and emotional resonance.

'*Akh! Watana*' (Oh! My Homeland) is another gripping novel by Ahmadi, in which the animal characters critique the human characters, suggesting that their lives are far better than the humans' (Sayedee, 2022). Also, Sheba Gahiez writes that *Akh! Watana*'s novel has eight sections, each of which points to and depicts the evil traditions of Pashtun society. The very characteristic of this novel is that it tells us something through the language of animals that humans cannot tell. The evil traditions of Pashtun society, such as violence against women, violating the rights of women, the birth of daughters, the damage of bridges, without fight; life does seem significant to someone, the burning of schools, calling one's own brother an enemy, are the themes told through The Cat's language. Finally, Ahmadi presents reformist proposals to address social problems. Building bridges, schools, equality between the rights of men and women, and educating daughters are examples that depend on the development of the society (Gahiez, 2023). Likewise, Asad comments that *Akh! Watana* is an excellent novel by Ahmadi, in which he portrays the traditions of our forefathers, the importance of women in our society,

the value of a man, education, development, agriculture and livestock, and many other aspects of society. In each section, he has tried to bring both grief and advice, stated beautifully, with satires that make someone laugh and cry (Asad, 2020).

Ismael Larawai writes that in narrative literature, the term 'fable' refers to stories in which animals speak. 'Kalila wa Dimna', a collection of fables, is one of the most famous works that features animal language. In Pashto literature, there are also similar tales where animals communicate, but among Pashto novels, Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi's latest novel, 'Akh! Watana' is the first one that also includes animal dialogues. I read it and enjoyed the communication of animals in the novel.

Ahmadi's novel, Akh! Watana incorporates animal conversations to portray various aspects of our society vividly. Through their dialogues, the animals narrate the story of Rahamdel's family, offering a profound reflection on social realities. Rahamdel is a ruthless human being. He does not treat his daughter humanely. He has exchanged his daughter for a young lady in marriage. He cherishes his boys, even showing them how to fight with rifles. Also, he does not pity even the animals when The Donkey hits him with her leg, he gets angry at her and shoots her to death. The story begins with hitting The Duck. This novel depicts the life of a cruel family member in our society, a story that is the experience of every second person (Larawai, 2018).

Arya (2019) writes that characterisation has been extensively discussed in world literature as a fundamental aspect of narrative fiction. This literary element has played a significant role in folktales, myths, legends, oral stories, and other ancient narrative genres, securing its place in the evolution of storytelling. Throughout history, characterisation has remained an essential tool for shaping narratives and developing engaging literary works (Arya, 2019). As Siddiqi (2017) defines it, a character in a novel should be able to create a dynamic environment within its surroundings and exhibit lively movements. Such characters are innovative in their abilities. Characters that fail to establish such an atmosphere are similar to a stone that only moves mechanically when an external force is applied. Once the force ceases, the movement stops as well.

A character is someone or something that, through their actions and dialogue, creates events and develops the story. This character faces various challenges and obstacles in the field of struggle and confrontation, experiencing different situations and phases. They may stumble and fall, but they never give up on moving forward toward their goal with all their strength and determination (Hashemi, 2010). Regarding the characterisation in Akh! Watana novel, Ahmadi writes that Akh! Watana is a socio-political novel that explores the emotions, values, and decisions of its characters under the shadow of war and social crises. The characters in this novel not only drive the story's progression but also represent the historical and cultural realities of society. While the novel's characters can be compared to those in classic Afghan novels, Ahmadi's unique writing style sets them apart, making his characterisation distinctive and impactful (Ahmadi, 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

The research design used in the analysis of characterisation in Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi's novel Akh! Watana follows a qualitative approach and focuses on thematic and literary analysis techniques to explore the structure, function, and meaning of characters. The literary analysis includes the analysis of characters' personalities, behaviours, and psychological depth. It also includes the characters' dialogues, actions, and interactions. Moreover, it follows the identification of themes and symbols associated with the characters and, finally, explores how characterisation reveals social realities in Afghan society.

As this study is mainly based on secondary data, it also includes primary sources such as the novel itself, *Akh! Watana* was the main text for the study. The translation method was also used to translate the original text into English. Nonetheless, books, monographs, literary articles, and online scholarly databases, e.g., Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and others, were also used to fulfil the objectives of this study.

For the data analysis, some techniques were used to examine the novel's content. The literary analysis examined how Ahmadi constructs characters through physical traits, inner thoughts, and

social roles. Moreover, to study the symbolic meanings of characters, e.g., The Cat, The Duck, The Hen. Furthermore, to interpret how character development contributes to the novel's message. Another technique, such as thematic analysis, was used to identify themes, including oppression, corruption, education, patriotism, and gender inequality, and to analyse how these themes are reflected in character dialogue and actions.

This study is limited only to one novel Akh! Watana's analysis is limited to characterisation, not the whole plot or stylistic features. All sources have been appropriately cited and acknowledged. No plagiarism was committed, and this research was conducted with academic integrity.

4. RESULTS

4. 1. Analysis of the Novel *Akh! Watana*

The novel of Ahmadi 'Akh! Watana' (Oh! Homeland, 2018) represents a significant contribution to contemporary Pashto literature that comprises approximately 180 pages. It is structured into five major sections and divided into eight thematic episodes. The novel offers a profound reflection on the sociocultural realities of Pashtun society. Through symbolic, metaphorical, and anthropomorphic techniques, the author critically engages with the entrenched traditions, systemic inequalities, and widespread social issues prevalent in the region.

At the outset, it is pretty important to know that there is a creative and symbolic use of animal characters, particularly The Cat, The Duck, The Hen, The Donkey, and other creatures, which engage in intellectual and emotional dialogues. These conversations serve as vehicles for critiquing human behaviour. Among the central themes explored in the narrative are gender inequality and the systematic oppression of women. The normalisation of violence and destruction, including the burning of schools and the demolition of bridges. The glorification of corruption and the degradation of national values. And the devaluation of education, development, and empathy.

The novel highlights a disturbing worldview in which individuals who act honestly and uphold moral integrity are mocked or dismissed as naïve. At the same time, those who engage in manipulation and exploitation are celebrated as wise and pragmatic. This dichotomy is masterfully presented through animal allegories, allowing the author to deliver social critique in a nuanced and imaginative way.

The final part of the novel brings together the animal characters to propose an idealistic yet hopeful vision for societal transformation. They advocate for gender equality, investment in education, and the rebuilding of communal trust. These metaphorical solutions reflect the author's belief in collective responsibility and the power of progressive thought.

Furthermore, Akh! Watana exemplifies the effective use of anthropomorphism in literature. The dialogues between animals transcend mere storytelling; they serve as a literary strategy to critique human-centric ideologies and to provoke philosophical introspection. This method also emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings and urges the reader to reevaluate established societal norms from a non-human perspective.

In terms of narrative structure, character development, thematic depth, and stylistic richness, the novel embodies all essential elements of classical and modern novel writing. The inclusion of irony, humour, sorrow, and wisdom adds emotional and intellectual depth to the work, engaging the reader on multiple levels. 'Akh! Watana' is not merely a fictional story; it is a reflective mirror of Afghan society, encompassing the voices of its villages, customs, values, and contradictions. It portrays the dignity of tradition and the pain of its misapplications, the laughter in hardship, and the tears behind silence.

Through its vivid portrayal of rural Afghan life, this novel offers a sharp, poetic, and transformative lens into the challenges and possibilities facing Pashtun communities today. Given its innovative narrative style, critical insights, and symbolic depth, 'Akh! Watana' holds a unique and enduring place within the canon of modern Pashto literature. It stands as both a literary accomplishment and a call for ethical and cultural reawakening.

The novel spans two months, offering a comprehensive portrayal of events and characters within that timeframe. It delves into the customs and practices of the era, challenging and questioning their societal norms. The author skillfully employs an excellent writing style, captivating readers with their prose and storytelling.

The novel encompasses all the key elements and principles of novel writing. It pays meticulous attention to character development, plot structure, thematic exploration, and narrative coherence. The author successfully incorporates these essential aspects, creating a compelling and cohesive literary work. Notably, this novel holds a significant place in contemporary Pashto literature, being recognised as one of the most important and influential works in the Pashto literary tradition. Its impact on the literary landscape is noteworthy, as it showcases the richness and depth of the Pashto language and literature.

4.2 Analysis of the characters in *Akh! Watana* novel

This novel, compared to others, is unique for its characterisation, which is defined by its animal characters. There are some major characters, such as Rahamdel (Kind-hearted), Heley (Duck), Pishó (Cat), and Khra (Donkey) and some minor characters , such as Chérga (Hen), Psa (Sheep), Niazi, Sayrah, Spai (Dog), and Ghwa (Cow). Therefore, seven animal characters in this novel make the story enjoyable, each with various symbolic, metaphorical, and allegorical meanings throughout.

4.2.1. The Character - Rahamdel

Rahamdel is the main, antagonistic, and human character of the novel, which literally means 'pitiful and merciful' but appears as 'brutal and pitiless', representing patriarchy, religious hypocrisy, lust-driven behaviour, and social oppression. He is a cruel, hypocritical, and manipulative man who exploits religion for personal gain. He not only looks down on women but also treats religion as a false facade. He abuses women, violates their rights, and cloaks himself in piety while being immersed in lies, prejudice, and lust.

Rahamdel symbolises oppressive fathers, corrupt religious figures, and remnants of a society where tyranny, religious manipulation, and male dominance represent power. He looks middle-aged, with a greying beard, wears religious attire, holds prayer beads, and appears outwardly very religious but is cruel inside. He is a hypocrite and lustful. At the same time, he is an oppressive father who denies his daughters education, respect, and freedom. In fact, he lacks intellect and relies on force rather than reason. Sarcastically, he resorts to beating, insults, and threats. Throughout the storyline, Rahamdel interacts not only with women but also with his tamed animals, children, and God. He humiliates and threatens women. He beats and insults, and prefers heavy labour for animals. He interacts with children by neglecting them and shows indifference. His prayers and repentance are used for selfish, lustful purposes when he interacts with God.

4.2.2. The Character – Heley

The character Heley is a Pashto animal name meaning 'The Duck' and is the female narrator, an innocent, symbolic character who represents a pure yet helpless conscience. This injured female bird observes the entire story but lacks the power to intervene. She is thoughtful, observant, and sorrowful. She comes from the outside world and is unfamiliar with corruption, cruelty, or male dominance. She symbolises a pure, inexperienced, yet intelligent mind. She is a beautiful, white-feathered bird with an injured wing. She intends to bring about reform, but her ability is limited to witnessing.

The Duck symbolises those minds who understand the values of humanity through exposure to the West, civilisation, or genuine religious principles but remain silent under the weight of oppression, hypocrisy, and patriarchy. She is the voice of the conscience. She watches every moment of the household's life, converses with The Cat, Donkey, Hen, and others, and reflects, compares, and judges their behaviour.

She is powerless but emotionally aware. Although she lacks the power to resist injustice, she deeply feels the pain. She weeps, pleads, and worries, but her wings are tied. She has witnessed respect and humane treatment in Western countries. Her past experiences leave her shocked and saddened by the ignorance and cruelty she now sees.

She has Relationships with other characters. For example, she has an excellent relationship with a cat, which is an intellectual companion. She shares her pain and suffering with Donkey. For her, Rahamdel is a tyrant, a source of fear. Finally, she is sympathetic and motherly, supporting The Hen. Her role represents the author's conscience, intellect, and moral judgment.

4.2.3. The Character - Khra

Khra, another female animal character meaning 'The Donkey', is one of the novel's most tragic and profound characters. She symbolises the oppression, sacrifice, patience, silence, and rebellion of Afghan women. Throughout the novel, she endures beatings, humiliation, and disgrace, but eventually stands up against injustice. Though silent, she is brave, teaching us that even if a woman is denied education, rights, and a voice, her sense of humanity does not die. This character serves as a moral alarm, forcing the reader to confront their own silence. She carries the heavy loads of Rahamdel's household and always appears tired, hungry, and worn down. Her throat is dry, but she never complains. Her shoulders remain under the constant weight of oppression.

The Donkey is patient and silent when enduring hardships such as hunger, beatings, humiliation, and degrading treatment, without ever raising her voice. Meanwhile, she is brave, standing up to oppression, crying out for justice, and paying with her life. This courageous act endows her character with a heroic quality.

The Donkey is loyal and dutiful, despite the harsh conditions. She is a powerless yet truthful character. She condemns Rahamdel's cruelty in her heart but remains silent out of fear. She shares a deep emotional bond and mutual sympathy with The Duck. Though she is unable to engage in intellectual dialogue with The Cat, they share a sorrowful bond. Sarcastically, Rahamdel, who is the primary oppressor of her and is responsible for her death.

The Donkey is one of the most literary, philosophical, and symbolic characters in the novel. She remains silent throughout, but when she cries out, her scream shakes the entire narrative. She teaches us that an oppressed soul remains silent only so far. Once the cup of suffering overflows, even a silent Donkey will cry out loudly! In response to Rahamdel's cruelty, insult, and abuse, the Donkey rises. However, her resistance marks the final moment of her life. Rahamdel kills her because she no longer remained silent. She represents the Afghan woman who has lived for years under the pressure of father, brother, husband, clergy, tradition, and ignorance, but who still, someday, finds the courage to raise her voice. Even if the cost is her life, her voice echoes as a final cry for justice.

4.2.4. The Character – Pishó

Pishó is also a female animal character that means 'The Cat' is an intelligent, critical, and conscious animal character that represents intellect, reasoning, and awareness. Throughout the novel, this character is shown as someone who observes deeply, questions, and analyses others' behaviours. The Cat symbolises scholars, critics, and thinkers who possess intellectual resistance, not devoid of emotion or perspective. This character sends a message that knowledge should not remain silent; thought should be voiced, not just for oneself, but for the benefit of others as well.

The Cat is beautiful, silent, and sharp-eyed. She is also graceful, agile, and quick-witted. Moreover, she is unafraid of other animals but deeply cautious of human cruelty. Personally, she is intelligent and analytical. In nearly every scene, The Cat offers profound insight into events. When Rahamdel lies, she reveals his true nature. She has a critical voice. She has an advising role, advising fellow animals, warning them of dangers, and spreading awareness with empathy and care. The Cat is powerless but perceptive as she cannot stop Rahamdel's abuse, prevent school burnings, or grant women their rights, but she fully understands and analyses these injustices.

The Cat is a like-minded companion with The Duck. The Cat understands The Donkey's suffering, though unable to help. Moreover, she represents the softer emotional side with The Hen. The Cat represents the author's philosophical stance. She is the conscience of the novel, voicing, "We know all of this is wrong, but no one hears us." She stands for consciousness without influence, wisdom without power.

She teaches us that when knowledge is silenced, hypocrisy will rule. Moreover, when knowledge dares to speak, it will be either killed or suppressed. At the very end, the Cat survives the novel's events, but her silence and helplessness reflect the ongoing intellectual oppression. Alongside Duck, she symbolises a silent but awake conscience—wisdom waiting for the courage to act.

4.2.5. The Character – Chérga

The female animal character 'Chérga' means 'The Hen' and is an important secondary character with a gentle, kind, and maternal nature. She represents compassion, endurance, and love, depicting that segment of society that deeply cares for others but is helpless to act.

The Hen is a metaphor for women's maternal role. That is, her natural empathy and emotional instinct that aches for the injured, children, or companions. However, she remains silent due to systemic pressure. She is love and emotion in its purest form. She was silenced by cruelty, fear, and male dominance.

She is a small, simple, but active person. She is always busy, alert, but anxious. She is maternal by nature when she is constantly caring for her chicks, feeding, protecting, comforting, and guarding them from fear and harm. She symbolises a mother's selfless love. She is a gentle and emotional character. She displays tenderness toward other animals. She feels their pain and tries to offer consolation. Furthermore, she is cautious and fragile. She has a voice but lacks the courage to use it, like many mothers who feel sorrow but dare not speak up. Importantly, she is empathetic but inactive. She is emotionally intelligent, but tied to her own responsibilities, so her concern for others remains limited to sympathy, not action.

The Hen shares a deep emotional bond with The Duck. She is intellectually less developed, but admires and respects The Cat's insight. She also understands the Donkey's pain but is powerless to assist. She is feared by Rahamdel deeply and remains silent.

The Hen brings emotional depth and human warmth to the novel's message. She represents the mothers whose children fall victim to violence, yet all they can do is pray or cry in silence. She is like a social symbol of an Afghan mother. Her children are hungry; she herself is hungry, yet she still sacrifices for them. Her message is that emotion can be more profound than anger, but without power, that emotion becomes only pain.

4.2.6. The Character – Psa

This male animal character 'Psa' [pse] can be translated into English as 'The Sheep', which is a submissive, innocent, and powerless character that represents a guiltless, naive, and sacrificial nation in the novel's symbolic language.

This character does no harm, raises no complaints, yet is always chosen for sacrifice. From The Sheep, we grasp the condition of nations that lack military, intellectual, or political power—yet always end up as victims. The character teaches that when a nation becomes silent, apolitical, helpless, and unresisting, it becomes the skin from which sacrifice is made.

Physically, the Sheep has a gentle, calm demeanour that avoids noise, conflict, or arguments. He appears silent and straightforward yet lives in constant fear of sacrifice. There are some of his personality traits, such as being silent, yet meaningful. However, its silence is a scream, a reflection of all those who witness oppression but cannot speak. Moreover, The Sheep in the novel are oppressed and powerless. It is easily sacrificed, without defence, justification, or justice. He is simple, yet tragic when he does no harm, asks for nothing, and lives a quiet life. However, it is chosen for slaughter. This cruel fate adds a deep layer of emotional weight to its existence.

Notably, the relationships with other characters, for example, with The Cat and The Duck, show sympathy toward the Sheep's misery. However, they are unable to protect him—Rahamdel, who represents the power that sees no value in innocence and sacrifices without reason.

The Sheep reflects the Ahmadi's underlying philosophy: that in a corrupt society, the ones who are silent, powerless, or voiceless are always the first to be sacrificed. The Sheep is a social symbol that represents ordinary people who fall victim to political power and systemic oppression. His message

teaches us that if a nation remains silent, wisdom is muted and justice is absent, then every person becomes a sheep, and every sheep becomes a sacrifice.

4.2.7. The Character – Niaza

This human female character, named 'Niaza', is the wife of Rahamdel, a hunted, helpless, and beautiful woman who symbolises the objectification of a woman's body. Her fate is tragic, where beauty is seen not as a blessing but a curse. Niaza is a victim of a system that views women merely as objects of pleasure and subordination.

Through her story, the author shows that if society values only a woman's body, she will never attain the status of a human being. Physically, she is youthful and naturally attractive. She wears simple clothing, but radiates beauty. She appears quiet on the surface, but holds inner strength. She has some personality traits, including being forced and voiceless. She is denied the right to choose her own path. Decisions about her life are made by Rahamdel and society, with no regard for her voice or consent. She is outwardly silent, inwardly oppressed. She may appear submissive, but the narrative reveals that Niaza is not silent by choice; she is a prisoner of a lust-driven world where escape is impossible. She is condemned for her beauty. She is not valued for her mind, will, or character, but used as an object of desire. Her beauty becomes her curse, a reason for her oppression rather than empowerment. The Cat and the Duck are sympathetic toward Niaza but are unable to protect her.

Niaza is the embodiment of the woman whose beauty is treated as a crime. Through this character, the author delivers a powerful critique of misogyny, systemic injustice, and cultural hypocrisy. Niaza is not just a victim, but she is a representation of lost autonomy, ignored consent, and buried identity. She symbolises women's lives exchanged for wealth, power, or marriage. She highlights the plight of women who have no right to choose their lives or love. Her message teaches us that a woman's worth must be defined by her intellect, dignity, and humanity.

4.2.8. The Character – Sayrah

Sayrah is also a female name in Pashto and is the third daughter of Rahamdel. She is a silent, illiterate, and rights-deprived woman who represents uneducated women, victims of mental confinement, and the symbolic reflection of a silenced social environment. She does not know what her rights in life are, nor does she grasp the concept of dignity. Sayrah symbolises the millions of women who have no access to education, and whose silence only extends the lifespan of oppression. The author uses her character to deliver a message: if a woman remains uneducated, she will neither have a voice nor will future generations see a brighter future.

Physically, she wears simple clothes and keeps her face covered. She has a gentle nature and is silent. Even she avoids eye contact out of shame. She is afraid of people and feels inferior. Her personality traits indicate that she is illiterate and unaware. She is silent, fearful, and submissive. She is unaware of herself, either. She is mentally trapped and unaware of her natural abilities. Rahamdel is the main barrier to her mental growth and education.

The author presents Sayrah as a voiceless girl. Her lack of speech, demands, and dreams tells us that some women's shattered lives have become so normalised that others do not even recognise their pain anymore. She is a symbol of rural girls who consider school a sin. She also represents women who have no decision-making power or confidence. A reflection of a silent victim who never questions but silently suffers. Sayrah teaches us that when a woman is deprived of education, awareness, and confidence, she not only loses her fundamental rights but also becomes unaware of her own existence.

4.2.9. The Character – Ghwa

The female animal character 'Ghwa' means 'The Cow', which is a quiet, obedient, and serving character that symbolises patience, endurance, and silent labour. This character represents the oppressed class that works, produces milk, endures beatings, but is never appreciated or honoured. It shows that society is full of such beings who work tirelessly, serve others, are sacrificed and never praised. The Cow character reflects Afghanistan's humble yet courageous labourers. Physically, she

is a large, calm, heavy-bodied animal. She is always silent, with her head bowed. She is the primary milk supplier for Rahamdel's household, yet without rights.

She is a silent servant, patient and content, loyal without expectation, and part of a system of oppression, not a resister. She shares traits of silence, patience, and helplessness with The Sheep, Donkey, and Mouse. Rahamdel uses it for labour, without showing respect. The Cow is a deep social and economic symbol crafted by the author. It not only reflects the unrecognised labour of women but also represents the backbone of the working class, who tirelessly serve but receive no recognition, reward, or voice from society.

This character shows that some people are used for service, not for appreciation; all want their labour, but their dignity is ignored. Her social representation portrays her as a rural woman who works constantly but remains unrecognised. Those in society who are deaf and uncomplaining are always busy with work. Lastly, her message is that even service and patience have limits. If a society fails to recognise the value of silent service, that silence will ultimately be the death of humanity.

4.2.10. The Character – Spai

This male animal character 'Spai' is meant to be 'The Dog', which is an obedient, aggressive, but unthinkingly loyal animal that serves as Rahamdel's tool for violence and oppression. This character represents the trained forces humans use to protect their interests and instil fear.

The Dog does not act out of justice, mercy, or awareness, but it acts solely on command. It is a mindless weapon used by oppressors against the defenceless and innocent. This character teaches us that power, when stripped of intellect, compassion, and morality, fails to distinguish between friends and foes.

Physically, The Dog is a large, aggressive, and powerful. He has a sharp, intimidating gaze and is always alert, attacking any sound, movement, or suspicious presence. The Dog is savage, but trained savage. He is an instrument of fear. He is a mindless force that cannot differentiate whether someone is guilty or innocent; he attacks whomever Rahamdel commands. Rahamdel is his trainer, master, and the source of his aggression.

The Duck, The Hen, The Cat, and The Sheep are the victims of his wrath, and The Mouse fears him deeply as The Dog hunts and threatens it. The author crafts the Dog to give form, voice, and movement to human cruelty. He represents the active force that silences, isolates, and terrorizes other characters. It can be learnt that when brute force becomes visible, it kills conscience. Its social representation depicts that he is trained in brutal forces like militias, private guards, and raids. The language of power, command, and anger that acts instead of thinking. The Dog shows us that when an animal becomes a tool of human oppression, society begins to fear not only humans but also animals.

5. DISCUSSION

Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi's novel "Akh! Watana" is not merely a literary story but a multi-layered mirror that reflects the moral, cultural, and political realities of Afghan society through deep symbolism and allegorical expression. It is not merely a tale but a profound intellectual voice, a social outcry, and a literary invitation for readers to reflect on themselves, analyse their environment, and become agents of change. This novel delivers a powerful message of moral awakening, a voice against silence, and a courageous unveiling of truths, even if told through the mouths of animals, as Ehsanullah Karimi asserts that in the history of Pashto literature, there may never be another writer like Ahmadi (Karimi, 2021). Ahmadi does not use animal characters simply for creative beauty, but rather as profound representations of human behaviour, social injustice, and moral decay. This technique allows Ahmadi to portray societal hypocrisy, tribal extremism, corruption, and ignorance in a soft, yet powerful narrative tone. In this regard, Sheba Gahiez also confirms that the very characteristic of Akh! Watana novel is the use of animal language through which the malevolent traditions of Pashtun society are communicated (Gahiez, 2023), and Asad regarding Akh! Watana states that it is the great novel that exposes prevailing traditions, and Ahmadi brought both grief and advice artistically through satires that make someone laugh and cry (Asad, 2020). Furthermore, Ismael Larawai compares this novel to

a fable in Pashto literature, in which animals communicate through dialogue that vividly portrays various aspects of Pashtun society (Larawai, 2018).

This novel portrays the life of a cruel family member like Rahamdel in our society, which is the story of every second person in our society, as the story begins with hitting The Duck. (Larawai, 2018). The character of The Donkey, who represents an oppressed yet straightforward and insulted voice of the people, is a prime example. Likewise, characters such as Rahamdel, his sons, and others are not merely individuals but symbolic embodiments of human corruption, oppression, ignorance, and resistance.

These characters represent not only Afghan or Pashtun society but also connect with many societies across the world. For this reason, the novel is not just a local narrative but a global social mirror as Rahamdel is exasperated by The Donkey that hits him with her leg, and he shoots her to die (Larawai, 2018). Furthermore, the evil traditions of Pashtun society in terms of violence and violation of the rights of women, bridges and school destruction, and many more are told by The Cat's language (Gahiez, 2023).

Although this study attempts to highlight the symbolic representation of animal characters in the novel Akh! Watana, several practical and academic limitations restricted the overall scope of the research. One major limitation was the study's scope, which was limited to this novel, with other novels of Ahmadi's not studied for this purpose. The unavailability of sufficient scholarly critiques and academic resources in English related to this and other novels is another major limitation for the study. Therefore, it was not possible to conduct an in-depth analysis of character development across his other literary and artistic texts.

These constraints justify the recommendations for future studies to explore the author's literary style further, compare his works with those of others, and critically analyse character portrayal across his novels. We first and foremost recommend that the characters in Ahmadi's other novels could also be analysed in a deep literary and critical manner in order to understand better the distinctive features of Ahmadi's characterisation and the thematic diversity of his literary works. Secondly, the characters in Ahmadi's novels could be compared and contrasted with those of contemporary national and international writers to assess their literary value and innovative contributions.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Nasir Ahmad Ahmadi stands as one of the most influential literary voices in modern Afghan Pashto literature. Ahmadi's life journey is marked by displacement, war, perseverance, and creativity that reflect the very soul of the Afghan experience. From early education in village mosques to incomplete university studies interrupted by conflict, Ahmadi never let adversity extinguish his passion for learning and storytelling.

Through his work with the BBC and his rich literary contributions, Ahmadi became a voice of reason, balance, and introspection. His novels and stories, rooted in Afghan soil, echo the cries of a wounded nation and the silent hopes of its people. With a style that blends modern narrative techniques with traditional themes, he opened new paths for Pashto fiction and inspired a generation of writers.

Though his life was cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, his words continue to live on. Ahmadi did not merely write stories; he documented the emotional and social realities of his time. His legacy will remain a guiding light for those who seek to understand Afghanistan not just through history and politics, but through the depth of its literature and the resilience of its storytellers.

The novel Akh! Watana is a profound work of symbolic, social, literary, and critical literature that narrates the story of human moral, psychological, intellectual, and societal decay, primarily through the voices of animals. Beneath its apparent simplicity, there lie deeply analytical and meaningful values. Ahmadi, with a strong background in journalism, storytelling, historical writing, religious studies, and social awareness, uses his writing not only to entertain but also to advocate for social reform, intellectual awakening, and critical consciousness.

In this novel, the author reflects human misconduct through the voices of animals. By doing so, he aims to show us that when human beings lose their moral, intellectual, and humane values, they can become worse than animals. This philosophical idea is symbolised through the novel's rich character development. The character Rahamdel is a man who seeks to fulfil his evil desires through religion, power, lust, and violence. He is not just an individual but a representation of a broader, corrupt system. A system that uses religion to maintain control, exploits women for lust, and sees knowledge as a threat.

In contrast, The Donkey represents an oppressed yet conscious being. The Donkey remains silent but feels pain; it endures beatings but perseveres. Other animal characters, such as The Duck, The Cat, The Hen, The Sheep, The Cow, and The Dog, each symbolise specific human states. The Duck represents observation and courage; The Cat symbolises intellect and dissent; The Hen reflects motherhood and emotion; The Sheep portrays innocent victims; The Cow symbolizes silent labourers; and the Dog is the embodiment of systemic brutality.

Furthermore, the female human characters, such as Sayrah and Niaza, are symbolic representations of the social injustices women face, including educational deprivation and mental suppression. Niaza is beautiful, but that very beauty becomes the reason for her humiliation, objectification, and abuse. Sayrah is an uneducated girl who neither knows her worth nor has a voice, nor expects anything from life other than silence, submission, and sorrow. These characters narrate the painful history of injustice against women.

The novel's greatest strength lies in the symbolic construction of its characters, through which the author gives a face to every condition of society. These characters not only represent different societal classes but also speak directly to the reader's conscience. According to modern theorists such as Arya and Siddiqi, a character must reflect society rather than merely serve as a fictional figure in a story. Akh! Watana fulfils this purpose perfectly; each character is a portrayal of a social class, a mindset, a wound, and a moral compass.

Through allegorical literature, the author reveals that toxic cultural values, religious hypocrisy, extreme patriarchy, and intellectual silence are key factors in societal decline. Rahamdel is not just a tyrant but symbolises those who misuse religion, devalue women, and sacrifice ethics for power. His sons, who inherit this mindset, signify the potential downfall of future generations. The author addresses this threat through an artistic yet deeply serious lens.

Moreover, this novel is not just a portrayal of a social condition but a wake-up call for society. It teaches us that if society remains silent, tyranny, ignorance, and corruption will become normal; if women are denied education, generations like Sayrah will emerge; if beauty is not honored, women like Niaza will be hunted; if conscience stays silent, the innocent like Sheep will be sacrificed; and if nations hide in fear, they will become like mice.

Another essential aspect of the novel's value is that it serves as a rare literary, intellectual, and ideological innovation in modern Pashto novel writing. It speaks to the reader, awakens emotions, provokes thought, and raises moral questions. It shows us that literature is not just a means of passing time but is a force for shaping minds, awakening awareness, and reflecting society. Akh! Watana teaches us that sometimes, literature can deliver a stronger message than politics.

Finally, this novel is not just a valuable literary allegory, but also a cry of conscience for society, a form of literary resistance against oppression, and a voice of intellectual awakening. Ahmadi speaks directly to our inner selves, offering us the opportunity to recognise our homeland, our thoughts, and our collective pain through literature.

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