

EXTRACT | Saeed Mirza

# Faith is not the only way to truth, he believed

The day her father left, Jahanara pulled out a piece of paper from the cupboard, read what she had written on it, and turned to Nusrat.

"Tell me about Ibn Senna and Ibn Rushd," she said.

Nusrat was surprised.

"How have you heard of them?"

"You mentioned their names in Quetta."

Nusrat Beg recalled what he had said that night to the members of the Pathan clan.

"You remember what I had said?"

"I had written down their names."

"What do you want to know about them?"

"Tell me everything."

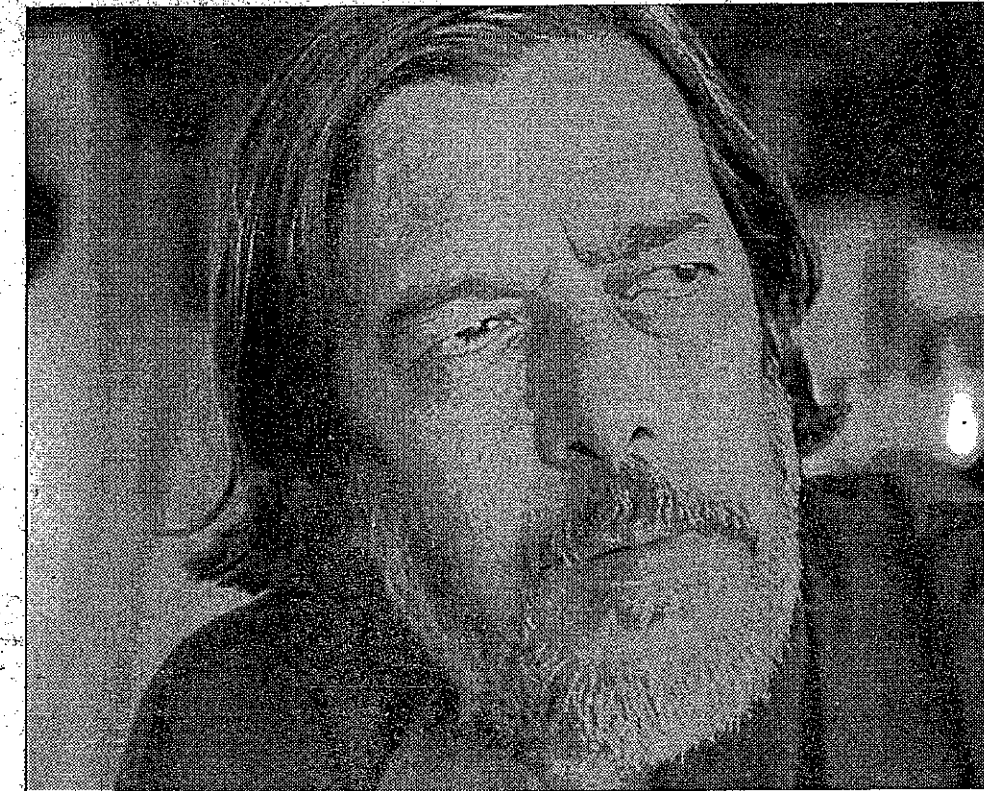
"Begum, before I do so, I must warn you that I will have to talk about a lot of other things. I must tell you about an age that was amongst the finest in the history of man. And it was in those times that these two men lived and worked. Are you willing to listen?"

Jahanara nodded.

Nusrat Beg launched into his favourite subject.

"For 500 years, Begum, from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, an age of learning, discovery and wisdom flourished. It stretched all the way from Bukhara in the East to Isfahan, Baghdad, Damascus, Alexandria, to Palermo in Italy and to Cordoba, Sevilla and Toledo in Spain in the West. There were hundreds of scholars, poets and mystics improved upon what they had learnt, and extended the frontiers of knowledge about our world and the universe."

Nusrat Beg talked about the great astronomer and mathematician al-Khwarizmi, the man who invented algebra, and



BACK IN TIME: Director-cum-author Saeed Mirza

and their contribution to the knowledge of the stars, the universe and the tilt of the earth's axis relative to the sun. He talked about how they had calculated the number of days in a year and the latitudes and longitudes of major cities. He told her about the great physician al-Razi and his study of infectious diseases, his use of anaesthesia and his emphasis on hygiene. Such studies and cures had never been done before. He also told her about al-Razi's 10-volume writings on Greek, Indian and Chinese medicine and his monumental medical encyclopaedia. He spoke



of surgical instruments. He talked about the scientist and mystic al-Farabi whose commentaries on Greek philosophy created a furore in theological circles. He talked about the philosopher and poet Ibn Arabi whose works were

## Ammi: Letter To A Democratic Mother

By Saeed Mirza  
Westland Books  
Pvt. Ltd.  
Rs 395, pp. 307

poems on love and romance had never been written before and a lot of people were offended.

"Those were great times, Begum. And now I come to your question about Ibn Senna and Ibn Rushd. I must start with Ibn Senna.

was no less qualified than all the people I have mentioned. He was the author of many books on mathematics and science. His scholarship and writings on medicine went far beyond even the great al-Razi. His study of plants and herbs for their medicinal use, his study of the circulation of blood and the use of anaesthesia for surgery were far ahead of their times. His books on medicine were studied in Europe right up to the 17th century and he was called 'The Master Physician'. But his real contribution, as far as I am concerned, lay elsewhere."

freethinkers in the world."

"What do you mean?"

"He started to question Begum. He was among the first to say that faith is not the only way to the truth. It can be found in science and philosophy as well. Imagine, Begum! Truth in science and philosophy. He studied the works of Greek, Indian and Egyptian thinkers and other ancient mystics. Though these philosophers did not believe in God the way Muslims or Christians do Ibn Senna felt there was so much to learn from them. He wrote about their work and added his own commentaries. Some Islamic scholars challenged his thinking. They were furious and wondered how he could have trust in the people who didn't have the Faith. They attacked his theories but he stood firm."

"Was he a Muslim?"

"He was. He was very much a Muslim, Begum. And then, about a hundred years later, came Ibn Rushd, another wonderful thinker who lived in Spain. He studied the work of Ibn Senna and added more to it, much more. 'Falsafa', or philosophy, was, to him the highest form of truth. Faith was not good enough to understand the God and the universe, it had to be backed by reason. These were two great men Begum, two great men Ibn Senna and Ibn Rushd the Teacher and the Student. They are my favourites, Begum. They changed the way we think and they changed the world. There were many others who did the same later, but these two were among the first."

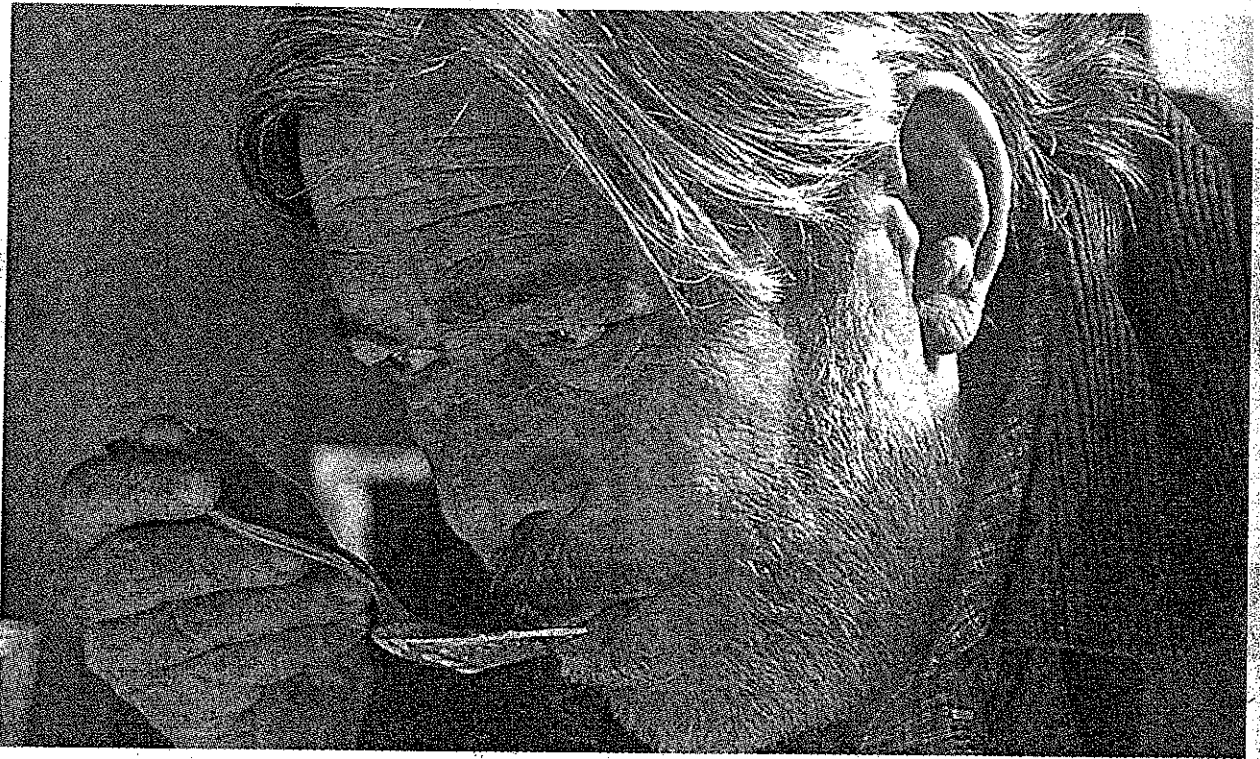
Nusrat paused again for effect.

"And therefore, I honour them. May their souls rest in peace, Ameen."

# Life beyond masala

**TABLE FOR TWO** Seasoned filmmaker Saeed Mirza on his food and culinary skills, and more

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**SUMPTUOUS AFFAIR** Saeed Mirza at Taj Mahal hotel's Masala Art restaurant PHOTO: SANDEEP SAXENA

**T**ruly, good food changes one's mood. It can turn an angry man calm and a placid one happy. Imagine, if a man, often angry, suddenly smiles and says, "I have a fatal attraction for prawns and 'paye'?"

Much to the amusement of all at the Masala Art restaurant in New Delhi's Taj Palace hotel, veteran filmmaker and author Saeed Akhtar Mirza mellows down. The reason? Ever smiling Executive Chef Mohammad Mushtaq who spreads a lavish menu with his signature dishes before Mirza and his wife, scholar and academic Jennifer Mirza.

"On the table, no ghussa (anger), *aisa buzurg kehnte hain*. Especially when the food is delicious," smiles Mirza, starting his meal with *murgh yakhni shorba*. "Lovely soup," he compliments. Traditional ingredients make him rewind, "At my home, dinner always used to be a lavish affair. My mother used to make it a point that all of us ate together. Never had we eaten without guests over

'*dastarkhwan*'. *Aur kya barkat hoti thi! Khana kabhi kam nahi padta tha* (despite several guests, food would always be sufficient).

#### Tips from mom

Switching over to *tandoori ajwani jhinga*, he continues, "My mother was a fabulous cook. She always used to say, 'never judge a good cook by his *roghan josh* or *biryani*, but by his *dal*'.

Trust a scholar like Mirza, who has churned out thought-provoking films like *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai*, *Salim Lagde Par Mat Ro*, *Mohan Joshi Haazir Ho* etc., to revert to what annoys him the most - the indifference of Indians towards the country's culture and literature. "I wonder if an average Indian reader knows that the West has borrowed so much from the East? Who said knowledge started with the Greeks? Ibn-e-Rusht, the 9th Century Jewish philosopher crossed North Africa long before any Westerner

did. Galileo came 800 years after Ibn-e-Rusht and he always denied that he had read Ibn-e-Rusht and took credit for all scientific innovations!"

The veteran seems to be getting serious. Only some *gilaouti kababs* with soft and crispy *ultra tawa parantha* can mellow him down. The delicious spread does the trick. From *Ibn-e-Rusht*, he switches to food, "I could never cook in my life. The only time I tried to cook was when I was a student at FTII. Once I was alone in my room and wanted to have fried egg. *Mujhse bana hi nahi to maine sab mila diya* (I couldn't succeed so I scrambled it). Realising my pathetic culinary skills, my room partners never allowed me to cook. They would send me out to buy vegetables, etc.," he laughs while choosing *jhinga aur scallop curry* for the main course.

"Wah, this is better than Goan curry," chuckles the man who divides his time between Mumbai and Goa. On the chef's insistence, he takes

*lassoni palak*, *dal makhni* and *kareli biryani*. "I won't eat for three days now," he quips.

One may be amazed as to what Mirza was doing if not making films all these years? "I was travelling all across India, meeting people on the street, making documentaries on them, teaching at different universities across the globe as a visiting faculty..." he reels out. And enriched with all his experiences Mirza wrote "Ammi - Letter to a Democratic Mother" recently published by West Land Books.

It is time for dessert; *strawberry cheena payas*, *badami* and *gajar ka halwa*, *bailey's kulfi* are all served quickly.

Mirza would soon shoot for *Savdhaan*, *Meri Jaan*, his forthcoming film produced by Rajat Kapoor. It is about the guys nextdoor, their hopes, aspirations and bonding. "Yes, what more can I celebrate? But it would be as *la-zeez* as these sweets?" he promises, giving a warm smile.

RANA SIDDIQUI

Price of the Paper : BUSINESS STANDARD

Place of Publication : NEW DELHI

27 MAR 2008

### OTHER BOOKS

**WHY WHIZZERS** This is a strange book, but one I must admit I couldn't put down. It makes a case for Whizzers, as both an idea and a movement. It is a matter of time before they become the voice behind the backs of modern, cynical Muslim leaders and even parents everywhere, wanting to make

use of the modern world has seized the world. There is a special blending of Islamic culture, folk lore as well as a fair amount of scientific and literary learnings of the world are highlighted.

Why Whizzers has the Islamic world's best modern, so far, today may as well be in the religion has to do with modernism, idealism and fundamentalism instead of the breaking learning with which it was created.

An essential read in today's chaotic world, amped up particularly for Muslims.

Name of the Paper : DECCAN HERALD

Place of Publication : BANGALORE

Dated - 4 MAY 2008

# Memorable melange

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To fully appreciate this engaging book, the reader must first sportingly ignore the tall and bewildering claim by the publisher that this is a work of fiction. Once this notion of a roman-a-clef is cast aside, it becomes easier to relate to this book by noted film maker Saeed Mirza as mostly memoirs, part history lesson and contemporary political documentation, part travelogue, and as a lucid argument for a more liberal form of Islam.

As the author himself eloquently puts it, the book is, "a mélange of memories, tales, anecdotes, events and people that have inspired me, saddened me, provoked me, and finally, shaped me and helped me understand my world."

Concomitant with the aim of self-discovery are Mirza's tributes in the form of expanded letters to his mother who died in 1990, the 'Ammi' who against severe odds ran the family household with a blend of tolerance, compassion and pragmatism. These qualities were shared by his father who, on migrating to Bombay, began as a coal hauling contractor in the railway yard in Sewree, advancing on to the business of selling locks and manufacturing '7Up' cola and ultimately finding his true métier as a respected and uncompromising screen writer in the Bombay film industry.

Shrugging off the rather pedestrian title, the book works mainly because of Saeed Mirza's tone, at once chatty and socially concerned, plaintive but never descending into sentimentality. His political commentary does not lapse into polemical rhetoric or the convoluted jargon of sociologists.

It is instead cryptic and pointed.

In what appears to be the only fictional part of the book, a taut and rivetting film script set in 9/11 America, Mirza's lead character, Rasheed, tells his young nephew: "Well son, let me tell you something that will cheer you up. We didn't invent apartheid. We didn't invent germ warfare. We didn't start the world wars or the

holocaust. We didn't have gulags. We were not in Vietnam. Nor did we bomb Hiroshima."

A refreshing and candid tenor does lift the 'letter' above a straitjacket classification. Mirza comes across as a sympathetic skeptic, a 'leftist Sufi', as he puts it. But, curiously, it is the guise of the book as a novel that preempts much that would have elevated it as a straight memoir— in which it is possible to integrate several fields of writing.

There is, for instance, very little on Mirza's own career as a film maker or on his pathbreaking movies like 'Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai?' and 'Mohan Joshi Haazir Ho' and others or on his popular TV serials 'Nukaad' and 'Intezaar'. There is nothing by way of explanation on why he hasn't made a feature film for so many years now.

The most glaring absence is of photographs, visuals that are central to a film maker's life. Pictures that would have a rightful place in a book of memoirs— such as this one only



## Ammi— Letters to a Democratic Mother

Saeed Mirza

Chennai: Tranquebar

Press, pp 307, Rs 395.

# The larger picture

Saeed Mirza's book encompasses different genres but strikes a chord.

ZIYA US SALAM

Post-9/11 the world is neatly divided between those who feel apologetic about their Muslim inheritance. And follow America's fundamentalism without ever questioning Uncle Sam's right to decide who should rule over Iraq or Afghanistan. And there is a handful who take pride in their unique culture, refusing to take any reference points from the West.

Seasoned filmmaker Saeed Mirza is among the latter. A bit of an outsider everywhere, yet at home with his uniqueness Mirza has penned this wonderful book *Ammi: Letter to a Democratic Mother*.

## Dispassionate observer

The book offers no daring insights but is, thankfully, not an exercise in nostalgia either. Even while talking of yesterdays on a personal note, he avoids a touch of anguish, preferring to see the larger picture all the while; much like a dispassionate observer, a non-participant outsider.

Following the tapestry of his life and his works, his films like "Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyun Aata Hai", "Salim Langde Oe Mat Ro" and "Naseem" as indeed his tele-serials like "Nukkad" and "Intezaar" managed to strike a chord with the common man and get critical acclaim too. Yet, he has not quite been able to translate that goodwill or words of genuine appreciation into a box office hit. Maybe because he has offered something that stirs, that provokes. He has never really spoken the language of mainstream formula films, never quite indulged in the stereotypes one associates with the *saas-bahu* soaps.

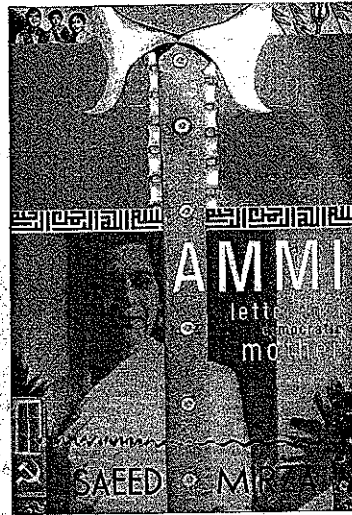
Now his book treads the same path, encompassing so many different genres, yet able to strike a rapport with a first-time reader. There are little anecdotes, some parables, subtle satire and more than a note or two of poetry, both medieval and contemporary, Oriental and Occidental.

He starts the book though on a wistful personal note, reminding us of that wonderful poem by Javed Akhtar: *Mujh ko yaqeen hai sach kehni thhi, jab hi Ammi kehni thhi, jab mere bachpan ke din the, chand pe pariyan rehti thhi*. Mirza talks of that little bath when he was only around three. How he was cleaned and dusted by his mom, who would then fondly caress him, showering him with talcum powder, all along humming, "*Saeed Saab ban gaye gentleman, Do paise ki ghadi lagaayi, teen paise ki chain, Saeed Saab ban gaye gentleman*."

## Early years

Soon, he transcends the mutual admiration club, and recalls an early lesson from his mother who could not quite grasp the subtleties of the English language. Addressing his Ammi, he writes, "I find it difficult to express myself in Urdu. I still remember your answer: 'Write in any language, in any way, but express what is in your heart'."

Subtly, he exposes the shortcomings of an education system where quality is synonymous with English to the detriment of family



*Ammi: Letter to a Democratic Mother*; Saeed Mirza, Tranquebar Press, Pages 307, Rs.395

think, your attempt to somehow stem the tide that you knew would inevitably follow...It is a price we both have paid: you for the partial loss of your son, and I for drifting away because of a language."

## Bigger canvas

Later in the book, Mirza takes on a bigger canvas, moving away from a fond remembrance of his mother to a world where what the West says is often taken as the right thing. In "A time to remember", he recalls his school days, and how things have not changed much since the time he was in shorts. "I would have happily sacrificed my *aloo parathas* and herbal sherbet for a sandwich and a cola. I would have probably sacrificed much more for a taste of those imported chocolates and cheese...since those early days of my school years, things have not changed much in India..."

Later, he is at ease talking of the works of Charles Dickens and the "complex" times he lived in. Just as he is while talking of Ibn Araby, Rumi, Mulla Nasruddin, Ghalib and Dagh Dehlavi, etc. But soon he corrects himself realising talking of the past does not always give us the roadmap of the future. He wonders, "Does the past really matter as the world hurtles towards a future that is relentlessly being sculpted by people like Bill Gates, Donald Trump, Warren Buffett, the Ambani brothers...?"

He weaves these little comments, sneak windows into our times that were, and the times that are with glimpses of his own journey, from a English-medium school boy to an economics and political science graduate, to his stay at the film school. And yes, he was



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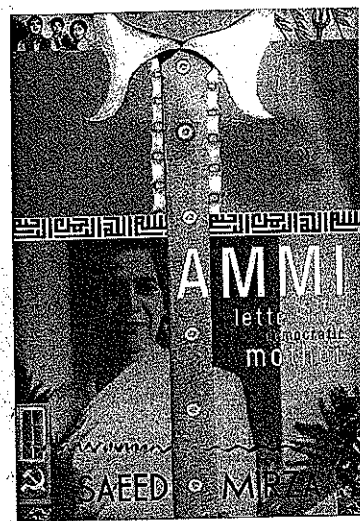
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Subtly, he exposes the shortcomings of an education system where quality is synonymous with English to the detriment of pupils' mother tongue.

As Mirza writes, "The problem is that my Urdu is inadequate, and I think the fault is yours. You slyly made sure that your children studied in a school where the medium of instruction was English...Yet you secretly despaired at what you had done. Those tentative classes in Urdu that I had at home were, I



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He weaves these little comments, sneak windows into our times that were, and the times that are with glimpses of his own journey, from a English-medium school boy to an economics and political science graduate, to his stay at the film school. And yes, he was deeply moved by Japanese filmmaker Ozu's "Tokyo Story", a story of an elderly couple who visit their children in Tokyo.

Yes, Mirza's book is a wonderful compendium of memories with pertinent comment about a world that is often guilty of judging men and civilisations by what they have, not what they are.