

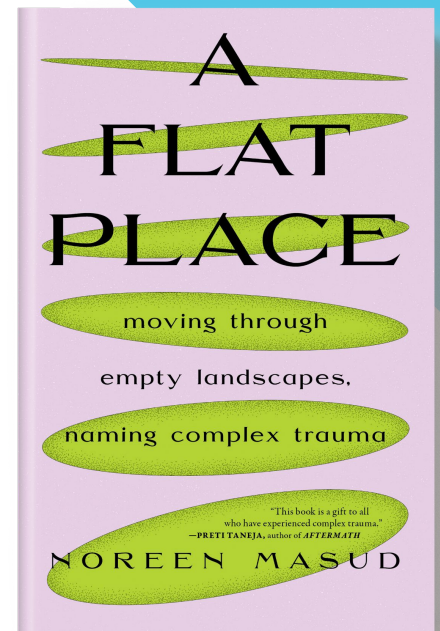
A FLAT PLACE

Moving Through Empty Landscapes, Naming Complex Trauma

Noreen Masud

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“Arresting and memorable ... Masud both finds a way to comprehend her own story and establishes a strong voice that confirms her as a significant chronicler of personal and national experience.” — **Financial Times**

“Sharply, subtly, and very movingly, Masud thinks *with* places, seeking as she does to find a way back into, and then out of, the traumas of her early life.” — **Robert Macfarlane**, author of *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*

AUTHORS NOTE TO THE READER

After a traumatic escape from her native Pakistan, author Noreen Masud found herself in England, and suffering from CPTSD — complex post-traumatic stress disorder. She also found herself strangely fascinated by Britain's flat landscapes. Like her CPTSD, she explains, "they didn't offer a significant landmark, an event, that you could focus on and work with." Coming to understand the "complex" part of her affliction, she will come to these places, and the literature about them — by Virginia Woolf, Willa Cather, Auden, Shelley, Coleridge and others — again and again. *A Flat Place* is a book that will be of interest not just to naturalists and literature fans, but also to people of colour, people who have moved to different countries, queer people, and people with complex post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as anyone interested in empire, parent-child relationships, postcolonial experience, and indeed the universal question of how we live alongside, and love, each other.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *A Flat Place* uses flat landscapes to think about lives which have no 'landmarks' or 'focal points.' How are our understandings of the words 'landscape', 'story', and 'plot' intertwined? How might one shape the other?
2. The author finds pleasure, meaning, and feelings of recognition in flat landscapes, but these feelings are by no means universal. Why might a flat landscape feel challenging or alienating?
3. The narrative of *A Flat Place* resists traditional forms of storytelling, with a traditional beginning, middle, and end. What might make a story easy or difficult to tell?
4. What is the difference between PTSD and complex PTSD?

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5. Chapter Two discusses how, to people experiencing cPTSD, the world often seems 'unreal.' People with cPTSD can experience what's called 'derealisation,' where the *self* feels real but everything *around* the self feels unreal. How might literature determine our sense of the 'real'? How might this be specific to postcolonial experience?
6. Chapter Three describes the difficulty of telling new stories when it often feels like all possible narratives have already been explored. Is it possible to tell truly original stories? What might limit our ability to do so?
7. Chapter Five is set on the Newcastle Moor, a huge green space in the center of the city which is often criticized as a 'waste' of potentially useful land. What determines our sense of what constitutes 'waste' and what constitutes worthwhile use?
8. In Chapter Six, the author explores Orkney Islands with her mother in an effort to understand her and the relationship between them a little better. However, the epigraph to the chapter is called 'NO ADMITTANCE': a phrase from a sign seen along the edge of Skara Brae, the neolithic village on the main island, which mirrors the author's eventual conclusion that she cannot "be admitted" into her mother's innermost mind. Is it possible to understand someone without probing through their feelings about the past? Why or why not?
9. *A Flat Place* describes how the author finds human relationships difficult, and sexual relationships particularly baffling. How might a life which isn't structured around romantic or sexual passion find meaning?
10. At the end of the book, the author explores her complicated relationship with her father and makes the decision to neither blame or forgive him for his past actions. To what extent are we in charge of our own choices? To what extent are we shaped by the society that we live in — what it permits or forbids?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noreen Masud is a Lecturer in Twentieth Century Literature at the University of Bristol, and an AHRC/BBC New Generation Thinker 2020. Her work focuses on the twentieth century, writing about things which, in one way or another, present variously as absurd, unrevealing, embarrassing or useless. These include aphorisms, flatness, puppets, nonsense, leftovers, earworms, footnotes, rhymes, hymns, surprises, folk songs, colors and superstition.

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