Sworn to secrecy, the stories of Naiyer Masud make a rather peculiar commitment to the page. His words are as invested in revealing – the plot, character and setting – as they are in hiding and turning their back to the readers. The readers, however, are not turned away entirely, and since the publication of his first collection *Seemiya* in 1984, Masud has managed to find for his work a singular place in the Urdu literary sphere. Despite being a regular presence in anthologies of Urdu stories – placed among more well-known Urdu writers of his generation – Masud’s prose has kept its distance from its designated neighbours. Some would say it is the elliptical and the absurdist charm of a Masud story that helps it keep this distance, but surprisingly this charm is nowhere to be found in the stories themselves. It resides neither in an embellishing phrase nor in a cataclysmic event; one can also not locate it in a historical or cultural detail evoked by the story. One is rather charmed, in Masud’s prose, by what is never made apparent in the work itself: a secret. If a secret is a verbal or gestural bond shared by two individuals where they are bound by a knowledge that they share, it is precisely this kind of relationship Masud’s fiction demands of its readers. It is the unstated, the hidden – made briefly explicit – the subatomic that one finds oneself in the company of as one reads Masud, one of the Indian short story’s finest prose stylists.

I wanted to never speak of Naiyer Masud to anyone. He was to be a secret I would keep, and take the greatest caution in keeping. Time and again I would return to Masud’s stories, and find myself renewed. A renewal I never felt comfortable sharing with others. I wondered whether it was the solitariness of the reading experience or its very peculiarity that kept me from sharing Masud’s name and his work with anyone. Whatever transpired while reading Masud, I knew, would be compromised if one were to talk about it. Secrecy, in some ways, was not a choice but a necessity of that reading experience. Masud, who passed away in Lucknow at the age of eighty-one last year, was popular not only amongst an Urdu readership but also a select English readership, gaining in numbers after the 2015 publication of his
Collected Stories, edited and translated by Muhammad Umar Memon. It is rare to find writers in South Asia whose fate rests, or who deign to rest it, almost entirely on their short fiction. Vilas Sarang had one such career in Marathi literature, although he continued experimenting with other forms; Intizar Hussain among Urdu readers is extremely well-known for his stories and, more recently, so is Jayant Kaikini for Kannada readers. I knew that by hiding Masud, by not bringing him up in conversations, I was probably doing a disservice to one of the rarest writers of Indian literature. But in not speaking about him, I was not preserving his works as a secret; I was preserving the riddles, the paradoxes, the great enigmas of his work, which could have found no easy and casual expression.

My hesitance at recommending Masud to friends might be understood by some as an act of shrewdness, like one hiding a trade secret. For some it might even be as serious as keeping a weapon hidden. The secrecy in which I approached Masud’s work, though, had more to do with the secrecy I found in such abundance in Masud’s own work. Characters in his stories often keep secrets, live secret lives, and at times are bearers of secret recipes and objects. If in some stories, it is everyday objects, ingredients or even one’s profession that turn into secrets, there are stories where a feeling, a thought or even an off-hand image can become a consequential secret for the protagonist. While a handful of Masud’s stories are tied around acts of revelation, others persist with the secret to the point where the entire story is spent protecting or tackling the secret. When Masud passed away recently, I regularly saw his name in print and, not unlike the apprehensions expressed in his own stories, I was confronted with a revelation. It seemed foolish at first, to believe that a gifted writer like Masud, widely published, could be a secret from the world. After probing further though, I knew Masud’s fame had nothing to do with the way I felt. The secrecy I desired was not for the prose or its writer, it was rather for the unique encounter one has as a reader, howsoever rare, when one is confronted with an idiom, a language, so painstakingly new. I kept Masud a secret, partly due to the rarity of such encounters and partly because of the fragile freshness his work carried.

‘Essence of Camphor’ (1990), the title story of Masud’s second collection, opens with a perfume-maker discussing the secret ingredient of his perfumes. Camphor, the covert ingredient, is described at length, with details given about how it is distilled and preserved for final fragrance. Owing to this opening revelation one would assume that the enigma of the perfume, the
One's profession often determines one's way in the world. And in return for this labour, the world allows us to be a part of it. The monotony of such participation is thoroughly broken in Masud, whose stories push the most common professions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Lucknow into zones of disbelief and wonder. Whether it is the toothpaste-maker in ‘Ganjefa’ or the chronicler in ‘Sultan Muzaffar’s Chronicler of Events’, all professions despite being immersive and partially productive, in Masud’s prose, have a hidden life of their own. A life that is not available to the diegetic world around them. If at times it is the nature of one’s work that is layered with secrets, as is the case in ‘Lamentations’, where a wanderer brings death to the communities he visits, giving himself the opportunity to observe their rituals of lamentation, there are also stories where a recognizable profession is
turned on its head by the quirks and emotional leaps of the individual practicing it. ‘Obscure Domains of Fear and Desire’, which opens Masud’s collected works in English and his first Urdu collection *Seemiya*, is one such story. An erotic encounter with an aunt leaves a lasting impression on a young man, who leaves his home to pursue a career in house inspection. This is how the narrator describes his job, while undermining his own talent in completing it: ‘The work that I had undertaken involved inspecting houses. Initially, I had the feeling that I would fail in this profession because back then, apart from my own house, all other houses looked to me like piles of inorganic matter or half-dead vegetation.’ The protagonist’s initial doubt turns into confidence the moment he discovers the secret of these houses, or rather discovers his own potential of accessing these secrets. The peculiarity of his vision, his singular strangeness, is ultimately integrated with his work when he starts slotting houses into domains of fear and desire. Not limited to his occupational requirements anymore, the houses the narrator inspects now mean more than the condition of their roofs and columns, the upkeep of their drainage and foyers. This is how the two domains, secretly lurking in the dull architectural mass, are revealed to the narrator:

No house, whether old or new, nor one among many of the same basic design, was without these domains. Looking for these domains of fear and desire became a vocation with me and, ultimately, this vocation proved harmful to my business. Because I was becoming convinced, asking the least bit of proof, that it was impossible to assess the life span of homes when they contained these domains of fear and desire...

Then one day I discovered a house where fear and desire existed in the same domain.

A scholar of Urdu and Persian with a PhD in both, Naiyer Masud taught Persian at Lucknow University until his retirement in 1996. As a professor and a scholar he would have had first-hand experience of parsing and explaining literary works to an audience. This analytical demand of scholarship though, is something Masud cleanly escapes, or unconsciously parodies, in his highly imaginative prose. The stories he wrote had no time for explanations. One is not sure if this was in any way a rejoinder to his own work as a critic or a teacher of literature, but a lack of explanations and a carefree neglect of logic in his fiction distressed him not only from idioms of
literary scholarship but also from much of post-independence Indian writing, its clutch of realism. There is a constant suppression and excision of facts in Masud’s work and in a long interview published as an appendix to the _Collected Stories_, it is also the nature of such omissions that are discussed: ‘I don’t know whether it’s just a fancy on my [Masud’s] part or whether it is true that once a thing is brought into existence, it continues to live in some form or fashion even when it is removed from the scene.’ What is removed from the story is the causal flow of events, which despite the absurdities could have made the story worldlier. Masud despite writing about this very world, with characters entrenched in emotions and gestures set after our very own nature, renders the world unrecognizable. This is what is so deeply unsettling about his fiction, if also its greatest promise.

Masud’s fiction often takes us to the frontiers of interpretation, to the limits of what we grasp and what we decipher in a literary work. His readers over the years have been very sensitive to this peculiarity and, surprisingly, have not shied from accepting their own shortcoming when reading and making sense of Masud. In fact, it wouldn’t be entirely wrong to call it one of the chief attractions of his prose – to be exposed to what one does not know, does not yet understand or, if one does, has no name for. When M. Asaduddin writes, ‘it is never adequate to explain the way they [Masud’s protagonists] are and their ruling obsessions’, or when Amit Chaudhuri calls him ‘a passionate but calm realist of the strange’, they are bravely accepting the challenges of reading Masud. A secret in Masud’s work is kept not only between characters in the story but also between the readers and the fiction they read. The fiction remains elusive and characteristically dense, while the reader reads the gaps and undergoes a distinctive experience that does not easily yield to explanation. The enigma is upheld. But the very inadequacy on the reader’s part to explain the events on the page also liberates them from the demands of narrative synchronicity, relatable protagonists and easy closures that have been the hallmark of much of short fiction in India, particularly after the emergence of the modern short story form in the subcontinent during colonialism.

Dastan, an ornate and oral form of Urdu storytelling, was among the several genres that faced an evolutionary crisis with the literary advances of the colonial masters: the novel and the short story. Failing to adapt, failing to overcome its genetic investment in folklore, magic, alchemy and adventure, dastan was soon replaced in the Urdu literary sphere with the short story. The
transition taking place between the late nineteenth century and early
twentieth century saw a lot of genres – akhyana, katha, kissa among others –
pushed into obsolescence in their respective linguistic abodes and replaced
with the more ‘modern’ form of the short story. Muhammad Umar Memon,
the most prolific translator of Masud’s work and the editor of his Collected
Stories, in an anthology of Urdu short stories titled The Colour of
Nothingness, gave ample reasons for this transition from the dastan to the
short story. He writes: ‘The dastan ascribed all causality to supernatural
rather than to human or natural agencies. It offered a different notion of time
and purposely left its characters two-dimensional.’ One can understand why,
with the introduction of colonial education and modern sciences, it would
have been difficult to practice or continue to be entertained by dastans, but
fiction also had before itself a much wider and complex reality to consider –
nationalism, wide social differences, caste and communal tension. The early
short stories of Premchand are a testimony to this crisis and the glorious
outcome it can have on page.

When Memon writes of the novel form ‘as the imaginative realm in which
two contradictory truths could coexist’, he is also hinting at the antagonistic
and factional political climate of the time that found a natural ally in the
capacious idioms of the novel and the short story. Angaaray, a publication
from 1931 containing ten short stories and a play by a group of four writers,
took the Urdu story in several radical and provocative directions. Sajjad
Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jahan and Mahmud-uz-Zafar – responsible for
writing Angaaray – had to face public censure for it and caused quite a few
political ripples, but their literary venture also had far reaching consequences
for the Urdu short story that matured along similar lines until 1947. After
independence there were varying developments in Urdu prose and among
many individuals, that made it possible Masud was one. Masud himself cites
Ghulam Abbas, a short story writer later based in Pakistan, as one who had
the biggest influence on him, but the modernism that Masud’s writing
practices seems to be borrowed from really nowhere and, in my limited
knowledge of the contemporary Urdu story, borrowed by no one in particular.
His style is a cul-de-sac in the long history of Urdu storytelling, but a cul-de-
sac where dastan and story can strike a deal without risking exposure, as to
who is who.

Unlike the dialectical concerns of the modern story, setting up ideas
against each other, Masud is more interested in the idiosyncrasies that grip an
individual and how it thereby reshapes all transactions between the self and
the other. The liberty allowed by the dastan form, the parable and even the
genre of puzzle, are on full display in Masud’s stories, which pay scant regard
to rules of causality, similitude and identification. It is not as if Masud ignores
the developments of the story form altogether to return to dastan, but the
imaginative freedom and valiance in his work is a quick reminder to older
forms of storytelling, where the story was allowed to easily escape, re-enter,
and occasionally explode our dearly held notions of reality. Masud’s story ‘The
Occult’ begins with the narrator describing the fog he is walking through, also
describing in some ways Masud’s exceptional engagement with the short story
genre, almost as if it were a manifesto: ‘The rays of the sun peeked out from
behind these dark twisting and tumbling forms that were keeping them
hidden ... This is exactly what I had come to see.’ Masud’s fiction, like the
narrator of ‘The Occult’, restricts itself neither to the fog nor to the rays, but
toils to see the embeddedness, the secrecy, of one in the other.

To think of a narrative that dabbles in fantasies, riddles and dreams but,
in the same breath, also refers to a historical Lucknow, to the most common
of professions and to the most orthodox of human relations, is to begin
grasping Masud’s fictional horizon. In story after story Masud crosses
territories of realism, fable and anecdotes, arriving at something entirely new.
His stories are neither a facsimile of the social world we are surrounded by
nor are they an abstract summary of one’s internal strife and emotions, they
rather indicate what one hides, not only from the world but also from oneself.
Consider the story ‘Stone with Sacred Name’, where the opening lines speak
of the stone as something known only to the narrator, but the succeeding lines
undercut this notion when the stone proves to be something even the narrator
does not entirely understand and, to worsen his case, does not knows the
location of: ‘I kept searching for several days but didn’t find it. Then one night
the pain started in my chest and while I was rubbing my chest my hand felt
the hardness of the stone. Just then I remembered that I had searched
everywhere but hadn’t noticed that, as always, it was hanging around my
neck. Suddenly the pain became very severe, and just as suddenly, it
subsided.’

Calling it strange or anti-realist is to still try Masud’s fiction in the court of
realism. One cannot grasp the secrecy of Masud’s fiction until one
overcomes the need to hang them on the knobs of genre or ideology. The
latter is much more difficult to overcome, since the question – why should
someone hide something without a purpose? – is an uncannily persistent one. This question assumes that when characters in Masud’s stories hide, they are motivated by one of many possible intentions. They, however, are not. Most of them are unaware, like the narrator of ‘Sacred Names’, of the extent of their own secrets. The German critic Walter Benjamin, one of the most sensitive readers of literary modernism, in an essay on Kafka, discusses this precise element in his work. Although the word secrecy is used here by the way of Dostoevsky, it comes to refer to a kind of literature whose key lies not with the narrator and not even with the author:

At times [Kafka] seems to come close to saying with Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor: ‘So we have before us a mystery which we cannot comprehend. And precisely because it is a mystery, we have had the right to preach it, to teach the people that what matters is neither freedom nor love, but the riddle, the secret, the mystery to which they have to bow – without reflection and even against their conscience’ … Kafka had a rare capacity for creating parables for himself. Yet his parables are never exhausted by what is explainable; on the contrary, he took all conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings. One has to find one’s way in them circumspectly, cautiously, and warily.

Kafka, also someone Masud translated into Urdu as Kafka ke Afsaane (1978), wrote, or used in his longer works, parables that none of his readers could claim to decrypt, nor could the author himself. It was the felicity of the inscrutable that Kafka, at least according to Benjamin, relished in his own work as much as his readers did. It is this felicity, if not anything else, that one sees being passed on from Kafka’s work into Masud’s. The hermetic quality of Masud’s own prose though is not entirely unconscious, in fact it is one of his desired effects, as Masud explains in the published interview with Memon: ‘But the specific elements or coordinates which would immediately anchor them to that time, I have purposely not mentioned. So we’re back to the dimness I spoke about earlier, one that withholds the sharpness of outline which specificity gives to atmosphere. I had to work very hard to achieve this effect.’ The ‘dimness’ he talks about here is very minutely built into the story, sometimes in the very opening sentence. The story ‘Ba’i’s Mourners’ begins with the caveat, ‘Few people know, or perhaps no one does, that for a long
time in my boyhood I used to be mortally afraid of brides’, dimming the sharpness of a childhood memory at once, by making it a secret. Similarly, the mother figure in the story ‘Ganjefa’ does chikan embroidery work, unique to Lucknow, for her family’s everyday survival but refuses to teach the skill to her son. Apart from her craft there is something else she keeps a secret, revealed in the story only after her death: ‘Before dying she was only able to tell a neighbour woman where she kept the money.’ Awarded the Saraswati Samman, one of the highest literary awards in India, in 2007, Masud has a rare talent for the inscrutable, a talent emboldened by a universal and timeless human tendency of keeping secrets, using them for purposes of friendship, logistics or self-explanation, and revealing them at will or under duress.

Masud’s fiction, despite keeping all its aforementioned secrets, does betray its historical setting. A particular kind of arch, a lamppost, a bird of the royal household, all hint at a time in Lucknow’s past. Yet the historical detail in his stories never encourages them to become narrative of that time or place, meaning that the stories at no point claim to represent a specific historical era or how a particular cross-section of people lived in that era. Despite the affinity with Lucknow and its past, no one after reading Masud’s fiction will come to identify them as Lucknow stories, the way one does with the Dublin of Joyce or the London of Dickens. Contrary to this, Masud’s fiction rather forecloses any possibility of representing history or specific places, since the anomalies of his protagonists are their very own and owe little to a period or a place. Venkat Mani, in a rare essay on Masud that does not dilute the philosophical density of its subject, writes: ‘He helps us understand when and where those standards were obfuscated or compromised, at what historical moments the incarnation of standards and knowledge in language and narrative was difficult, or close to impossible.’ The historical markers serve only as a trellis for the actual story to climb and perform its unexplainable, ‘close to impossible’ narrative, as is the case in ‘The Big Garbage Dump’:

The big garbage dump was located inside a building dating from royal times. It couldn’t be said who owned it, or what its original purpose was, or precisely when it was converted into a garbage dump. All that could be said with certainty was that now it was the personal property
of no one, that it was not built for the collection of garbage, and that no one had seen it in its pre-dump state.

The building the garbage dump is located around is of historical importance, a spillover from Lucknow’s royal past, but the narrator makes it a point to divest it from this history. The garbage dump takes on a meaning, or a lack of it, which is in spite of its history. Although it would be tempting to read the story as caricaturing the fall of the Awadh empire and of the Lucknow elite, now literally turned to rot, it is the disappearances and the parallel universe within the dump yard that occupies the majority of the narrative. The garbage dump exists as an epistemic gap throughout the story, eluding everyone who comes in contact with it, making the narrator at one point exclaim: ‘I would sense some vague feeling in its silence, but I could never put it into words.’ ‘The Librarian’ is another such story where history enters into a contest with the timelessly bizarre. Set in a library where ‘no books were ever purchased ... but from the very beginning there were many available’, the story can very easily be read as symbolically tracing the rise and fall of the reading culture in Urdu, either with the change in public culture or with the introduction of English. Although not wrong, the reading mitigates the unruliness that is so immanent to the story and, ultimately, to the conclusion: ‘He wrote to the Trust asking that a new library supervisor be appointed and followed that with several reminders, but no action was taken ... When the cloud moved out of the way, only the librarian was inside. Or rather, not even the librarian.’ How does one, through history, account for a cloud that starts following a librarian in a deserted library, finally consuming him?

Familiarity is the soil and water of unfamiliarity. It is one’s overt familiarity with the conventions of everyday life, the conventions of representing it, that Masud carefully exploits to create in his stories a gaping sense of unfamiliarity. Neither are his images shocking nor are the events he narrates particularly jolting; it is, rather, the measured restraint of his prose that does the job. In the interview with Memon, Masud methodically explains his craft and its restraints: ’First off, you will almost never find the use of izafat [Persian genitive, used often in poetical Urdu construction where words are conjoined by grammatical particle] in my stories, and will find vav-e ‘atf [the conjunction ‘and’] used only sparingly. Likewise I try hard not to use any idioms ... Purging idioms sounded like an easy enough way of creating an
element of unfamiliarity.’ So alien was Masud’s language for some of his Urdu readers that they assumed the text was translated, passing the burden of eccentricity on to a neighbour. Such eccentricity, and Masud’s craft of partial perspective, is what makes the story ‘The Colour of Nothingness’ so effective: ‘In fact, what aroused my interest in the matter was the opportunity it offered of looking squarely at a bad woman.’ The bad woman, who has been brought to the narrator’s house to face a trial by the family elders, is concealed throughout the story. The readers are made familiar neither with the nature of her crime, nor her physical features. Even the narrator is kept in the dark: ‘Her features were not visible. I couldn’t understand why it was so.’ Although one cannot observe the ‘purging [of] idioms’ up close in an English translation, the details that are hidden from the readers and the narrator in a story like ‘The Colour of Nothingness’ is telling enough of the narrative economy that Masud has in mind.

We seriously need to develop, using Venkat Mani’s phrase, ‘a language that can begin to register an experience of reading Masud’. It is to add to such a language that I re-read Masud now and, ironically, chose to discuss the sesecrets of his work. Secrecy, rather than excluding one from something or someone, allows a way into Masud’s fiction. As a reader one is always sharing these secrets when one is reading Masud, and thus in recalling and commenting on his work it would hardly be appropriate, let alone adequate, to employ a language of indication and revelation. There is really nothing to reveal. The secrets of a story like ‘Essence of Camphor’ can neither be paraphrased nor quoted, they are nowhere to be found on the page; one can only testify that between the page and one’s discerning eye something was shared, invisible and hushed.