“Make homes out of words, even though they don’t fit us properly”: An interview with Noreen Masud

Claire Chambers

University of York

Noreen Masud is a Lecturer in Twentieth-Century Literature at the University of Bristol, and an AHRC/BBC New Generation Thinker. Her research covers all kinds of bases: flatness, spivs, puppets, leftovers, earworms, footnotes, rhymes, hymns, surprises, folk songs, colors, superstitions. She works mostly on twentieth-century literature, but she makes forays into Victorian and Romantic literature too. Her first major research project was on aphorism in Stevie Smith. The book based on Noreen’s doctorate is out with Oxford University Press, called *Hard Language: Stevie Smith and the Aphorism*. Noreen’s current project is on flatness, with her memoir *A Flat Place* having been published by Hamish Hamilton and Melville House, and she is working on an academic book as well. Articles on flatness have been brought out in *Twentieth-Century Literature* and *Textual Practice.* Her third project, still in the planning stages, is on puppets, while she is always working with an eye to or on nonsense literature, with work published and forthcoming on Edward Lear, modernist nonsense, and George Orwell.

Claire Chambers is Professor of Global Literature at the University of York, where she teaches twentieth- and twenty-first-century writing in English from South Asia, the Perso-Arab world, and their diasporas. She is the author of *British Muslim Fictions* (2011), *Britain Through Muslim Eyes* (2015), *Rivers of Ink: Selected Essays* (2017), and *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* (2019). She has co-edited and co-authored several other books including, most recently, *Forgotten Foods: Memories and Recipes from Muslim South Asia* (2023). Claire also publishes articles in a wide range of journals, including *Interventions* and *Contemporary Women’s Writing*. She was Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* for over a decade, and now co-edits two book series, *Multicultural Textualities* (Manchester University Press) and *Global Literature: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* (Routledge). She has been awarded funding by the AHRC, ESRC, Leverhulme, and British Academy. Claire is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Flat lands, like the tidal areas of Morecambe Bay or the Scottish Orkney archipelago, can feel both boundless and constraining. British author Noreen Masud originally wanted to write about these environments because of a memory from her youth in Pakistan. This childhood in Lahore was deeply unhappy, as her controlling doctor father kept his British wife and their four daughters largely confined to the four walls of their home. The girls were only released from a madness of mysterious injections, loaded guns,[1] and male tyranny to go to school. In the car, Noreen would stare out of a window, finding solace in gazing at the flat farming fields she saw ribboning away from Lahore's urban sprawl.

Masud's second book, the travel memoir *A Flat Place* (2023), comes out of this and other experiences of even terrains. At fifteen, her parents separated, and her father disowned all but the youngest of the sisters. Teenage Noreen found herself living with her mother in Fife on the east coast of Scotland and, then, studying English Literature at Oxford and Cambridge. Her unusual and emotionally charged nature writing incorporates five British locations, including Ely and the Fens in Cambridgeshire, the shingle spit of Suffolk's Orford Ness, and the common land of Newcastle's Town Moor, among other level expanses.

The author is a lecturer in twentieth-century literature at the University of Bristol, where she published her first monograph, *Hard Language: Stevie Smith and the Aphorism* (2022). In the creative nonfiction book *A Flat Place* she offers a multifaceted exploration of trauma, landscape, and the impact of colonialism. This will be followed by a complementary monograph, *Flat Feeling*,[2] which brings together queer, trauma, and affect theory to analyse flat landscapes via the fiction of such authors as Willa Cather and D. H. Lawrence.

Masud has long grappled with her near-total separation from society in Pakistan, which led her to be diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (cPTSD). The condition's challenges include derealization, dissociation, and difficulties with intimacy.
The PTSD we associate with warzones revolves around flashbacks to life-altering traumatic experiences. By contrast, cPTSD has no such landmarks but results in endless exhaustion from having never felt safe. Her father's cruelty did not build to any particular climax but was instead ever-present. As such, Masud associates the flatness of the lands she is drawn to with the flat affect of her cPTSD (see also Masud, "I Was Sad"). Against this flat backdrop, she delivers a powerful exploration of emotional disconnection. The writer questions the conventions of storytelling, challenging assumptions about traditional narrative structure. Apparent turning points in life often seem bathetically inconclusive continuations, but literature rarely reflects this.

In describing her cPTSD, Masud highlights the postcolonial trauma Pakistan still suffers. For Masud, with her Kashmiri and Pakistani heritage, most personally damaging of all the British Empire's injustices were Cyril Radcliffe's Partition borderlines, which marked the creation of an independent India and Pakistan. Borne out of British ignorance, reckless speed, and self-interest, these borders resulted in the monstrous, blood-drenched birth of two nations in 1947. According to the author, only against this political backdrop can the personal tragedies of her father's family be understood. To humanize her Kashmiri grandmother's refusal to hug her children, Masud writes about how the catastrophe of Partition led to her grandfather's madness. In this personal and political context, her father seems less of a monster. The 1971 War, in which he fought and witnessed the death of his best friend, had a further impact on him.

Masud wanted to foreground the postcolonial trauma Pakistan still suffers. Colonialism has vast and far-reaching effects, yet Britain deludedly wants to brush it aside and call it old history, erase it, or romanticize it. For instance, a selective focus on Empire's more positive aspect contributes to a form of historical amnesia where the damaging effects of colonial rule are often overlooked (Rushdie; Elkins). What is more, the way colonial history is taught in schools in Britain contributes to a sanitized and idealized view of the colonial past (Sanghera; Bhanot).

Many of the things Noreen endured were consequences, she demonstrates, not of Islam but of the particular long agonies exacted upon the South Asian subcontinent by the British Empire. The author underscores the diversity of Islam even within the single nation of Pakistan. It took Masud a long time to understand this variegation, because she was taught as a child that the official version of Islam in Pakistan was the only true one. By contrast, *A Flat Place* casts light on her father as not only an impious progressive but simultaneously as someone who self-identified as Sufi. Her schoolfriend Rima, who was a child rebel with punky hair-dye and as a young adult published poetry, now to her family's chagrin wears a hijab. Masud also writes about the persecution of Pakistan's Ahmadi minority and the declaration against Ahmadiyya, which since the mid-1970s Pakistanis have had to sign in order to get a passport.[3] From all this it is clear that there is much complexity in how Islam is practised in Pakistan.

Masud's travel memoir also addresses some important contemporary issues. The book's British sections highlight the injustice of colonialism. By shedding light on modern slavery through the deaths of at least twenty-one illegally trafficked cockle-pickers in Morecambe Bay in 2004,[4] Masud emphasizes the realities of labor exploitation in otherwise idyllic landscapes. At Orford Ness, she confronts the hidden history of the Chinese Labour Corps which fought for the Allies during the First World War (Guoqi; Bailey). At

Newcastle's Town Moor, she researches the shameful history of the human zoo (Blanchard *et al*.; Putnam), inhabited by a hundred Senegalese people, which was put on display there in 1929. In gift shops and antique shops along Masud's journey, the author encounters the triggering presence of golliwogs, controversial dolls with caricatured Black features (Varga and Zuk).

Sections of Masud's memoir shed light on her Pakistani heritage. As a politically astute British Asian, the author seeks to subvert the dominant anti-Pakistan and Islamophobic stereotypes commonly deployed in many so-called Muslim misery memoirs (see Ahmed; Chambers; Morey; Whitlock). These are autobiographies, usually written by ex-Muslim women writers, which often present an exaggerated picture of suffering and oppression under Islam. Masud takes pains to show that if her father was "culturally conservative" (30), he was far from conventionally religious or misogynistic.

Western assumptions about the global south are also interrogated. *A Flat Place* touches on the widely held perception in the West that people of color often have an infinite capacity to absorb suffering with no negative impact. According to Masud, this is because the West does not see people of color as fully human. When she would tell British people about her abusive childhood, they would act nonplussed, as though imprisonment were a normal thing for girls in Pakistan. She imagines them saying: "Why complain about it? Worse things happen in places like that. Presumably" (135). *A Flat Place* exposes the one-dimensional nature of such assumptions by emphasizing that such an upbringing was highly unusual for most Pakistanis.

One area where *A Flat Place* explores a vitally important contemporary point is in rebutting the well-established narrative of exclusion and reclaiming a sense of belonging for brown people within natural environments. Masud shows that people of color have a long presence in the British countryside, but they do not get to enjoy its beauty as they work dangerous, poorly paid jobs there. While expressing her love for flat lands, she simultaneously notes that these outdoor spaces "also contain the stretched pain of people of colour forced into difficult, dangerous work by border regimes, or omitted from histories where their presence is an inconvenience" (201).

Masud presents an unconventional perspective on the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020 within her memoir, an important topic as the pandemic widened already vast chasms between whites and Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) people in Britain. As she grapples with cPTSD and its challenges, Masud finds comfort in the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic. She explores how, for individuals who are neurodivergent or mentally unwell, the lockdown can serve as an unexpected release from the pressures and expectations of the outside world. For people whose minds operate outside of the

mainstream, social distance can be liberating. What is more, her whole childhood had been a lockdown, trapped, as she was, under the roof of her despotic father. Note that this entrapment had nothing to do with Islam, since, as I have shown, he was not religious. In fact, for the medical father, child-rearing was a secular social experiment. During the pandemic, while other Britons were preoccupied with "flattening the curve," or how flat they felt in their isolation, Masud was liberated by social distancing.

In meditating on these and other illuminating ideas, Masud's *A Flat Place* presents a startling rewrite of South Asian and British landscapes. By unsettling prevailing notions, the book establishes this young author as a resonant new voice in contemporary literature.

I was able to talk to her in a semi-structured phone interview in the early autumn of 2023, and the interview was supplemented with some follow-up questions and answers via email.

CC: In *A Flat Place*, you explore dealing with complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Can you explain to new readers how your experiences with cPTSD are intertwined with the landscape you write about?

NM: My primary experience is embodied. One way of putting it is of being caught in a kind of vigilance, a vigilance that I cannot explain, which is particularly a vigilance towards my past. I seek to locate the source of this vigilance and I can never find it. This experience translates into the kind of feeling that I have when I look at a flat landscape. When I'm faced with a flat landscape, I find that my sight scans and scans the landscape and it doesn't find anything to light upon, to focus on, but at the same time it can't stop looking. It is that endless searching without finding and maybe even that ambivalence about finding anything at all—the fear of what one might find—that informs my embodied sensation of my life.

CC: Further to that, are landscapes in general and flat lands in particular also metaphors in your writing for emotional experiences and psychological states?

NM: That's something which strongly operates in all literature. In certain Western texts (I can't really speak for other literatures), and in our everyday language, we plot heights onto elation or horror or terror or a kind of narratively important event. Then we map feeling low, down, or bored onto flatness; it's such an established idiom to talk about feeling flat. It's absolutely embedded in the language and we can find evidence of this going all the way back to the Bible and before. So it's a really sedimented part of Western and Christian cultures.

The way that my mind works is it throws up very visual and haptic sensations. I don't really think in words. Often before I know what I am feeling or thinking, I will find my mind presenting me with an image of what could be a shape, or could be a landscape. I recently laid some carpets and to do this job, you need these grippers. For anyone who hasn't laid a carpet, they're like thin boards with nails coming out of them at an angle and you have to push the carpet really taut and catch it on the grippers and then tuck it behind them. And that is a kind of haptic experience of such satisfaction and beauty that my mind has adopted it as a kind of currency for explaining certain sensations that it undergoes.

CC: How would you talk about attachment—a sense of belonging or not belonging—to the landscapes that are explored in your book?

NM: There's a weird paradox at the heart of a flat landscape when it comes to attachment. In one sense, a flat landscape is one that we can ignore or not think about much. For instance, if we build a city in a place where there are no rises and falls that we have to navigate or compensate for in our building, this is a landscape we can easily forget about. In my book I talk a little bit about how flat landscapes are like our mothers. When the baby is born, they have their mother, D. W. Winnicott tells us, or nowadays it can be any primary caregiver. The baby feels contained as long as it doesn't understand, and as long as it can experience itself as continuous with its environment. But there are times when even what Winnicott calls the good enough mother will make little slips or trips, might drop the baby very slightly, and in this way the baby comes into its sense of selfhood. The mother will not be a seamless environment that the baby can be sure of. And there is something analogous about a flat landscape that suggests a lack of attachment. There's something in a flat landscape that causes you to go on seeking. That's the paradox that I grapple with in the book. I think that characterizes my sense of my relationship with my own mother, which is the subject of one of what we might call it the climactic chapters of the book (if we're going to give in to the conventional language around landscape).

CC: Your book challenges exclusion as it tries to carve out a sense of belonging for brown people within natural environments in Britain. In some ways, it reminds me of Corinne Fowler's *Green Unpleasant Land*. Could you elaborate on how you envision the reclamation of the British countryside as a space for people of color?

NM: It's a great question. I suppose the difficulty is that there are already so many people of color in the British countryside. However, compared to white people they are much less often there for leisure,

and they seldom write about their experiences. What people of color are doing in the countryside is working dangerous, invisible, poorly paid, abusive agricultural and fishing jobs. I think particularly about undocumented migrants here. In my book, I write about the Morecambe Bay disaster, for instance, where all the victims were invisibilized migrants of color, picking cockles for pennies. The existence and shape of the countryside as we currently know it is built upon the exploitation of people of color. So I think that reclaiming the countryside as a space for people of color entails more than outreach, or improving facilities catering to different groups, or making more space within publishing for those voices (although all these things are *so* important). Fundamentally, the countryside as a space of leisure, pleasure, and inspiration will always be dominated by whiteness. At least, it will be until the UK ends its racist immigration policies, and moves towards becoming a more financially (and, along with that, racially) equal society. Like so many things, this imbalance is at its heart about poverty and deprivation.

CC: Please discuss how you engage with trauma theory and the insights you derive from thinkers like Sigmund Freud and Sara Ahmed.

NM: Sara Ahmed has been a key figure for me, not just in her brilliant insights, which I explore in *A Flat Place*, but in the fact that her situation is in many ways eerily similar to mine—white mother, Pakistani father, difficult upbringing, queer. Trauma theory in general is very important to me: I teach a second-year undergraduate course called "Literature and Trauma," where we read trauma theory from Freud to the present alongside literary texts. But what's fundamental to that course, and to my thinking about trauma, is that we explore the limitations of trauma theory as it currently stands: historically centered on male, white, straight, cisgender, Western, non-disabled, global north experiences. Often trauma theory assumes that trauma turns on a particular, singular, identifiable wounding event. This creates a set of assumptions about how the traumatized person thinks or feels about time, about interpersonal connection, about community, about their place in the world. So we look at feminist, queer, and postcolonial trauma theory as a way of questioning some of these fundamental assumptions. For instance, there's a great essay by Laura S. Brown entitled "Not Outside the Range," in which she explores the fact that sexual assault was only added belatedly to our understanding of traumata because it is such a common experience for women and girls. At that time (the article was published in 1995), traumatic events were thought to necessarily be events which were outside the "normal range" of human experience. My students and I discuss what happens, or changes, when we start interpreting as traumatic those experiences

which are normal under capitalism and white supremacy. Brown describes our society as, in fact, a factory set up for "the production of so many walking wounded" (123)—a phrase which stuns and inspires my students. Capitalism is designed to traumatize its participants: this is necessary to its functioning. *A Flat Place* participates in just such a tradition of thinking differently about traumatic experience—as something which can be ubiquitous, everyday, invisible. The traumatic moment can be much less about the event itself than the experience of being disbelieved and dismissed via structural racism.

CC: I'm really interested in the way you write about the pandemic. How did your unusual upbringing shape your perspective on the Covid-19 lockdown and its effects, especially in terms of finding unexpected liberation from social pressures and expectations?

NM: It shaped it very strongly. In Pakistan my family were so cut off from the social—we couldn't talk to neighbors, or walk to the cornershop; all wedding invitations were ignored; we weren't allowed to visit schoolfriends' houses (occasionally we managed to do so secretly, with my mother's collaboration). I remember long, long summers when school was out, with us trapped in the two rooms where the five of us lived. But at that time, as a young child, you don't really think of it as "trapped"—or, rather, it's just one of the normal horrible things of which your life is composed, and you have no idea that it could be any different. I remember reading *Room* by Emma Donoghue, told from the point of view of the five-year-old child born to a captive mother. Their life confined to the room is just his normal, and he accepts it, though he's often anxious or frightened about certain parts of his life. As I read the novel, I completely recognized the way in those circumstances you just get on with your life, bleak and small though it may be.

When I came to Britain, I had to socialize myself from scratch. I had to watch other people and work out how to behave—how to seem normal. And it took, and takes, a huge amount of effort. It's monumentally tiring. The Covid-19 lockdown allowed me a reprieve from having to perform normality where I didn't feel it. I was able to rest and just *be* for the first time. And I really thrived. I was extraordinarily lucky: if I'd had kids, or a job where I had to work outside the house, things would have been very different. During that time I wrote a lot and slept and ate, and brought my weight back up to a healthier level, and made things. The life I've had has made solitude and social isolation seem very normal to me.

CC: Your memoir actively works to subvert stereotypes, particularly the anti-Pakistan and/or Islamophobic misery memoir trope. Could you elaborate on your approach to countering such prevailing stereotypes

and how you aim to provide an alternative narrative through your storytelling?

NM: It was essential to me that my book not become fodder for fueling a right-wing narrative about Islam and Pakistan. That would have been unacceptable to me. A few things were important as part of that process. First was to counter the West's view of people of color as able to withstand intolerable suffering. If the West saw them as fully human, it would have a very different migration policy, a very different attitude to climate change, and a proper understanding that poverty, deprivation, and loss change you in appalling and agonizing ways. People of color are as complex and as vulnerable to the psychological consequences of pain and suffering as white people are. It's insane that I have to say it but I do, because this whole country is still organized upon the belief that they are not. Secondly, I wanted to foreground the postcolonial trauma that Pakistan is still trapped in. Britain's desire to brush its empire aside, to call it water under the bridge, is delusional. Many of the things I suffered were consequences of the British Empire's cruelty and divide and rule policies. That needed to be a central part of the story. Thirdly, I tried to emphasize the diversity of Islam itself. It took me a long time to realize this aspect myself, because I was taught as a child—as part of the postcolonial trauma of Pakistan, struggling to impose a rigid and comprehensible identity upon itself—that the official version of Islam in Pakistan was the only true one. But what is that official version? Islam is extraordinarily diversely practised even within Pakistan.

CC: Your book invites us to think about exteriors and it has been interpreted as a travel book, but I think that the text's domestic interiors are very suggestive as well. As such, I wanted to ask you how a sense of home can be carved out within the various external landscapes you encounter—but also what home and belonging mean for you.

NM: Categorization is always quite interesting. I never know what genre to say in describing *A Flat Place*; I call it a memoir-travelogue because that's an easy set of words to present to people. Part of the work of the book is to ultimately make homes out of words, even though they don't fit us properly. It's not even that the words don't fit us, but that we are always subject to a language that exists before us and we will always be trapped by it; we will always fit weirdly within that. To answer your question associatively at first, part of making a home for me is coming to terms with the fact that I don't know very much about families. Even so, it seems likely that most families involve a lot of their members constantly feeling like they're the ones that don't quite belong. I guess what I would propose is that the most

meaningful part of making a home is accepting that you may never feel at home, that being at home involves this unhomeliness: the Freudian uncanny. The *unheimlich* and the *heimlich*. And the unhomeliness is part of the homeliness.

To answer the question from another slant, my home is above all the inside of my own head. I am at home when I am able to spread out in the space of my own head without interruption, to move spontaneously and do one thing after another based on what my body and mind want to do in that moment. When I'm able to do that I'm at home and when I'm not able to do that I am inconsolable and displaced.

I will also say that I feel least mad the closer I am to Scotland. That's where my mother is, and that's something which I hold on to despite the complexities of my relationship with my family. I don't know what it's going to feel like when my mother dies, but for now Scotland is the center. I feel at a crazy angle and off-center the further I get from Scotland. And I become more upright and balanced when I get close—but I don't get to get close very often. Being in England always feels a little bit like operating in a dangerous strong sun.

CC: Your mention of your mother and home makes me want to follow up by asking about feminist thinkers' ideas about the home. Home tends to be seen as a safe space, but feminists have pushed against that (Brownmiller; Rich; hooks). In the answer you've just given and in your book—as in Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*—you're pushing against glib ideas about happiness. You seem to me to be doing something quite similar with home: complicating it and showing that home can be the most dangerous place, especially for women and queer people.

NM: Certainly. Pakistan will always be a part of me, but my life there was often unsafe and terrifying. It's a paradox, isn't it? People who've had a troubled past sometimes seek out danger to find a sense of belonging. On the literature and trauma course, my students and I regularly discuss the concept of safety. Making the ethical changes I aspire to often involves feeling unsafe. I wasn't born an activist, but the current state of the world suggests that activism is the most effective way to bring about change. I'm unsure if we should go into the bleak British situation here, especially given the readership's internationalism and *Postcolonial Text*'s literary focus. But as someone who migrated from Pakistan and made this country my home, I can't help commenting on this hostile environment in Britain right now.

CC: Please go ahead, especially in the context of home.

NM: Certainly. My mother is British, specifically white British. And my family's history is complex. My great-great-uncle was involved in

Britain's colonial structures, possibly in China. Another British family member had a role in administering the Raj. On the other side, my grandparents were born in Kashmir and fled during Partition.

CC: How does your Scottish background complicate your sense of Britishness?

NM: Scotland has a strong narrative, especially under the pro-independence Scottish National Party, but it conveniently forgets its colonial past. The nation is less right-wing and more open to migrants than England, but that can involve a kind of selective amnesia. This complicates my identity as a migrant.

Soon after I arrived in the UK, the 2005 London bombings occurred, and I experienced a significant uptick in hostility toward people of color and those from Pakistan. In 2005, public Islamophobia was distressingly acceptable, even on the left. Thankfully, the left has made progress in recognizing and addressing Islamophobia in recent years, due to the voices of Muslim leftists. Life has improved since then, but shaking off the remnants of Islamophobia remains a worry. I have to remind myself of that, even as I feel that there is less and less anything left in this country to love.

It's not me who's going to be at risk. I have this tremendous accent privilege. When people might look at me and get alarmed, as soon as I open my mouth, they relax. So it is not me who will be hounded; it is the vulnerable, the people without the English language, people without this posh accent. It's them who we need to look after. We need to create bonds of solidarity.

CC: I want to move from the Scottish British side of your family to the Kashmiri side. You write about the impact of Partition borderlines on your family and on Pakistan. Could you say more about how this historical event shaped your personal narrative and the broader context of your memoir?

NM: Partition was absolutely catastrophic. It meant a loss of loved ones, place, neighborhood connections, continuity, safety. Even the very concept of Partition was extremely damaging to psyches. Farzana Shaikh, whom I reference in my book, examines this, and while I have some disagreements with her monograph, she raises interesting points. Her work can sometimes veer into a rejection of Islam itself or of Pakistaniness, in ways that I think are questionable. But one thing I find persuasive is when she highlights that Pakistan was created as a homeland for Muslims without a clear definition of what that meant. Did it include Muslims in specific regions or all across the subcontinent, even those who wouldn't end up in Pakistan? What version of Islam was it—Sunni, Shia, or a state-sponsored one? There

are so many versions of Islam and so many ways of practising Islam in Pakistan, in India, in Bangladesh, both then and now. The lack of a clear definition implies that virtually no Muslim, let alone Christians, Hindus, or Jews, can truly feel at home in Pakistan. Minorities are persecuted, and this vagueness about the country's founding has instilled a deep anxiety about securing a sense of home and belonging within Pakistan. I can't speak for India, but Partition has left Pakistan haunted. This mirrors my own experience of a place where belonging was an impossible equation.

CC: What do you make of how things are shaping up for Indian Muslims under the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government? I know you said you can't speak for India, but I just wondered, from the outside, what you're making of happenings over the border?

NM: This too is catastrophic. I honestly don't know what else to say about it other than it is a catastrophe to which the world is only just starting to wake up. But they are doing too little, too late. There must still be reverberations of Partition on both sides of the border. I think in India, anti-Muslim hatred was one of the levers that was left there after Partition that somebody could make the choice to pull, and they have pulled it. It wasn't an inevitability that it would be pulled, but someone chose to. But I don't know if we can say it was Partition or it was part of the stoking of divisions between Hindus and Muslims. If that didn't originate in colonialism—and I know there's some debate about this—it was certainly absolutely fueled by the British colonial presence in the subcontinent. If we look back to the 1930s, that performative Hindu nationalism definitely played a key part in what concretized Partition. And that again was, I think, an anxiety response to colonialism.

CC: I'm glad you've circled back to colonialism because I wanted to ask you about the book's exploration of modern slavery and labor exploitation in idyllic landscapes. There are quite a few examples, including the cockle picker disaster at Morecambe, the Chinese Labour Corps at Orford Ness, the human zoo on Newcastle Moor. How did you come across and choose these stories? Because there were plenty of others you could have selected. And what impact did these tragedies have on your understanding of the places you describe in the book?

NM: In all instances, I rarely exerted much effort in my research for this book. What I mean to say is that these stories are readily available. Take, for example, the human zoo on Newcastle Moor, where our primary source of information is an archaeological research project (RCHME Newcastle; Co-curate n.p.). All you have to do is obtain and peruse that source, and the information is all there, simultaneously

visible and yet overlooked in people's comprehension of the moor. Then there is the tragic cockle picker catastrophe that occurred before my arrival in the UK. Personally, I did not have those associations with it, but the British public predominantly associates Morecambe with that disaster. So knowledge of these atrocities exists, and yet being aware of it has brought about no change. If anything, there's an increase in trafficking, modern slavery, and various ways in which we benefit from the deplorable conditions in which the world's desperate are held. Knowledge, this peculiar faith in the transformative power of open disclosure, proves insufficient. As Eve Sedgwick asserted in her remarkable essay on paranoid reading, mere public awareness is insufficient for effecting change. Everything is laid bare, yes—laid out in a flat landscape—but things go on as normal.

CC: Finally, how does queerness factor into *A Flat Place* and your work more broadly?

NM: Hugely—pretty much everything I write concerns queerness. My first book was about aphorism, which is a queer form historically used to provide a safe space for queer expression. For disruptive writers like Stevie Smith, the aphorism allowed socially unacceptable pain or sensation to be articulated without the risk of being heard and facing the consequences. What aphorism does is to make itself not be listened to. If you put something in the form of an aphorism it becomes so smooth and so perfect that it exempts us from the responsibility of hearing what is said. There is something fundamentally unmemorable, counterintuitively unmemorable about the content of an aphorism. That phenomenon is very much of a piece with my preoccupations in the work on flat landscapes. It's again the idea of things being clearly laid out and yet we're not able to see what is right in front of our eyes. The expansiveness, the joy, the circling, and the particular things that our mind does if we let it listen and see: these things are worth exploring.

A Flat Place is deeply influenced by Sara Ahmed's concept of queer desire. This is a desire that doesn't follow the proper paths, a desire that doesn't orient towards the things it ought to orient towards: heteronormative rises and falls, heteronormative focal points. In *A Flat Place*, I contemplate whether this deviation is linked to complex trauma or something else. I explore a mode of queerness whose core lament is not "I want this," be it a normative desire or otherwise, but rather exclaims "I don't want that." This is a negative queerness, a rejection, which might not be in vogue. Yet, the queerness of absence is a tangible reality, taking center stage both in my life and in *A Flat Place*.

CC: Noreen Masud, thank you. Your insights in the interview resonate profoundly, showing how (postcolonial) trauma, landscapes, and a sense of belonging are interbraided. What I find especially enlightening is your ability to articulate the intersectionality of your experiences, as well as your subversion of prevailing stereotypes. Your deconstruction of happiness and the safety paradox within homes, especially for marginalized groups, is compelling. More than that, the complex interplay of identity, migration, and the impact of historical events like Partition adds another layer to your interview. The clarity with which you address modern slavery, colonialism, and queerness makes *A Flat Place* a vital contribution to broader debates. Indeed, your work is not just a travel memoir but a vital conversation starter challenging existing narratives.

NM: Thanks to you too. It's been a pleasure to talk to you, and the questions have really made me think.

Notes

1. This reference pertains to Noreen and her sisters periodically receiving injections from their doctor father throughout their childhood, with Masud never discovering what this practice was supposed to inoculate against. As for the guns, the father keeps one in his car and another under his pillow. He allows his young daughters to pose with a loaded gun and even to point it at each other.

2. This is an in-progress manuscript, which has yet to be submitted to a publisher. However, Masud's research on flatness can be accessed in three representative articles: Masud "Flat Stevie Smith", ""A Horizon Line," and "D. H. Lawrence."

3. The Pakistani government mandates an "Attestation Form" for passport applications, perpetuating systemic discrimination and forcing Ahmadiyya Muslims to renounce their beliefs. The legislation dates back to 1974 under the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and has not been rescinded by successive administrations. This form, criticized globally, underscores state-sponsored challenges to religious freedom in Pakistan (see Khan; Balani).

4. Morecambe Bay, a seaside town in England's northwest, gained tragic notoriety in 2004 due to the cockle picker disaster. Exploited migrant workers, largely undocumented, lost their lives harvesting cockles. The disaster shone a spotlight on issues of labor exploitation, human trafficking, and the vulnerabilities faced by those working in precarious conditions along the bay's shores. Yet little research has

been conducted on the disaster, with the single academic paper on the subject by John Meadowcroft and John Blundell being short, published soon afterwards, and politically conservative.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Rehana. *Writing British Muslims: Religion, Class and Multiculturalism*. Manchester UP, 2015.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke UP, 2010.

Bailey, Paul J. "'An Army of Workers': Chinese Indentured Labour in First World War France." In Santanu Das. Ed. *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*. Cambridge UP, 2014, pp. 35–52.

Balani, Marzia. *Ahmadiyya Islam and the Muslim Diaspora: Living at the End of Days*. Routledge, 2020.

Bhanot, Kavita. "A 'Balanced' History of Empire: Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland* and Other Colonial Anti-Colonial Histories." *Wasafiri*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2022, pp. 88-100.

Blanchard, Pascal *et al*. *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Empire*. Liverpool UP, 2008.

Brown, Laura S. "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma." *American Imago*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1995, pp. 119-133.

Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. Fawcett, 1993 [1975].

Chambers, Claire. "Countering the 'Oppressed, Kidnapped Genre' of Muslim Life Writing: Yasmin Hai's *The Making of Mr Hai's Daughter* and Shelina Zahra Janmohamed's *Love in a Headscarf*." *Life Writing*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2013, pp. 77–96.

Co-curate. "Five Minutes at The North East Coast Exhibition Newcastle (1929)." *Newcastle University*, 13 April 2014, https://co-curate.ncl.ac.uk/resources/add/search/?q=%22african+village%22

Donoghue, Emma. *Room.* Picador, 2011.

Elkins, Caroline. *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya*. Pimlico, 2005.

Fowler, Corinne. *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections*. Peepal Tree, 2020.

Guoqi, Xu. *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War.* Harvard UP, 2011.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Pluto, 2000 [1984].

Khan, Adil Hussain. *From Sufism to Ahmadiyya: A Muslim Minority Movement in South Asia.* Indiana UP, 2015.

Masud, Noreen. "Flat Stevie Smith." *Twentieth-Century Literature*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2021, pp. 215−234.

—. *Hard Language: Stevie Smith and the Aphorism.* Oxford UP, 2022.

—. "A Horizon Line: Flat Style in Contemporary Women's Poetry." *Textual Practice*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2022, pp. 542−561.

—. "D. H. Lawrence's Queer Flatness." *Textual Practice*, vol. 36, no. 9, 2022, pp. 1519−1536.

—. *A Flat Place.* Hamish Hamilton, 2023.

—. "I Was Sad and Did Not Want to Live: Life with Complex PTSD." *Psychology Today*, 7 June 2023, https://psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/more-than-a-footnote/202305/i-was-sad-and-did-not-want-to-live.

Meadowcroft, John and Blundell, John. "The Morecambe Bay Cockle Pickers: Market Failure or Government Disaster?" *Economic Affairs*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2004, pp. 69-71.

Morey, Peter. *Islamophobia and the Novel.* Columbia UP, 2018.

Putnam, Walter. "'Please Don't Feed the Natives': Human Zoos, Colonial Desire, and Bodies on Display." *The Environment in French and Francophone Literature and Film*, vol. 39, 2012, pp. 55–68.

RCHME Newcastle. "Town Moor, Newcastle Upon Tyne Archaeological Survey Report." *Royal Commission on the*

Historical Monuments of England. Newcastle: Colin Lofthouse for RCHME, 1995.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W. W. Norton, 2021 [1976].

Rushdie, Salman. "Outside the Whale." *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981−1991.* Granta, 1991, pp. 87-101.

Sanghera, Sathnam. *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain.* Penguin, 2021.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You." In *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction.* Duke UP, 1997, pp. 1–37.

Shaikh, Farzana. *Making Sense of Pakistan*. Columbia UP, 2009.

Varga, Donna and Rhoda Zuk. "Golliwogs and Teddy Bears: Embodied Racism in Children's Popular Culture." *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2013, pp. 647–671.

Whitlock, Gillian. *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago UP, 2007.

Winnicott, D. W. *Playing and Reality*, foreword by Robert Rodnam. Routledge: 2005 [1971].