

## Handout 1: Poem in Original Format

This is the poem *Mustafa Centre. A Fact Sheet* by Pooja Nansi, presented in its original format in her poetry collection *We Make Spaces Divine* (2021).

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### **Activity 1A: Choral Reading**

Read the poem out loud according to the role you are assigned.

### **Activity 1B: Post-reading Reflection**

Across both the stanzas and footnotes, identify **three** to **five** lines that are **most impactful** to you? Highlight them.

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### ***MUSTAFA CENTRE. A FACT SHEET***

Mustafa Centre is a 24 hour mall in Singapore on Syed Alwi Road in the heart of Little India.<sup>1</sup>

Born on June 8, 1951, 5 year old Mustaq Ahmad leaves his home in Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh after the death of his mother to be with his father who sells tea and bread from a pushcart in Singapore.<sup>2</sup>

As a young boy, he sets up a stall next to his father's selling handkerchiefs and socks he buys with his own pocket money. Eventually he leaves school early to start his own business.<sup>3</sup>

In 1971, when the government imposes a ban on street stalls, he rents a 900 square foot space at No. 1 Campbell Lane selling ready-made garments.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a love poem.

<sup>2</sup> This is a poem about the places we have to leave.

<sup>3</sup> This is a poem about the maps we have to follow.

<sup>4</sup> This is a poem about relentless immigrant work ethic.

In 1985, when rent escalates by 70 percent and following the government's acquisition of his shop for conservation, he decides to lease a 40,000 square foot space on the ground floor in Serangoon Plaza.

In a few years, business does so well that he buys 20 storefronts on Syed Alwi Road which he tears down to build a 75,000 square foot department store.

Mustafa Centre is named for Haji Mohamed Mustafa, Mustaq's father.<sup>5</sup>

In 2003, Mustafa Centre announces that it will be open 24 hours a day.<sup>6</sup>

Mustafa Centre is home to the widest range of Indian groceries in Singapore, a jewel mart, a money-changing service, a pharmacy, postal services and a travel agency.

In 2005, for a brief moment, Mustafa Centre sells parallel imported cars.<sup>7</sup>

Following its 2004 renovation, Mustafa Centre turns over \$302 million per annum.

You can find almost anything in Mustafa Centre. Almost.

Mustaq Ahmad becomes a Singapore citizen in 1991 and has lived in Singapore 63 out of the 68 years of his life.

In 2004, the Singapore Tourism Board names Mustaq Ahmad "Tourism Entrepreneur of the Year".

In 2008, Forbes ranks him Number 37 on their list of Singapore's 40 Richest People.

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<sup>5</sup> This is a poem about how we leave our marks. Leave our fathers' names permanent in the topography of a country – how we turn our fathers' names into plaques, how we turn them into a likeness made of stone.

<sup>6</sup> This is a poem about making home feel less far away.

<sup>7</sup> This is a poem about brown movement.

In the 2006 National Day Rally Speech, the prime minister mentions Mustaq Ahmad. He says, “You get the right foreigner here, he creates thousands of jobs for Singaporeans like Mr Mustaq and you need to get more people like him”.

Currently Mustafa Centre occupies 400,000 square feet in the heart of the city.<sup>8</sup>

An entry on Tripadvisor calls Mustafa Centre an “out of Singapore shopping experience”.<sup>9</sup>

400,000 square feet is roughly the size of 7 football fields.

In 2017, Mustaq Ahmad is asked to vacate the space he has leased in Serangoon Plaza which is slated for redevelopment.<sup>10</sup>

In anticipation of its impending closure, Mustaq Ahmad can be seen almost every day pacing around the store – as he stops and gazes at the empty shelves.

“We are not sure what he is thinking but we can understand his feelings,” says one of his workers who has been working at Mustafa for over a decade. “We started from here and have grown so big.”<sup>11</sup>

For many employees, practical concerns outweigh any nostalgia – several of them will be redeployed to different roles or departments which they are unfamiliar with.

Still, some of them will miss the place they call home. “It holds a lot of memories for me,” says Mr Mohideen, a cashier, his hands looping a cable tie around another shopper’s bag.

Mr Mustaq, however, shrugs off the impending closure.

He says, “There is nothing to feel bad about the place that we do not own.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This is a poem about taking up space.

<sup>9</sup> This is a poem about how you can take up all the space in the world, and still they will never see you as their own.

<sup>10</sup> This is a poem about right of soil, about land.

<sup>11</sup> This is a poem about where we have come from. Maybe this is a poem about survival.

<sup>12</sup> This is a poem about the displaced children of displaced children.