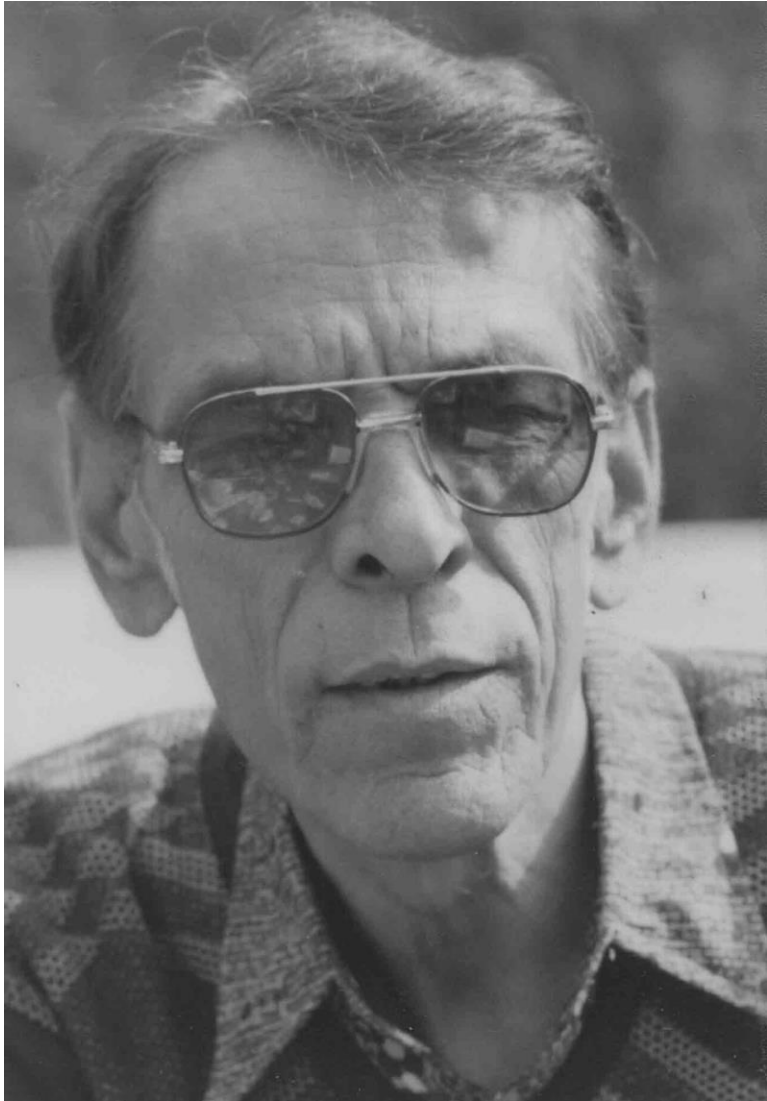




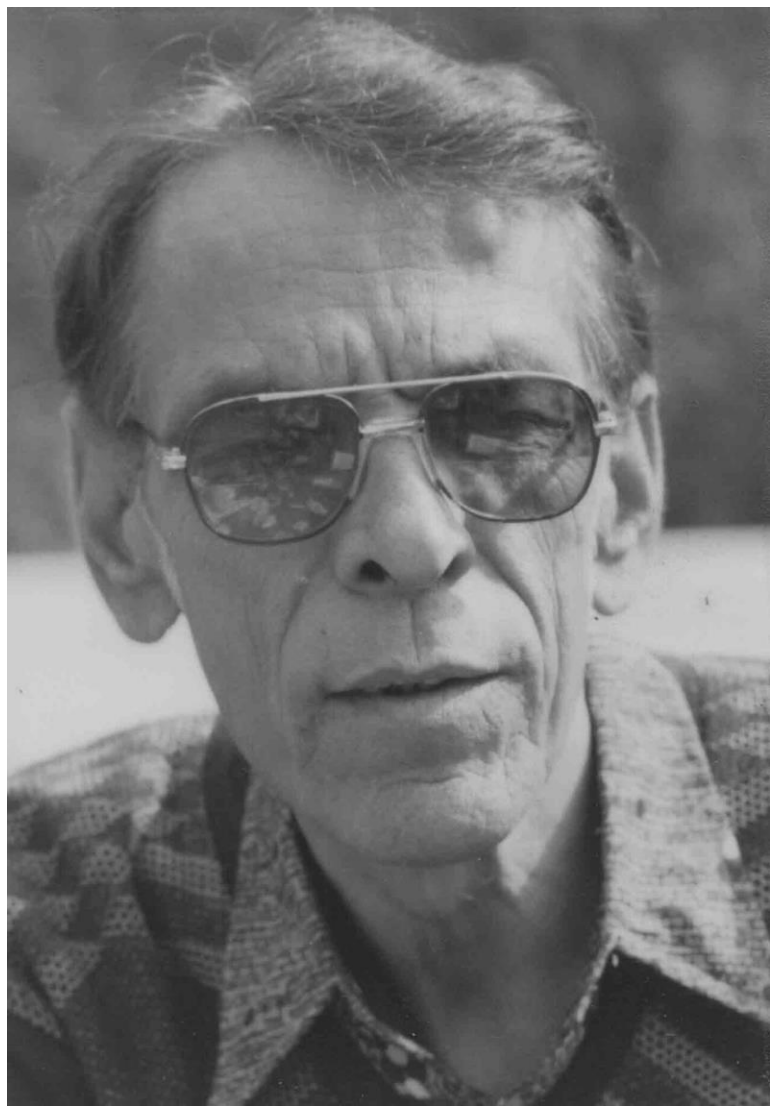
REALITY AND THE SHORT STORY

Introduction to Literature
September 2&4, 2025
IIIT Hyderabad



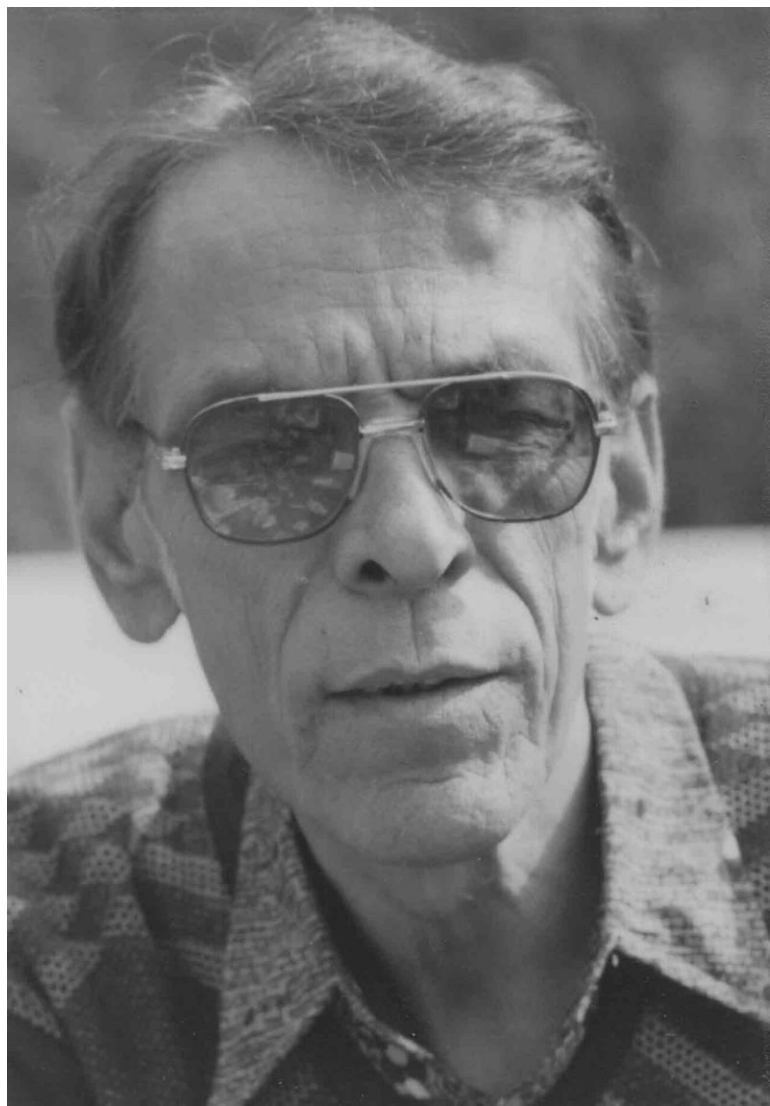
Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

- Born and lived mostly in Lucknow
- Began writing short stories as a boy, but started publishing them only in the 1970s, with encouragement from Shamsur Rahman Farooqui
- Wrote three collections of short stories
- Translated short stories and parables of Franz Kafka; also translated many Iranian short stories.



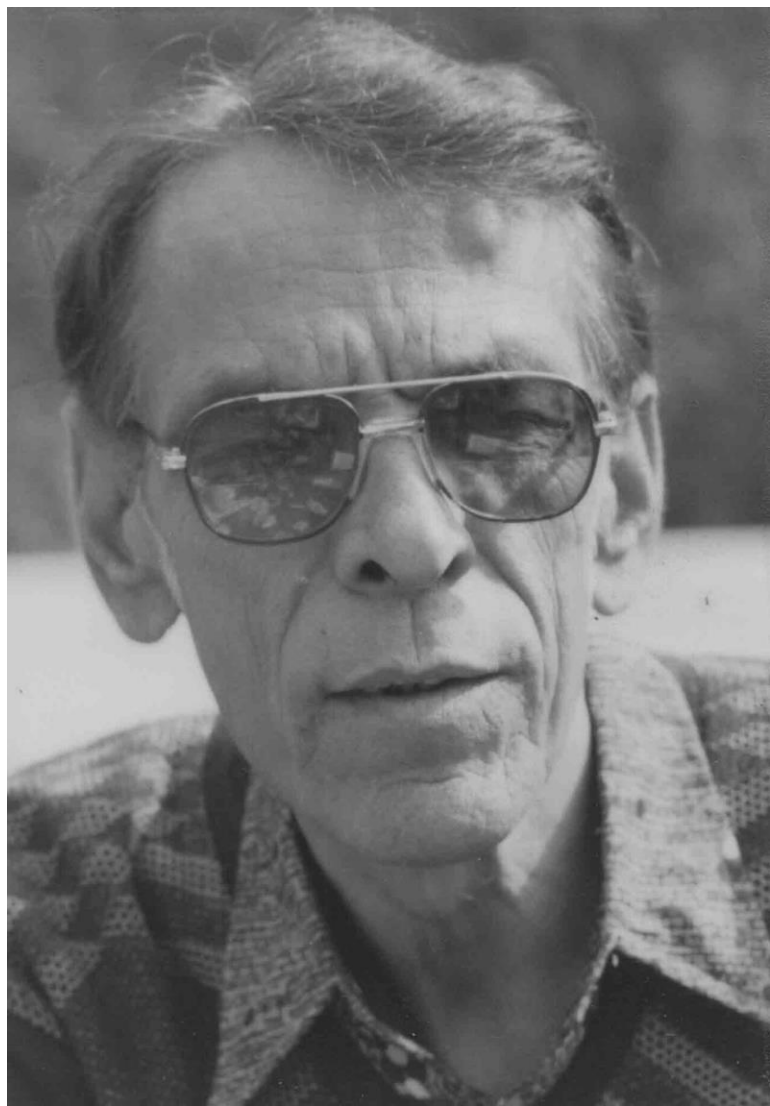
Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

- His work has been translated into Finnish, French, and Spanish.
- Presidential Certificate of Honour for outstanding contributions to Persian; two Katha Awards for Creative Fiction.
- Two PhDs: Urdu (Allahabad University); Persian (Lucknow University)
- Professor of Persian at Lucknow University



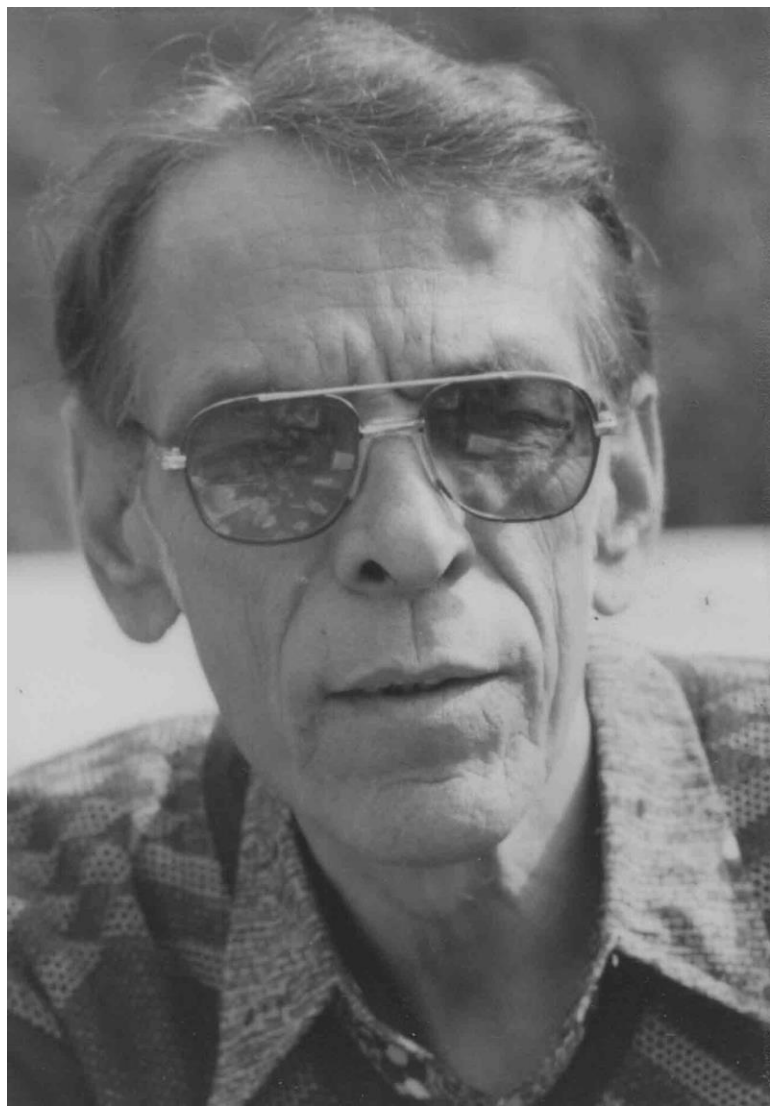
Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

“I owe the greater part of my literary training to him and to this collection ... I was educated in ordinary schools and was an average student, more interested in reading all kinds of other books, novels and short story collections, than my course textbooks” (qtd in Memon, *Snakecatcher* xi).



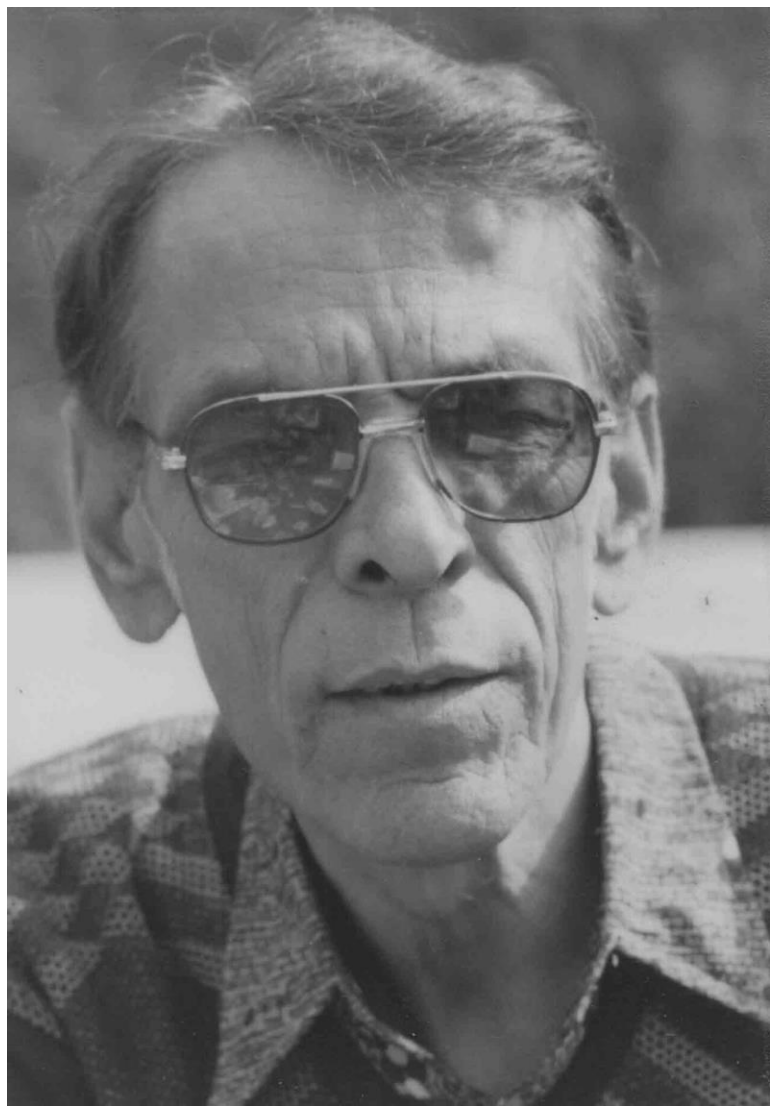
Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

“[C]orrespondence with friends, my job at the university, and visitors have saved me from becoming entirely cut off from the outside world” (ibid. xii).



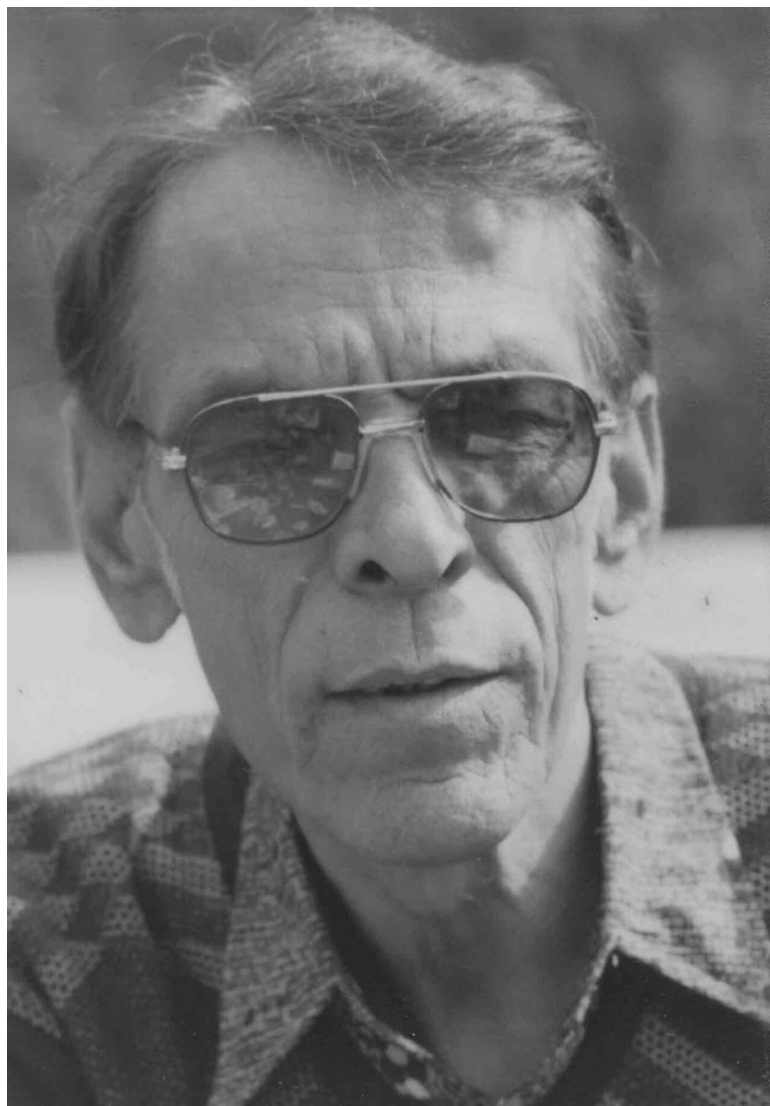
Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

“I am very slow at writing ... I’ve written only twenty-two short stories in the last twenty-five years” (ibid. xii).



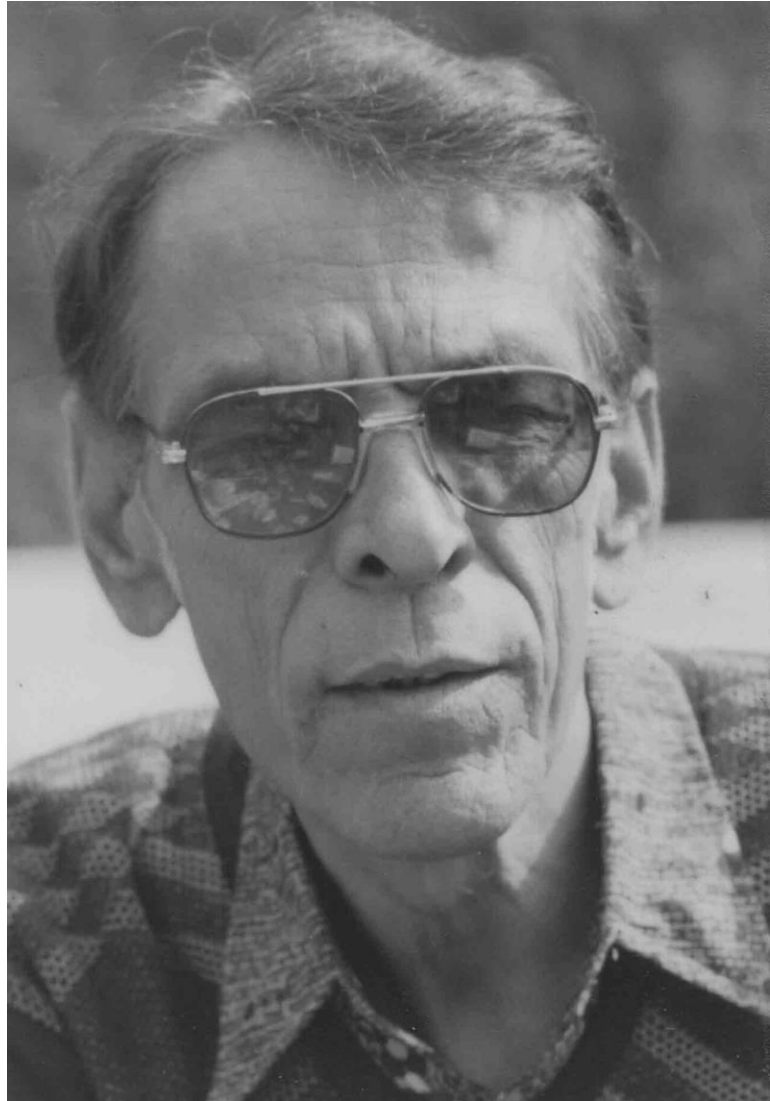
Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

“When the new kind of short story, with its penchant for ambiguity and abstraction, moved to centre stage and was discussed vigorously in debates, I read it too. However, I didn’t find it to my liking ... words should signify, and signify without equivocation” (qtd in Memon, *Essence* n.p.).



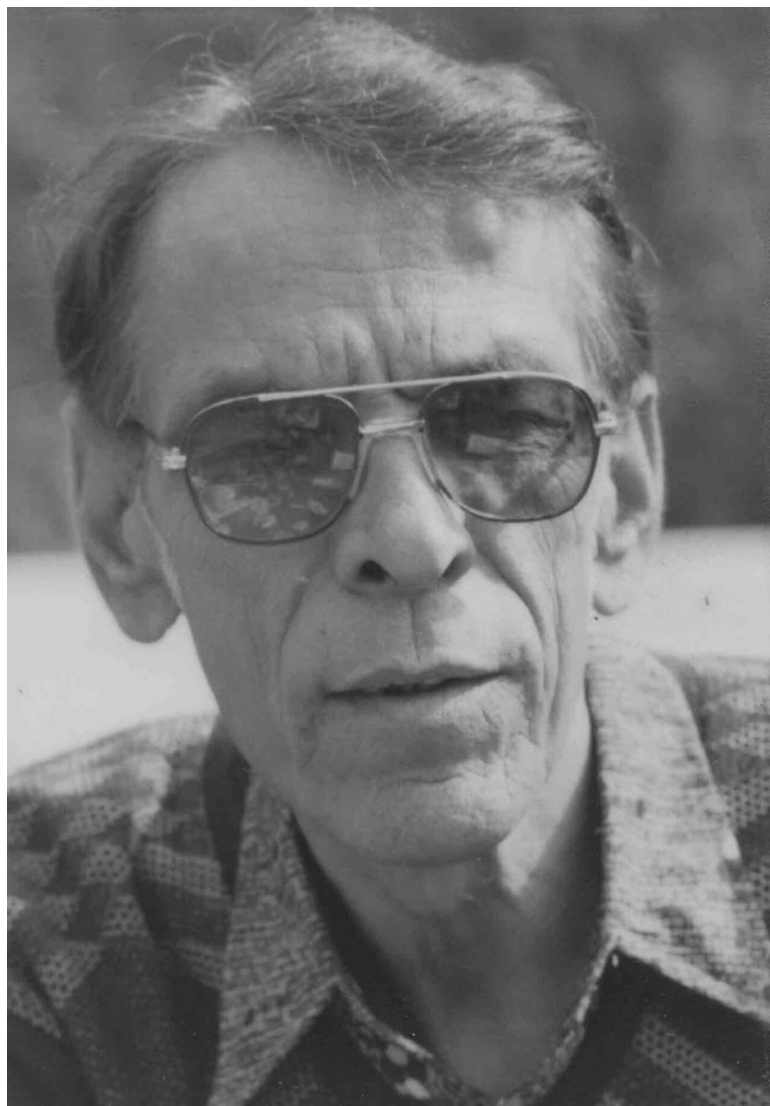
Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

“I had to struggle the most on language, on how to write precisely, on selecting words that would communicate my intent most accurately ... For me the hardest part of writing is deciding what to keep and what to leave out, what to describe and, more importantly, what not to describe ... I think a reader’s impression ought to be taken as more authentic than a writer’s own” (ibid. n.p.).



Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

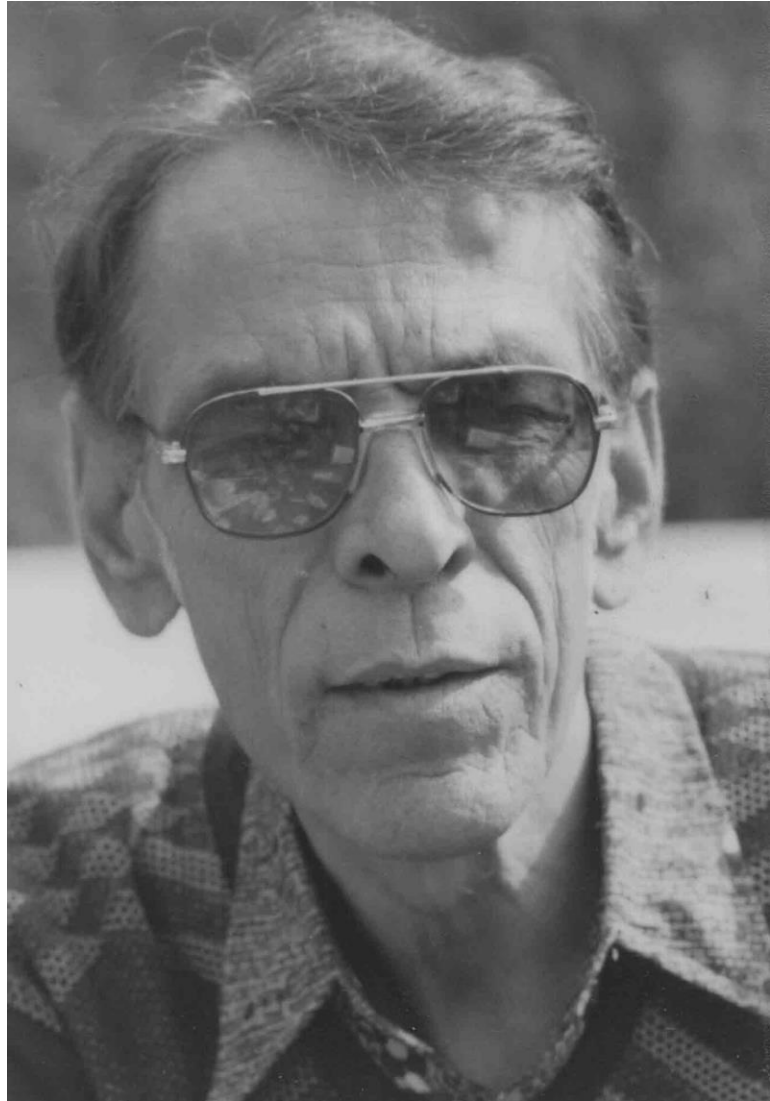
- **“shimmering but elusive”** (Memon, *Snakecatcher* viii) – unclear what is the message, purpose, or meaning of Masud’s writing. Difficult to pinpoint what exactly his characters are experiencing.
- “Some Urdu critics praised his work in casual newspaper columns or in coffee house banter, but **none of them could tell the reader what was good or bad about it, or even where it led. The message, the meaning, the experience remained tenaciously elusive**” (vii).



Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

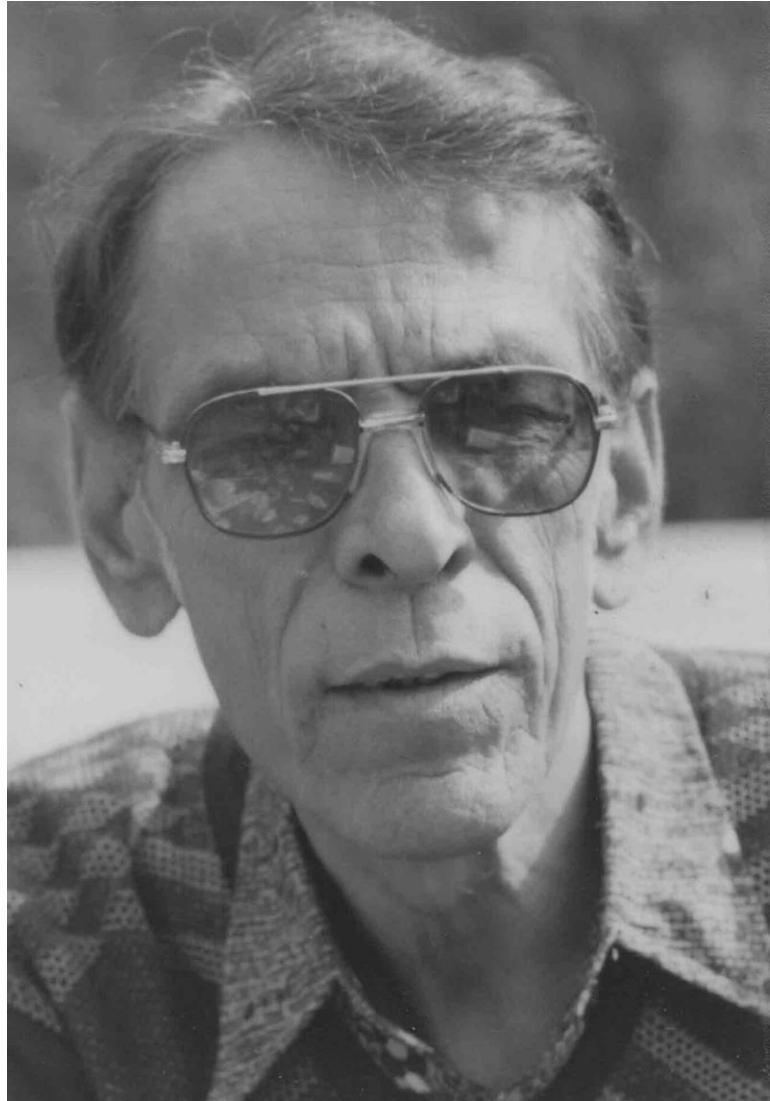
- His writing has been described as “**at once seductive and inaccessible ... [his] stories evoked a sensation of being thrown headlong into a self-referential circularity**” (vii).

“I tried to ascertain the events that had taken place during my absence. I arranged and rearranged the scraps in many different ways but failed completely to make any sense of them; as soon as I changed their order the events they were supposed to represent also underwent a complete change. I wasted a considerable amount of time juggling those scraps and was none the wiser for my effort” (38).



Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

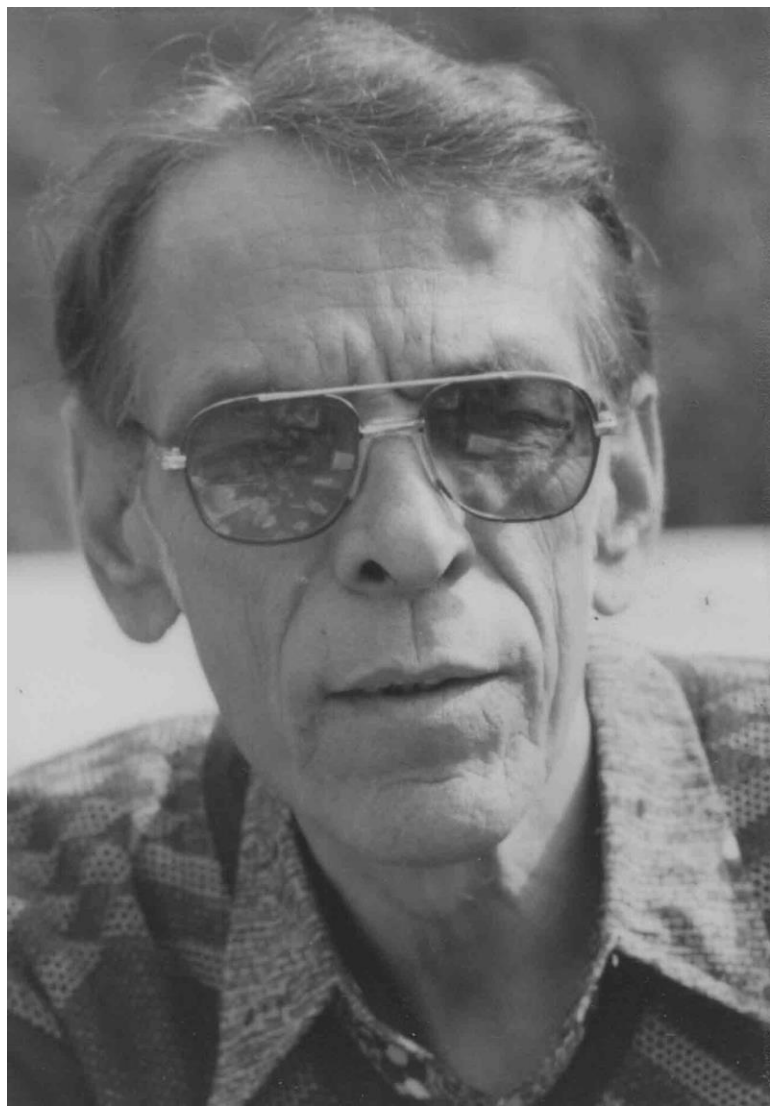
- It has been said to have a “**unique ontological orientation**” (viii), i.e. it is writing that studies or makes statements or comments about **the nature of being**.
- In other words, Masud is concerned with the whole experience of being: “**His theme, which can only be sensed dimly, is truly colossal: the entire problem of being**” (Memon, *Greatest* xxi).



Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

- Masud's writing appears to represent and depict the world ("**mirror-image of the real world in its outer form**"), but at a deeper level subverts that image.
- So it does not represent the world as it is, it is not realistic in the way we usually understand realism:

"[E]ven though each element in it appeared palpably real, oddly, the aggregate didn't add up to anything known" (viii).



Naiyer Masud (1936-2017)

- Memon attributes the intriguing but elusive quality of Masud's stories to his language, among other things. He writes that his prose is **"terse and highly-clipped ... so stark in its suppression of qualifiers that it unsettles the mind"** (viii).

“The Woman in Black” (1971)

- Originally called “Nusrat.” How does the change in title modify the way we look at the text?
- About this story, Memon writes:
 - “It has the cushy softness of dreams ... where an otherwise artless surface hides a troubled and troubling vision” (Memon, *Greatest* xxi).
 - “rather opaque” (ibid.)

What is the theme of this story?

“The Woman in Black” (1971)

- One possible reading is that this is **a story about loss**.
- Another possibility: Masud's stories are **not meant to be socially useful**. They penetrate and **challenge the idea of reality and consciousness**. They are meant to be experienced in terms of their **tantalizing ambiguity and strangeness**, and it is futile to think that we can ever understand them or make some practical use of them.
 - **This story seems to embody ambiguity**, again challenging and troubling the reader's perceptions of reality, **so that we do not know what is real in the story and what is unreal**.
 - First epigraph, quoting Donne's "The Dreame."

***My dream thou brok'st not, but continued'st it
Thou art so true that thoughts of thee suffice,
To make dreams truths, and fables histories.***

- John Donne

*The rider bearing the eternal treasure appeared on the path
No one bade him halt. He travelled on.*

- found among the papers of Fazl Allah Hurufi

Works Cited

Masud, Naiyer. "The Woman in Black." 1971. *Snakecatcher: Stories*. Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon, Penguin, 2006. 29-42.

Memon, Muhammad Umar. Introduction. *Snakecatcher: Stories*. Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon, Penguin, 2006. vii-xiii.

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