

## Personality Interview

By Asif Aslam Farrukhi

# "The dirt is in their minds"

—Ismat Chughtai

*Ismat Chughtai is a living legend. She is one of the most widely read writers of the day. For nearly fifty years, her novels (Tairhi Lakir and Masooma) and stories (Lihaf, Chauthi ka Joda and Nanhi ki Nani, etc.) have kept readers shocked, amused and titillated. Ismat began writing in the days when writing was viewed as an act of rebellion, but even a trial for obscenity (for Lihaf) couldn't restrain her unabashed candour. Today, the fiery, outspoken, non-conformist grandmother can look back smugly on a long career which spearheaded a new consciousness for women.*

*One of the leading stalwarts of the Progressive Writers Movement, Ismat is the only living survivor of the group of four — Manto, Bedi, Krishan Chandr and herself — the larger-than-life figures who appeared on the scene at a crucial moment and took the Urdu short story to new heights.*

*Ismat Chughtai, in person, is as vivacious as Ismat Chughtai in print. Her conversation is peppered with the same spice that flavours her writings — which means that not all of it is quotable here. Perhaps she is aware of this as she sits back and enjoys her own conversation. The fact that she answers most of the questions put to her only tangentially does not seem to matter. This sari-clad, silver-haired, benign-looking rebel who chews paan and smokes a cigarette alternately, has not lost her touch. She still knows how to captivate and charm...*

**Q. Do you, like all visiting Indian writers, have any statements to issue on Urdu's 'bright future' in India?**

**A.** Urdu's future? The language that is being spoken is Urdu, the language of films is Urdu and because of it, people have to read Urdu. There are so many schools; so many children are learning Urdu. All the Muslim children study Urdu because they read the Quran. There's no likelihood of Urdu being wiped out from India. We have the largest population of Muslims — 10 crores. They will not let it happen. In some places the script has been changed, but the language remains.

**Q. You and a few others have advocated that the Devnagri script being used for Hindi should also be adopted for Urdu. What is the rationale behind this?**

**A.** That's because Hindi is compulsory. Everybody has to study it. This way, we won't have to work hard to teach our children. Because of our emotional attachment with Urdu we want them to learn the language.

**Q. Surely such a change would harm Urdu?**

**A.** Urdu has already been harmed. There are so many people who can't pronounce 'kha', specially among the lower class, Punjabis can't pronounce 'qaf' but that doesn't mean the language has died in the Punjab. It's not so bad when a few defects creep in and the language doesn't remain so polished. Everyday Hindi is simply Urdu. They've tried to add a lot of Sanskrit to it. But the word Hindi itself is of Arabic and Persian origin. Urdu has this quality that it takes root very easily. And precisely for this reason it will retain its popularity. The script will live for as long as there are Muslims in India. Do you know that there are 36,000 newspapers and magazines in Urdu?

**Q. You belong to a set of four literary giants — Manto, Krishan Chandr, Bedi and you...?**

**A.** And Abbas (Khwaja Ahmed Abbas)?

**Q. Is his contribution of an equal calibre?**

**A.** Very much so. I don't measure people by the length and breadth of their writings. If somebody has written one good story, I believe in him. Abbas has not written much but whatever he has written is of a high standard.

**Q. How do you view that period in retrospect? Those days, whenever you or Manto wrote a story, it was a widely discussed event. Today, a good story causes only small ripples in a limited circle. How would you compare today with yesterday?**

**A.** A thing called 'modernism' crept in between. It pushed young writers away from the main track. It told them that they didn't have to depict life first-hand, they didn't have to worry about relevance and meaning. People started competing for absurd and meaningless stuff. Beautiful words but senseless. Now the common reader in Urdu belongs to the middle class. He wants to read about himself. The children of the rich have stopped reading Urdu. They all go in for English. And Hindi is compulsory. So there is a class which can do without Urdu.

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There are so many convents. It's English everywhere. This has affected both Urdu and Hindi. Hindi itself doesn't enjoy too strong a position. There are some popular magazines in Urdu like *Shama* and *Ruby*. People are crazy about them and, through them, of this language. You can be abusive in Urdu. You can't abuse in Hindi. This language hits you so below the belt that you can never forget it.

**Q.** The realistic story of the '30s tended to become journalistic in less-accomplished hands. Do you think modernism was a reaction to this?

**A.** Writers were pushed towards modernism. They were encouraged to be meaningless. But everything has its

utility. They coined new phrases, created a new imagery, beautified the language. Now that phase has ended. The story is returning to the Progressive point of view.

**Q.** The Progressive Movement, no doubt, played a vital historical role but isn't it finished as a movement?

**A.** Nothing ever finishes off. What is being written today is being written in protest against whatever. The period when there was no meaning, no protests, has ended. I have no grouse against the modernists. Every trend should come and enrich literature. Nothing is totally bad.

**Q.** Do we need a Progressive Movement today?

**A.** What is the Progressive Movement? You can call it by another name. Aren't we still fighting against injustice and social evils? What does the Progressive Movement stand for? It is against false restrictions. Isn't the young man of today struggling against all this? Has everything changed? Still there are people who get married to whoever they are told to get married to, who take a large amount of *jahaz* and lead an easy life. Such a class is found the world over. They are prone to psychological disorders. They live through problems, broken marriages, divorces, wife-swapping and what not. Whatever happened to those headstrong people who were inspired by



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ideals, who left their homes to serve the cause they believed in?

**Q.** What has the Progressive Movement contributed to life and letters?

**A.** What it has done is destroyed, broken down false conventions. Why all these strait jackets? They should be removed. Before the Progressives, who dared to speak of the lower classes? Nobody thought they were worth writing about, these downtrodden

sives. People used to get offended that the *bhangan* and *chamari* were being mentioned in literature. Why were stories being written about butchers and vegetable vendors, they asked. But this trend caught on. We didn't start it. Prem Chand did. Sajjad Zaheer and his friends achieved the first breakthrough and showed us how bonds could be broken. They encouraged us to rebel.

evil allowed to exist on this earth? If people were to write about it openly, then perhaps it would become all right.

**Q.** The writers of the '30s all had different ways of saying their thing. Manto said everything openly, with a touch of bitterness. Krishan Chandr had a foggy romanticism. Bedi was a master of analysis. Whose style is closest to your heart?

**A.** Krishan Chandr was the most popular because his work had the element of romance. In each and every one of his stories, the woman is dominant. Sikhs are generally thought to be a ferocious people, and one might think that all their women must be kissing their feet, but occasionally they turn out to be very dominating. The men tend to hide the fact that their wives dominate them. In the house, the woman owns everything. The children are hers, first inside her womb and later under her control. When the father makes a mistake like falling for a younger woman, the children always side with the mother. Children always belong to the mother. No father can take this away. A father can only give a name and security.

What use is a father's name? There are no fathers among animals. Fathers are found only among mankind, and they have asserted their claim over children with great difficulty. In the early ages, a woman would leave with the seed inside her womb. Man would rape her — and she would reap the benefit of that rape. She would carry the child away. And such a child laid the foundations of the early matriarchal society. Man was running in forests like a lonely wolf, while the woman was laying the foundations of early civilisations. Out of some cave, she made a home, a home for the children man had given her and then left her with.

Man has a very insecure position. He is just a breeding bull. What would have happened if woman had not given him her heart and soul. But she did, and so he strengthened his position. He set up standards of beauty for females — that the hips must be this way and the chest like this. These qualities are sometimes to be found in the *banya* and *seth* community. They are the ones with such hips and bosoms. By singing their praises, men left the women good for nothing, they took away their strength and their power. In the end, they reduced them to property like cattle. All this must have taken ages, but it actually happened. And the worst hit is the Indian woman. This is



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people. Nobody realised they even existed. They were mere objects, like a carpet or a cup to be used at one's convenience. We made people realise that they too were human beings. This class has improved economically as well. Servants are no longer *zaleel*. They have taken to dressing very well. Just look at the fine clothes they wear.

**Q.** So it's the Progressives who should be thanked for the servants being well-dressed?

**A.** (Laughs) No, no. It's a whole feeling, a change. That '*ji huzoor*' servant is not to be found in Bombay. You may find him in Maleehabad or some such place. In Bombay, he looks you in the eye, draws a good salary. Better than a clerk's.

**Q.** In essence, what the whole Progressive Movement was focusing attention on was not just servants but the common man.

**A.** That common man has been brought back to life by the Progressives.

**Q.** How far did the writers of your generation succeed in creating literature out of the life of a common man?

**A.** Manto, who used to say he's not a Progressive, see what fantastic stories he has written. The prostitutes he has written about. The prostitute in *Kaali Shalwar* who seeks her redemption by observing Moharram. She cannot afford new black clothes so she gets an old shalwar dyed black. A begum may don black clothes as fashion, but for her they are a psychological need. I feel very strongly for that woman.

I re-read *Toba Tek Singh* when I was helping my grandson with his lessons. This story was part of his syllabus. I read it word by word. It's all about mad people who have not been divided between Pakistan and India at the time of Partition. People had driven Manto mad. He was not really mad but he was sent to a lunatic asylum. He found lost souls there too. There was nothing wicked or bad about Manto. Why is any

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because India is the land of *devis*. Women enjoy the highest position here and the higher you place them the greater will be their fall.

**Q.** What is your reaction to the women's liberation movement?

**A.** Women's liberation? I actually believe in the liberation of man. He needs to be freed. He has a heavy load to carry. But he is proud of his chains. He has to provide for home and hearth, earn his daughter's dowry. All the while the wife is staying at home and egging him on like a beast of burden. If a woman goes out to work, he calls it 'rebellion'. She comes out to share his burden, and he calls it 'rebellion'. Man has been so conditioned that he is very proud of his bondage. The idiot's pride is wounded when the wife is willing to share his responsibilities. After marriage, my husband told me to stop writing and working since he was earning enough. I told him that if he were to tell me to stop breathing, then perhaps I might cooperate; but I couldn't stop writing. Down-trodden and oppressed women turn their men into freaks. Krishan Chandr's wife was a *jahil*. Bedi's wife was very dominating, but she was not such a big *jahil* but then Bedi was not such a big revolutionary. Bedi's wife never read his work and couldn't object to it because Bedi had a very subtle style. Even if he removed the clothes of his female characters, he did it very tenderly and delicately. Nobody accused him of being pornographic. This accusation was left for my work. *Mine* and *Manto's*.

**Q.** Some of your writings are dubbed pornographic. How do you react to this charge?

**A.** Have you ever read anything of mine that was pornographic?

**Q.** No, never.

**A.** Neither have I written anything pornographic. Nobody has really told me what is pornographic in my work. The real dirt is in their minds. When I wrote *Lihaf*, I read it to a cousin, a young girl. She couldn't make head or tail of it. It was based on a real person. In the afternoon, when everybody has had their meal what generally happens is that all the women gather and gossip. The children are packed off. And then they talk about marriages, wedding nights and childbirth. I took my cue from there. I didn't know anything about lesbianism then. I knew that men could do something but, after all, what could women do? They could only touch. What else? They couldn't reproduce. Anyway, when the story was published, it was considered pornographic and I was summoned to a

court in Lahore. They couldn't prove anything. There are no four-letter words in it. All they could come up with was that at one place the child heroine utters a cry '*umm*' so they said that she must have been doing something.

I have never been able to under-

stand why certain parts of the body are taboo. Why can't they be named in literature? The olden-day writers were very frank. Nazeer Akbarabadi wrote about sex with joy, with relish. Why should there be restrictions on us? And the best part is that those people who called my writings obscene, earned large sums by printing and selling it. They didn't hesitate to collect dowries for their daughters with the money earned by my writings which they never failed to condemn."

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**Q.** Lately we saw you act in Shyam Benegal's *Junoona*. How did this come about?

**A.** It was more or less accidental. The lady who was supposed to do that role fell ill, and since I was there, they

film world respectable. Bengal and Madras began producing small-budget movies which took the whole country by storm. Those were the days of our national freedom movement. These films also contributed to it. They taught us to admire the Indian way of life, to rid the country of its evils. Then came Partition, and with it a change in film trends. From Punjab came the handsome hero, the *challa*, and from Madras came the dancing girl who couldn't even speak and her dialogues had to be dubbed. They were desperate, they needed the money. They commercialised everything. The educated Maharashtra heroine started flopping. She couldn't compromise. So people like her withdrew and the

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asked me. I was very reluctant, but in the end had to give in when my daughter, who had worked with Shyam Benegal in an advertising agency, made me accept.

**Q.** You have been associated with the film world for a long time and seen its many ups and downs. What do you think of people like Shyam Benegal who have set up a parallel, non-commercial cinema?

**A.** They've outdone large scale productions. Before Partition, there were some really beautiful movies being made. The big heroines of those days

commercially-oriented producers started exploiting song and dance, cheapness, vulgarity, using women for their purpose. They became millionaires, but they do not hold all the cards. From the same Maharashtra comes Shyam Benegal, and from Bengal comes Satyajit Ray both of whom have struggled hard for their laurels. But one thing I must point out. Nobody might have noticed a Satyajit Ray if it hadn't been for the West. The minute he won recognition in Europe, we all started to shower praise on him. With us, it's still the European certificate that counts.