

Mustahid Husain. *Double Truths*. 2024. Kantara Press. 292 pp. ISBN 9781916955370.
Price \$20.18.

Is development an art as well as a science? This is a conversation that some of us within the research community have been having for some time – both with colleagues in the social and natural sciences, as well as with those involved in the development business in more practical ways. With its now dominant focus on measurement, delivery, impact and value for money, development has become increasingly technical and economistic. The arts are “an overlooked and underappreciated source of legitimate knowledge about international development in all its many facets – from the drivers of disadvantage, inequality and dislocation to the pathways through which steps to a better life can be articulated, forged or denied” (Lewis et al. 2023).

The creative arts have long contributed to debates about social change and the nature of “progress” – from the romantic poets who critiqued the damaging effects of industrial modernity on society, culture and nature, to the widely-read novels of Chinua Achebe with their insights into the experience of colonialism and its lasting legacies. British novelist and scientist C. P. Snow famously criticized what he regarded as the unhealthy separation of public life into “two cultures”: people with a science background on the one hand, and those with an arts or humanities education on the other – each side unaware or even dismissive of the other’s worldview. In many ways, this continues to be a problem.

Bringing a humanities lens to bear on development issues through novels, films music or other creative media can be useful – not only because it widens the range of sources considered relevant to gaining an understanding of change, but also because it has the potential to generate new additional ideas and insights. For example, academic Sara Roy’s (1987) concept of “de-development” helps us to analyze poverty, exclusion and deprivation in the context of Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians. At the same time, why not also read Mahmoud Darwish’s poems that have, since the 1960s, also expressed aspects of the Palestinians’ lived reality, giving human form and shape to a people whose future has been snatched away? His poetry remains part of today’s resistance to occupation and is quoted regularly in graffiti (Saber 2024). Not only can the arts express people’s thoughts and experiences, but their forms and practices may also have real world effects. For example, in many contexts, community arts initiatives are used to promote reconciliation and reconstruction, while music can be seen to shape emotional responses to fund raising appeals, or to challenge or reinforce unhelpful stereotypes (Lewis 2025).

The novel reminds us that we do not only come to know the world by measuring it, but we also do so by experiencing it – including the need to appreciate and embrace the extent of its messiness, emotion and complexity.

Dr. Mustahid Husain teaches in the Department of Anthropology at University of Toronto where he is currently working on race, immigration, and historical trauma among diaspora communities. Following an earlier career in energy, telecom, and international banking, he went on to work at the World Bank in its Results Measurement Unit. Here he became interested in the relationship between the international development industry and Bangladesh's economic elites, and experienced the disjuncture between what agencies such as the World Bank promise and what they deliver. This is one of several central themes in his debut novel *Double Truths*, which weaves personal narrative and social observation into a rich mix. Interestingly, it is a novel about development that is alive to the importance of the arts to development itself. "I like being surrounded by art and crafts," says Zareen, the Bangladeshi USAID deputy director, "when my work gets hard it helps to remind me why humanity is worth fighting for" (50).

The novel tells a wide-ranging story with two central interlocking themes. The first is a set of detailed observations on the inner workings of the World Bank in Bangladesh, a society undergoing rapid change as well as one struggling with past legacies. The second is a very personal story of identity, redemption, and love. At the book's heart is Asif's journey through the shifting hierarchies of class, caste, ethnicity, and power as he returns to his native Bangladesh after a long period of living in the United States. Asif has spent a decade working in the financial industry in North America and has become restless, balancing being true to his roots with meeting the expectations of family and struggling with questions of personal integrity and professional ambition. Leaving behind a lost love in the US, he begins a new job, re-engages with his family, searches for new love and in doing so observes the rapidly changing society around him – in which he is adrift as both an insider and a stranger. "I'd returned for a reason," he begins, "but it wasn't altogether clear even to me" (6).

The novel is full of wry, perceptive observations on a life of displacement and the inability to move smoothly between different places and cultural worlds. For example, Asif with his "part-east, part-west psyche" reflects on the challenges of building a relationship on equal terms on the complicated terrain of postcolonial South Asia: "I was an American in America, but Layne could never be Bangladeshi in Bangladesh". Alongside these themes, Husain ruthlessly dissects the machinations and manipulations of the aid industry, where World Bank deputy Pradeep remarks that "facts are also relative in our line of

work" (61), and where the dismal nepotism of the country office is brought to life among interns whose only qualification are their elite connections. Nor are the agency staff hires much better, since "the World Bank hires the worst students from the best universities" (71). The world of professional development is characterized as one in which people strive to graduate "from the bush league NGOs to the ivy league of the World Bank" (27).

There are also sharp (and often amusing) observations about Bangladesh's elites and middle classes: "local staff at the World Bank's Dhaka 'zoo' blissfully co-existed, yet were divided by an abstract iron curtain, between the elites and the middle class with a small number oscillating between the two" (98) as well as the powerful representations of a country that has been acted upon by outsiders for so long that no one knows the past any more: "We limit ourselves thinking we are a developing country, but we're like a kingdom whose treasury got looted, libraries got burned, and entrepreneurs lost their expertise" (43).

The "message" of the book – "that development aid benefits everyone except those it's meant to help" – is convincingly made in the context of this fictional but entirely believable account of events at the World Bank. At the same time, the message is not a new one, and in any case, it is not always true. Development is a complex and diverse field covering a great many issues that go beyond the Bank's preoccupation with promoting investment in a "trickle-down" economic growth model – as organizations campaigning for garment worker rights or for environmental justice in the Sundarbans will tell you. Anthropologists from the "aidnography" tradition have given detailed accounts of this complexity, and this novel succeeds in complementing such accounts.

I was swept along by the surprisingly fast-moving narrative, and the characterization is strong. It offers a compelling and often moving personal story with which many readers will identify, about a protagonist finding his feet in a complex world of shifting identities and carelessly wielded power. While some might find the central critique of "development" a bit heavy handed, there is much to admire in this highly readable novel.

Mustahid Husain has spoken elsewhere about the ways his approach to writing fiction has been informed by cultural historian Saidiya V. Hartman's concept of "critical fabulation" (Husain 2025). This is a methodology for communicating issues of contemporary history in accessible ways through fictional characters and narratives – in ways that create emotionally resonant human stories that illuminate complex political and social issues. The aim is to bridge the gap between academic scholarship and aesthetic beauty and richness of storytelling to articulate ideas. This is, she says, also a way "to displace

the received or authorized account” (Hartman 2008, 11) and where “artistic practice becomes the exercise of imagining beauty and what it might make possible in the world” (MoMA 2023).

This approach helps the novel to illuminate aspects of the development world’s contradictions – the mismatch between the cost of development consultants and the poor quality work they often produce, the tendency to fund large-scale business enterprise based on cronyism at the expense of dealing with the challenges of assisting the small-scale grassroots entrepreneurs featured in the Bank’s promotional materials, and the continuing legacies of colonialism that structures the attitudes and relationships of “aidland”.

The author sometimes lets an understandable urge to educate the unfamiliar reader about Bangladesh get in the way of the narrative flow and can sometimes be a little clunky: “Do you know much about Bauls? ... Bauls are a unique group – they are influenced by both Vaishnavism and Sufism. Where else in the world could you find them except in South Asia?” (90). I did not always find myself agreeing with some of the explanatory asides, such as the reason for the fall of General H. M. Ershad in 1990. But this is fiction, intended to provoke and challenge, as well as to educate and entertain.

The novel reinforces the case that fiction is a powerful source of insight about both the world of development and wider issues of globalization, change, and identity. The development novel – though the author might feel that is too narrow a descriptor of this wide-ranging narrative – is a comparatively rare thing. *Double Truths* is an impressive debut, avoids oversimplifying its complex subject matter, succeeds as an act of critical fabulation and is well worth your time. It’s a very worthwhile addition to a slim oeuvre. While the book is an enjoyable read in its own right, it should also be on every university development studies reading list.

David Lewis | ORCID: 0000-0003-0732-9020

Professor of Anthropology and Development, London School of
Economics & Political Science
d.lewis@lse.ac.uk

References

- Hartman, Saidiya. V. 2008. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe*, 12 (2): 1–14.
Husain, Mustahid. 2025. “Double Truths: When fiction reveals what academia cannot.”
CIPS Newsletter, March 17, Centre for International Studies, University of Ottawa.

- Lewis, David. 2025. "Towards a 'Development Humanities': widening the multi-disciplinary field of development studies." *Oxford Development Studies*, 53 (2), 105–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2025.2476553>.
- Lewis, David, Dennis Rodgers, and Michael Woolcock. 2023. *Is Development an Art or a Science?* <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2023/01/09/is-development-an-art-or-a-science/>.
- MoMA. 2023. *Saidiya V. Hartman. Gallery 214. Critical fabulations. 2001. Collection 1980s–Present*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/298/4088>.
- Roy, Sara. 1987. "The Gaza Strip: A Case of Economic De-development." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 17 (1): 56–88.
- Saber, Indlieb Farazi. 2024. *'The war will end': Remembering Mahmoud Darwish, Palestine's poetic voice*. Al Jazeera, 13 March. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/3/13/remembering-mahmoud-darwish-the-poetic-voice-of-palestine>.