

BOOKS TODAY

FEBRUARY 2008



AMMI

letter to a
democratic
mother

SAEED MIRZA

INDIAN AUTHORS'
LITERARY JEWELS

ROMANTIC
FICTION

AMAZING BOOKS
FOR CHILDREN

GIFT FLOWERS ALL
ACROSS THE COUNTRY

AMMI

Letter To A Democratic Mother
Saeed Mirza

The Book: Mirza's narrative interweaves memories of a mother with the living political creed she believed in – the egalitarian ethos of a democratic faith coupled with a deep, inquiring faith in religion. The book begins as a letter that contains within itself a vast repertoire of literary genres ranging from the short story, poetry, interior monologue, memoir and diatribe, to travelogue, novelisation and film script.

Mirza writes simply and, with a film maker's passion for authenticity, he makes everyday events tell a deeply complex story.

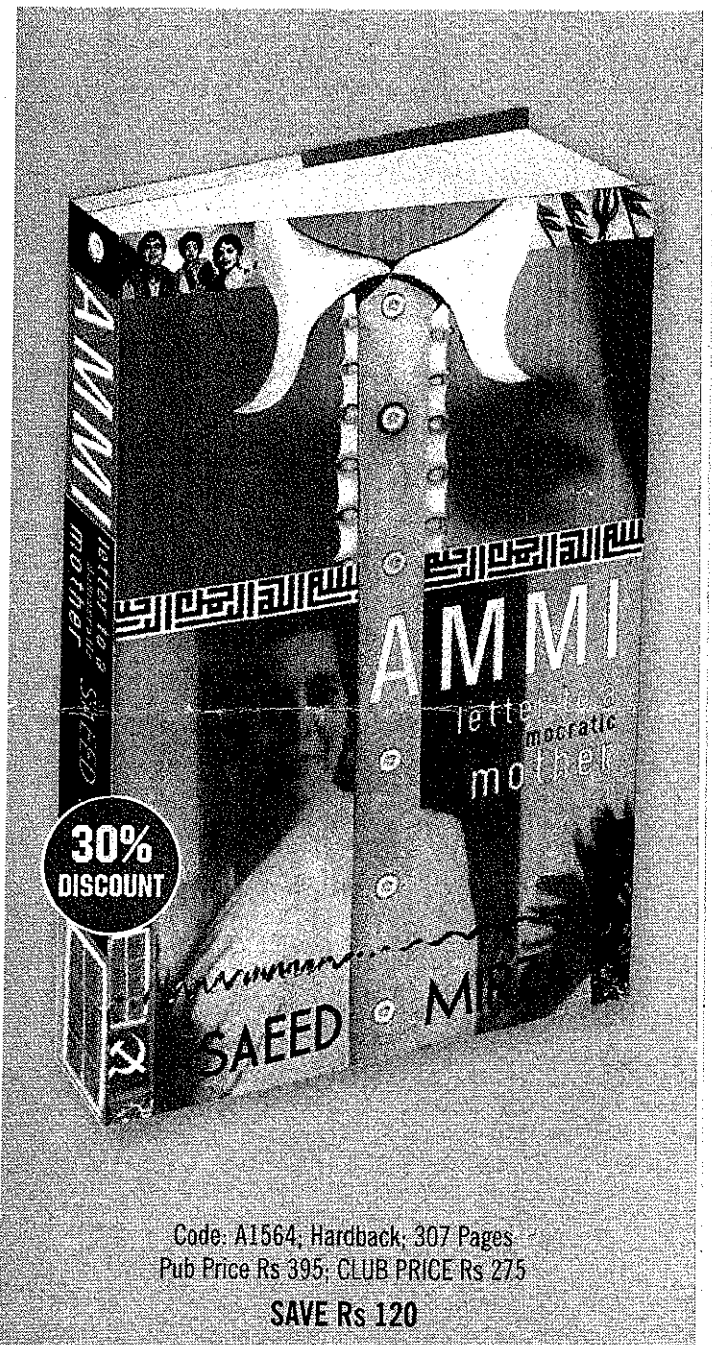
EXCERPT:

I am trying to imagine that moment. The year was 1938 and you had been wearing a burqa ever since you were thirteen years old. What went through your mind that made you decide that you were not going to wear it anymore? It was such an incredible decision. In a way I believe that this particular moment would be fixed forever in your mind. Am I right? What did Baba do or say when you shook your head? I believe he smiled. What did you do with the burqa that was in your hands? I was told that you folded it and put it around your arm and walked home with Baba. What did you feel when you walked home? There must have been hundreds of people who passed you by on the streets that evening and who, perhaps, even looked at you. Did you look back at them? Or, did you look down at the road as you walked? Later, you folded the burqa and put it away in a trunk at home, almost saying to the world and, perhaps, to yourself too, that a chapter was closed. You then joined Baba at the dining table and smiled. I was told that Baba looked at you and smiled too. It was perhaps the quietest revolution ever because it seems you and Baba never talked about your decision again. And here I am, so many years later, still wondering about a story that should have made the headlines that should have been trumpeted from rooftops but was instead silently hushed up in a rented apartment on Cuffe Parade. I am not suggesting that you had turned into a revolutionary because I do know you were a devout Muslim all your life and you even prayed five times a day. But I still wonder.



The Author: Saeed Akhtar Mirza is a pioneer of the New Wave, progressive cinema in India. His films including *Arvind Desai ki Ajeeb Dastaan* (1978), *Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai?* (1980), *Mohan Joshi Haazir Ho* (1984), *Salim Langde pe Mat Ro* (1989) and *Naseem* (1995),

have all won major awards including the National Awards for film excellence and the Filmfare Critics Choice Awards. He has also directed the popular TV serials *Nukkad* (1986) and *Intezaar* (1988), along with numerous documentaries on social welfare and cultural activism. Mirza trained at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, and has also taught there.



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QUESTIONS

Saeed Mirza



Celebrated filmmaker on his debut novel Ammi—Letter to a Democratic Mother

Q How did you get around to writing a book?
A This wasn't begun as a novel, rather a response to 9/11 when people like George Bush started using words like "democratic" vs "undemocratic" without an idea of what it meant.

Q What about that did you find so offensive?
A How badly people are misconstrued and misperceived. Just because a person wears a business suit doesn't make him a liberal.

Q And the name of the book comes from that?
A Very much so, I wanted to rescue those words to show how the term "democratic" could be used for people like my mother, who fitted none of those preconceived ideas.

Q How long did the novel take to write?
A Over four years and a lot of travelling.

Q Tell us about the structure of your novel.
A I'm not sure I can. It's made of many parts—screenplays, diary entries, memoir and events I witnessed, worked into the overall structure.

Q Any other book we could compare it to?
A I haven't seen one. I had no benchmarks with which to compare when I started, and now, when I'm finished, I still don't see one.

Q You are associated with Progressive, New Wave cinema, is the novel a continuation?
A "Progressive" isn't the word I'd use, rather "cinema with integrity". Whatever I've done I've tried to do with passion and integrity.

Q Is there still scope for that type of cinema?
A I don't know. You just do your best. Nobody knows what will work with the audience.

Q With the new writing on India, is there scope for "literature with integrity"?
A I hope so.

Q What do you find disturbing about cinema and literature in New India?
A Less than 2 per cent of the population are affected by the stockmarket, but recently 80 per cent of the stories are about that. Cinema and literature will follow suit, but that's a very

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