

# Talking about *Basti*: Intizar Husain in conversation with Asif Farrukhi, Lahore, July 2005

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*Intizar Sahib, it's been now more than twenty-five years since the first publication of Basti. Now when you turn back to look, how do you find this novel?*

It's been twenty-five years since the publication of this novel, but it's been more than fifty years since I took to my short stories. And as for turning back to look, I haven't started to do so. This is because I still feel that I'm in the process of writing. Although I suspect that I've had my writing life along with my physical life, and at this age generally a writer's pen becomes tired or languid. I too have doubts about myself – that my pen has stopped, or might stop. There's a kind of anxiety. But I'm trying to continue, and I feel that I'm still in the process of writing; so perhaps for this reason too I suspect that right now I shouldn't turn back and take a look.

There's this novel, and the novel I had written before it; afterwards I wrote two more novels as well. With regard to all four of these novels I've felt that there's a kind of flaw – I'm criticized for it, and perhaps it may be a little bit true as well – that I live in the past. All right, but my stories are of every kind. Some are about the present situation, some are set in the past; some are set in the near past, some in the remote past. But in my view, I generally come back to my present time. But it's strange about the novels – whatever novel I began was affected by the immediate socio-political situation of the country, by whatever turmoil our country was going through, which influenced me, and in reaction to which I picked up the pen and began to write. All four of these novels were directly set in motion by the turmoil through which our country was passing. Beyond this, whatever the critics say about them, only they themselves can say.

*You're saying that you don't look back, but in your writings there's so much looking back, and what has already happened you recall again and again – sometimes you remember so much that the reader can't believe there's anything yet to come: it seems that everything has already happened, everything is past and gone.*

That isn't true of the novel you're talking about, *Basti*. As I was saying just now, it was entirely the turmoil of those days, the events that were taking place in East Pakistan, the news that was coming from there – to all this I felt an immediate reaction. Before discussing this reaction, I want to say that my short stories had come out of that period when I was remembering my near past. That is, those stories were written up till the time of *Din* ['Faith'], and I had already written *Din*. And that had been quite some time ago: I began to write it around 1969 or 1970.

Yes, *Basti* – I was saying that it was my own near past that I was remembering and writing in those stories, and *Din* should be considered a sort of high point. After that another series of stories began, such as *Akhiri admi* ['The Last Man'] and *Zard kutta* ['Yellow Dog'] and other stories of this type – among which were –

*Stories like 'Shahr-e afsos' ['City of Grief'] –*

*Shahr-e afsos* comes later; it's connected to this very novel [*Basti*]. These stories were of a kind that had no relationship to nostalgia, to the time before 1947 for which I was overcome by nostalgia – or for which I was accused of being overcome by nostalgia. Between the near past of these stories, and this nostalgia, there was no relationship. It seemed that I had outgrown that [nostalgic] past. But when these events started happening and the news began to come in, all at once I felt that 1947 had again come alive within me. That whole period before and

during 1947 came back to me so sharply and intensely that without thinking what I should do with it, without planning to make it into a novel, I started writing it down; and for many days I just went on writing and writing. After that I put the pen down; after that the news began to come. East Pakistan had fallen. When this event was over and some months had passed, I again picked up the pen and looked at what I had written, what it was. And then the form of a novel began to take shape in my mind and my imagination, and I completed this novel in 1971 or 1972. Perhaps it took a few years more to complete it; but the work of writing the novel, I started in 1971.

*That is, you didn't start writing with the thought that it would become a novel, and what its theme and technique would be.*

No, I'm only saying that my reaction was so intense, and the news that was coming from there – the past that I was trying to forget sprang to life again within me. And in that reaction I began to write down these memories of mine, because questions had begun to arise within me, when that news came. The explanation given for Pakistan in 1947 and those circumstances – for example, the reasons, the history, behind the bloodshed, that we were given at that time, was: 'my friend, these two nations [*qaum*] are separate, the Hindus and the Muslims, and the Sikhs too, so this bloodshed was inevitable'. So now a question arose in my mind: we imagined that the Hindus and the Muslims were two nations – but what we were considering to be one nation, is that also two nations? That is, are the Bengalis a community separate from us? Are they not Muslims, or are they not Pakistanis? If the bloodshed now happening is on the same scale as happened in 1947, what does this mean? So this question, and others like it filled with doubt, and doubt-filled questions about our whole previous history, began to arise in my mind; there was a simmering. So consider that as a result of these questions, doubt-filled questions, the novel was written.

*So we might say that a doubt about this history is the inspiration for the novel?*

Yes, definitely.

*And you said it was those memories that acted as a spur for the novel –*

They built up a ground for it.

*What then was the difference between this novel and your writings immediately after 1947, or the stories in Shahr-e afsos? Was there any difference in the nature of the memories?*

No, there should be a difference, but I don't analyze and dissect my own writings in this manner. I just keep on writing in a flow. And I'm not an 'intellectual' writer, such that if I write a story or some such thing, I'd keep on analyzing it in the process. I'm among those ignorant people who just pick up the pen and start writing. Those who are 'conscious' writers, and also afflicted with a bad case of intellectualism, do such things. But in my view since the excitation of those memories was other, and of a completely different kind, and doubts and doubtfulness arose within me as I've just said, in that connection I went back to that past of mine that I'd thought I had outgrown. So in those memories of the time when I first came to Pakistan, and of my whole life that had all at once become the past and had begun to repeat itself within me – so in that time, and in this time; and in that excitation, and in this other excitation, there should be a difference.

*I don't believe that a conscious writer like you is simply writing along in a flow, and has no sense of his writing. The founding of Pakistan, and the political things that had happened to it, forced you to reflect on whether this was the same Pakistan as before.*

Together with this please also take my last novel, *Age samundar hai* ['Before lies the Ocean']. That too was this kind of turmoil. When I was writing it, the events that were taking place in Karachi – again this kind of question arose within me, of what sort of process this was. What were our dreams, our claims, our convictions? And in what direction were we now going? The same situation arose as in 1970-71, and the same kind of doubts came to life again, the same apprehensions. Since at that time Karachi itself had become the most important

manifestation of the whole situation.

*All right, these events can be looked at from another perspective as well. For example, an objection to Basti was raised in Bangladesh by the Urdu short story writer Ghulam Muhammad, who was a great admirer of yours. He questioned your use of 'the fall of Dhaka' in the same manner as is used for the attack of Hulaku and the Mongols on Baghdad in the days of the Caliphate – whereas Bangladesh was established as a new, free, and Islamic country. Why so much grief and sorrow over this? That was his point of view, of course. Now, from your point of view, what do you say about this?*

Their point of view is appropriate to its context: they were involved in the struggle and the movement, and that would be suited to their situation. But I was thinking as a Pakistani. Before me was the view that the political history of the Muslims of the Subcontinent begins after 1857, and it begins from Dhaka. That is, the first, founding session of the Muslim League in 1906 was held in Dhaka, and the conclusion of this whole history too took place in that city. So for me this was a very instructive event, that the whole history we'd been carrying along with us ended in the same city in which it had started – that is, it was buried there. So what was this process, that we had been considering ourselves to be one nation [*qaum*], from Dhaka to Peshawar and to Cape Kumari? At that time the slogan used to be raised that we, the hundred million Muslims of the Subcontinent, are one nation; we have one culture, we have one language – so what was this process now?

When I came to Pakistan and felt myself to be a Pakistani, I was thinking as a Pakistani. So for me this whole process became a question. What historical process was it that caused these people, the Bengalis, to gradually begin to feel, 'no, we are not part of them, we are separate'? So all right, they can think in this way. But I who was in that part of Pakistan, I in whose mind that history dwelt – I was thinking as a Pakistani.

*All right, that was the way you were thinking and feeling at the time. But between that time and the present, a number of books have come out about what happened in East Pakistan, many analyses have been written. And an extremely fine book, The Separation of East Pakistan, has been written by Hasan Zahir, who is a relative of yours. After critical assessment, the general opinion that emerges is that what happened in East Pakistan was a betrayal; and the betrayal was at the hands of the administration of that time, and of the power brokers in our country. Do you agree with this assessment?*

No. I read that book of Hasan Zahir's – he was my nephew, and I read that book with great care and tried my best to understand it. What I could get out of it was that the concept of Pakistan that the Muslims of the Subcontinent had carried with them had been betrayed, and this betrayal was not on the part of the Bengalis. Originally, the Pakistani Muslims – which included the Muhajirs, and the Punjabis, and others – had betrayed this ideal, this dream. The Bengalis reacted to it, they rose up by way of a response to it. One of their leaders said farewell to Pakistan – but he said that farewell afterwards. First we had shattered that dream.

*All right, so this was one analysis, but what has been the literary expression of this analysis? One essay written by Muhammad Umar Memon comes to mind, in which he said that many stories were written about the events of 1947, and poems too – and good stories were written; but what's been written about the events of 1971 can be counted on one's fingers. Did our writers not try to confront this whole situation? Or was its literary expression not important to them?*

Look, it's not my responsibility to be an advocate on behalf of all writers, or to plead their case. Speaking only for myself, my reaction was that this novel was written. And look at the stories I wrote at that time: somehow or other this comes to be their theme as well. You just mentioned *Shahr-e afsos* – that story too was written pretty much immediately after those events. Although I believe that when an event occurs, it's not necessary that you sit down at once to write about it. But several times it's happened with me that when some turmoil or event took place I had such an intense reaction that I began to write at once; so *Shahr-e afsos* was that kind of story that was written right afterwards – there are other stories, there's a whole sequence of stories that you'll see in the collection *Shahr-e afsos*. This much is about me as an individual.

A second point I will raise is, why are you centering the blame on the writers? Look at the attitude of the whole nation [*qaum*] – how the whole nation has accepted these events, and how quickly they've forgotten the whole trauma. Look – if an entire half of a country is cut off, then this is a major cataclysm. A half-fragment of a nation has become a separate nation – and on top of this, how quickly our Pakistani nation reconciled itself to this! So when the nation itself didn't feel this event with full intensity, why do you blame the writers?

*But many writers have written things about this. Do you recall some writing, or some things that you liked?*

But I don't recall any writings that fit the events, or made me think 'this writing is fit for the trauma that has happened to Pakistan'. For example, our Masud Mufti wrote stories on this subject, but I found his reportage to be better than his stories. His stories about these events didn't impress me greatly. But the small amount of reportage that he wrote – this artist who was my contemporary, and who had passed through the whole series of events, I was hoping for him to write something that would be able to be a representation, a charter, for that era. But it's a pity that no such writing appeared.

*Masud Ashar too wrote some stories –*

Masud Ashar wrote some stories, and they're worthy of mention; a few things did get written.

*Raziya Fasih Ahmad composed a very long novel. But perhaps you haven't happened to see it?*

I don't recall; perhaps I didn't happen to see it.

*You mentioned that you started writing this novel after the events of 1971, or perhaps a little earlier than that. Do you remember how long it took you to write, how much time you spent on it? Can you recall the writing process of this novel?*

The process I just described to you was that when the turmoil was developing, and the news kept coming from there, and the crisis kept developing – that was when I began to write it, without thinking whether it would become a novel, or what; but just thinking that I ought to put in writing the memories that were coming to me, without worrying about what they would go on to become. I didn't want to waste those moments, so I began to write at once. But after that, the novel kept developing for several years. And as far as I can recall, it was in the last years of the decade that I handed the manuscript over to Salahuddin Mahmud. It must have been in 1977 or 1978, it probably came out in 1979.

*When you say that the moving force of the novel was your memories, the question arises as to whether the central character is an alter ego of yours, or whether you modelled him upon yourself.*

Well, when a novel is written, then somewhere or other, on some level or another, it becomes autobiographical, unconsciously or consciously. So I don't deny it – somewhere or other, within this character there must be some reflection of my own personality. But I didn't conceive it as being myself. But obviously when that character took shape within me, then some fragment of myself must certainly have become attached to him.

This reminds me of a fable. Not even a fable, but one of those stories about the various births of the Mahatma Buddha that have inspired me so much. In one situation, the Mahatma Buddha has taken birth as a monkey, and the monkeys who are with him are caught in a difficulty, and they want to leave their garden. So the monkey who is the Mahatma Buddha has arranged that the monkeys can climb onto a large tree beside the river and thus can cross. But when the monkeys started to cross, they saw that there was a small remaining bit of the river that went on beyond the tree, and how could they cross? The Mahatma Buddha said, all right, I will stretch out my leg. So he braced his leg on the tree and stretched it out across the river, and then the monkeys crossed. So the novel writer usually does this, and perhaps I'm the kind of novel writer who prepares a tree: 'Here, my friend, cross over on this'. But when a gap remains, then I stretch out my leg across it. So it's possible that I might have used a bit more leg – (laughter).

*This leg has been spotted by the critics, and it bothers them very much. One approach to this novel has often been that such-and-such a character seems very familiar, the author must certainly have based him on such-and-such a man. One critic even made a list: this character must be based on that person. So when the critics point to the stretched-out leg, and begin to name actual living people on whom the characters are based, how do you feel about that?*

To some extent they seem to me to be correct. What you get is a map of that city, in that time, in that turmoil. No matter what else may have been going on elsewhere, or on a national level, what you'll see is Lahore, where the novelist was living – you'll see what was happening *there*.

So the people and the atmosphere around me – when they came to mind, it's obvious that such people, who were part of that atmosphere, who played one or another part in that situation, must also have come into the story. This is quite possible. But I can't say much about it, because I didn't do it consciously. Unconsciously, when you speak of your era, then glimmers of some personalities who were real living people certainly reach you.

*But when a living personality becomes a character, in one way or another it gets transformed. That is, it doesn't remain merely what it was before, a stranger of living, moving, flesh and blood, but rather the novelist's creative power has transformed it.*

This is how it ought to be; and if this hasn't been able to happen, then it ought to be considered the novelist's weakness – that that character has encountered difficulties, and hasn't been transformed on a level that would make it entirely a fictional character.

*I won't say it's a weakness. But some of your critics have made a great game out of 'catching the thief'. In the process the rest of the game is ignored, they place much emphasis on catching the thief and making a lot of noise about it.*

Sometimes I feel that the relationship my critics and readers have with me is one of enmity, as if my readers and critics are besieging me, and I'm writing in a state of siege. This state of affairs is an ongoing one. From the very beginning, when I wrote my first story, there has been a continuing harsh onslaught: what's this kind of language that you're writing, which culture is it that you're depicting, what relationship does it have with Pakistan? This whole culture has already receded into the past – why are you weeping over the past? So questions kept on being raised, and I went on writing in my flow. Sometimes I did turn around and take a look at my enemies, but I wasn't much influenced by them. If I had been influenced, then there's no telling what form of my novels and stories would have taken, but it wouldn't have been the form they have now.

But I drew inspiration from a story. It was an old story. When I'm unable to understand some new situation, I often turn for inspiration to old stories of the past, or long-ago events, or the tales of Sufis. So there was this one story that I'd kept hearing many times over the years, in my childhood. In the story an elder says, 'Go to such-and-such a place where there is a cage hanging, with a parrot in it. Take the cage down and bring it back. I will tell you how to do this. But when you set out on the return journey, behind you a great clamor will be raised. Don't turn and look back! If you turn and look back, you will turn to stone.' So when you write, and when you think that you're doing your work, this is a good prescription. The commotion that's being raised against you – you shouldn't pay much heed to it. And likewise the objections that were made in 1960 – why are they being repeated now? The things that I said in response to them at the time, haven't they even looked at them, or at the stories that I've written since?

This is one aspect of the situation. But when I'm in the process of writing, I don't turn and look back. This I do only later, when I cast a quick glance at the objections, to see what has been said.

*All right, one more thing. We're talking about critics, and with regard to Basti it's been said that the turmoil and disaster in this novel is accepted with great silence. There's no protest, or resistance, or struggle, or source of*

*change. One critic has even said that Intizar Sahib doesn't want change, because he fears change – he's awaiting the coming of the messiah-like Mahdi. But for this to happen, isn't it necessary that people struggle against the tyranny of the day, and assist in the coming of the Mahdi? People have said that in your work no path of action can be seen.*

Well, this is because under the influence of the Progressive Writers' Movement people formed such expectations of literature, about how writing and writers ought to express their reactions. That prescription has come from the Progressive Writers' Movement, and they've tied it around their necks. This critic, whoever it is, took it up from them and tied it around his neck too; it's not his own individual objection. I imagine that he hasn't done any thinking on his own: he simply adopted the prescription that he inherited from the Progressive Writers' Movement, and added this question to it. Now what answer can I give to it?

*No, not an answer; I'm quoting Anvar Sajjad...*

So now I understand.

*Anvar Sajjad says that your work shows a lack of energy and vigor and decisiveness, which has led to apathy, political inaction, and silence.*

This kind of objections – my reaction to them is silence.

*All right, on the one hand it's been said that the novel lacks all these things. But among the people who wanted to reply to this, some critics presented another interpretation. Muhammad Umar Memon, for example, said that the inaction and the silence about politics are because of the Shia ethos, or the requirements of the Shia point of view: Shias often show a political reaction of silence and acceptance, and this is the influence of Shiism. So if the novel is seen in this way, do you consider this interpretation valid?*

No. In the history of Shiism there are many revolts as well; or rather, intense reactions. The most intense reaction was the event of Karbala. I'm surprised at Memon Sahib, who's a scholar of history too, since in Shia history there are two reactions. One reaction is that of Imam Husain, the other is that of Hazrat Zain ul-Abidin; these are the two extremes of reaction. Thus Hazrat Zain ul-Abidin says that rejection – that is, the kind of reaction in which there's great action – seems absurd. So these are two reactions, and Shia culture is composed of a synthesis of these two reactions. There's not one single reaction; that's one thing I want to say.

Now I also want to ask, what is the reaction of story-writers and novelists who belong to other cultures, who use different languages? For example, I've read many of Chekhov's stories. For one thing, many of them end with silence; for another, many show a soft, gentle kind of reaction. So was Chekhov a Shia?

*Indeed, this is a good question for research! Perhaps Chekhov was a Shia who practiced prudent concealment [taqiyah].*

(Laughter) When Memon Sahib read this essay here in Lahore, I was in the audience, and also three of my Shia friends. And of those three, one or two had been associated with the Progressive Writers' Movement and thus were revolutionary; and their revolutionary fervor had been doubled because they were inspired by Imam Khomeini. The Shia Muslim revolution had taken place in Iran, and Ali Shariati was providing inspiration from there. Lenin and Ali Shariati had come together in my friends. And they expressed an intense reaction against that essay, and I just sat there silently. The program didn't call for me to take any part in the discussion. Finally my friend turned to me and asked me to speak – why wasn't I saying anything, when he had misinterpreted Shia tradition, and was presenting it as a passive culture, although it was really a revolutionary movement, as was Karbala itself.

When he had spoken at length, I said look, the interpretation of the event of Karbala that you're giving – I don't have any great objection to it. But I'm a decadent Shia; I'm a Shia who's grown up in the atmosphere of the

*marsiya*hs [elegies] of Anis and Dabir. So if you expect me to become the kind of Shia of whom Ali Shariati dreams, then I can't become that kind of Shia. I can become neither Ali Sardar Jafri nor Ali Shariati. I'm a reader of Anis and Dabir, and I'm a decadent Shia, and when their kind of marsiyah is recited it pleases me. But listening to Josh Malihabadi's revolutionary marsiyahs drives me crazy. So I said this –

*This is the tradition of lamentation [matam] and weeping?*

Whatever you may call it –

*So is a story a form of lamentation?*

Lamentation – so now the question will arise, what do you consider lamentation to be? That is, this whole tradition will come under discussion, about what the lamentation and marsiyah tradition is. Anis was trying to say something; what are *nauha*hs [poems of lamentation], and what do the Muharram rituals tell us? This is a very large question. This is really a whole tradition of Muharram, in which poetry plays a large role, and what kind of thing is it?

The tradition of Muharram that's developing now – I have an objection to it: the element of poetry keeps lessening; the poet is pushed into the background, the preacher has come to the forefront. When Anis used to occupy the pulpit, then when he finished reciting the marsiyah, with that the majlis too used to come to an end. Nowadays when the marsiyah-reciter recites a marsiyah, it's introductory; the ritual is completed afterwards, when the preacher comes, and then the zakir comes and starts his rational speech.

And this has affected the poets – that is, the marsiyah-composers – too. They have tried to mold their marsiyahs in the same form as the zakir uses for speaking in the majlis. So logic has entered their marsiyahs too. In Anis's marsiyahs you won't find any logic; in Dabir's marsiyahs you won't find any logic. But this Josh Malihabadi and Al-e Raza and the other poets nowadays use logic and evidence in their marsiyahs. Thus these people's marsiyahs don't seem like marsiyahs to me.

*Now this zakir is obviously not the same as Zakir in Basti. So in this situation perhaps if Zakir had been different, or if his name had been something else –*

Look, it's just the name of that character. Now Memon Sahib has interpreted it as a reflection of the zakir whom we find in the Muharram tradition. This is something devised by a critic. It's possible that unconsciously I might have done such a thing. But consciously, I didn't think along these lines.

*Very well. You were speaking of a kind of synthesis between Imam Zain ul-Abidin and Imam Husain that has come down in the Shia tradition. From time to time you've also spoken of a synthesis of Islam and Hindu mythology that you see as operative in that Hindustani culture of which you're very fond. Why do you keep trying to insist on a synthesis of these diverse things?*

Well, this brings in another question, about the situation of Muslims for the past thousand years in the Subcontinent, about this whole history. That is, we're not the same as Arab Muslims, nor are we Iranian Muslims. We're Muslims of the Subcontinent, of India [*hind*]. Our Islam has spread its wings in this land, amidst these traditions, these cultural surroundings; here in this atmosphere it has expressed its own individual form. Thus our Islam, our culture, is an Indian Islamic culture. I don't know where a purely Muslim culture took birth in the world. It didn't take birth in Iran, and the Arabs' tradition was the Arabs' own culture; Islam came and mixed into it; while our culture is an Indian Islamic culture. So this is one thing.

Another point is that since you mentioned my Shia background and referred to the event of Karbala, Premchand wrote a drama called 'The Event of Karbala', which is about two Hindus who were also among the seventy-two companions of Imam Husain. This legend appeals to me greatly. Premchand's drama is among my favorites. The interpretation of Karbala that emerges from Premchand's work, I find to be valid.

*When we begin to discuss your novel writing, we keep returning again and again to the same questions of cultural background, synthesis, and cultural figures, as if your novels provoke such questions.*

Once I translated a fragment from the *Mahabharata* and gave it to a journal editor who was a friend of mine, Masud Ashar. He raised the question, out of the whole *Mahabharata* why had I chosen this fragment in which the whole war is ignored and one young man is killed, and in response to this his grieving mother comes to the battlefield and laments and mourns him? So I too thought about why I had chosen this fragment. Then I remembered all that whole tradition of mourning and lamentation when Ali Asghar has been martyred and his mother is mourning and lamenting, or his aunt, or his sister. The mourning, the grief of Abhimanyu's mother – I saw so much similarity to the lamentation of Karbala that I was astonished. Had the marsiyah tradition been influenced by this kind of expression in the *Mahabharata*? How had this similarity come about? Perhaps this is what had provoked me into translating this particular fragment into Urdu.

So somewhere or other these two cultural traditions had come together, in the history of the Subcontinent. And Muslims like us came, and there has been an ongoing mixing too with the Hindus, as well as a dialectic, including elements of confrontation. So here and there I see similarities, I see mixing. This is a cultural process, and I am a product of this cultural process – a process that appeals to me greatly, and also in a way challenges me, and demands that I try to understand it, and asks me how I will respond; so the lineage [*silsilah*] continues.

*You speak of your personal experience, and of the thousand years of cultural experience that lie behind it. From your individual experience you very gradually pass beyond it and enter into cultural experience, and we don't even notice. In Basti, the events of 1971 come before us, and we're also waiting with the Delhi people for the Iranian army in 1857. So the individual experience blends into collective experience, and again and again mutual interchange can be seen.*

During the time that was passing in our history, the time of the decline of East Pakistan, the whole story of 1857 came back to me, and I began to see similarities between them. When a time of turmoil comes upon us, then we're always waiting for help to come from somewhere. That expectation of help was there in 1857, and was also there in the crisis of 1971 when we were waiting for the Seventh Fleet to come to our rescue.

So in times of turmoil, that waiting – it doesn't seem like mere waiting. Since this scene happens again and again, is it a part of our behavior pattern, is it that kind of thing? This is one point. In the same way, when I'm writing about my present, then if I go into my past, some pathways of this kind open up through which I enter into the past. I don't go willy-nilly into the past. One or another road emerges that takes me in that direction.

*It seems that in your novel the sense of time is very important, and it's not a straightforward one. That is, for one thing the past isn't finished, but continues into the present, and in truth it's also shaping the future. So this is an image of time, and of its twists and turns, in your work ...*

Look, this problem of time is a philosophical question; if I talk about it, then since I'm not a philosophical type, I'll muddy the waters and make such a mess that the thing will become absolutely meaningless. I understand these things only to the extent that they enter into the stories. As perhaps I've already said, when I write a story I understand a number of things; but when I've finished the story, then the thing like a single light that shows things disappears with the story and into the story. Again I'm in the dark.

Thus questions of this kind, and what might be called the problems of the time, I understand to whatever extent I can understand them, when I'm writing a story. Apart from the story, I leave these questions to my friends who are involved in philosophy, and who used to sit around me, discussing the philosophy of the time. At one time all my friends, Shaikh Salahuddin and Hanif Ramay, used to spend whole nights discussing philosophical perspectives on the problems of the time, and I was entirely receptive. Like a passive character, I've perhaps received anything I might have of the philosophy of the time as a gift from my friends. There's nothing of my own in it. I can't say anything about it.

*All right, you can't go outside the text of a story and talk about time. But you can talk about the characters. The objection has often been made that in your work there's always the same heroine. She appears in the stories, and in the novels too. She doesn't change from one situation to the next. And she's the prey of something unspoken. If there's some relationship between her and Zakir, then it's something that's never fully expressed. What do you say about this?*

The kind of expression that this sort of critics and readers want, won't be found in my stories. That is, an open, frank expression, the kind that used to be a trademark of the Progressive movement – I don't believe in this kind of expression. When things are conveyed in hints, in suggestions – when it comes to the inspiration of my stories, I've mentioned Chekhov.

I used to think that the short story ended with Chekhov, but later I learned that it doesn't: it comes forward to Joyce. Joyce's story collection *Dubliners* – I read those stories again and again. I understood some of them, others I didn't understand. But the kind of expression that appears in them struck me powerfully, this expression knocked me over. The kind of expression that appears for example in Manto – how could that come into my work?

*But you must have not only read Manto and Ismat Chughtai, but also seen them.*

I read Manto and Ismat Chughtai; they were my seniors, and in truth I respect them. But it was Chekhov and Joyce who knocked me over. That expression – the deficiency that I feel in myself even now, is that I ask myself why the expression in the stories of Joyce's *Dubliners* doesn't come into my stories. This is my problem. The expression that's in Manto's stories isn't at all my ideal.

*I want to refer to one of your other writings, about a story writer and novelist who's your near contemporary, Qurratulain Haidar. You wrote an essay about her story 'Sita haran', and praised that story very highly. And in it you wrote that as long as Sita is in the company of her friends, Qurratulain Haidar describes her situation; but when she lifts the tent-flap and goes off with the American into the tent, then the author becomes silent. But this silence is in your work too.*

Look, what I say in my stories is the truth. But when I write a critical essay, please don't quote those statements of mine – I may be wrong, I may be right.

*This is what Lawrence said, trust the tale and not the teller. So we ought to trust not your criticism, but your stories?*

Where I feel that I'm speaking the truth, where I'm in my real field, it's in my stories. When I write criticism, then some things are diplomatic (laughter), or prudently framed – there can be a lot that's 'worldly wisdom'. But when I write a story, then I'm not being worldly.

*In Basti too there's a kind of critical process – the kind of criticism that's not only in your essays, but is also in your stories. It doesn't have the structure of a traditional novel, and especially not the structure that we adopted from the Victorian or Georgian novel – that the novel should be such-and-such, it ought to have a plot, it ought to have characters, it ought to have a climax. Basti perhaps doesn't have a single one of these elements that were in the Victorian novel. So did Basti challenge this conventional western vision of the novel?*

Well, this perhaps didn't happen consciously. Please consider this with regard not only to the novel, but also to the whole of my fiction, and the way I began to write my stories. I remember that the stories included in *Gali kuche* ['Streets and Lanes'] were all ones that I'd read aloud in the [writers' club] Halqah-e Arbab-e Zauq. At that time I had a very lively relationship with the Halqah. About every story there was a discussion: is this a story, or is it not? Some said that it was a sketch; some, a light essay or something like that. The concept of story that they had – it wasn't a story of that kind. So I feel that unconsciously, right from the beginning, I'd broken

away from the traditional concept of a story. Once I'd broken away, what kind of a story it turned into is another problem. But the concept of the story and the definition that [the literary critic] Sayyid Viqar Azim had written in his books, and in which we had faith in those days – many of our other story writers wrote stories that conformed to this definition. Perhaps I'd already broken away from it, right from the beginning.

So when the time came to write a novel, how could I remain faithful to the traditional concept of a novel? Because by that time I'd read some twentieth-century novels. From the beginning I'd been a great admirer of nineteenth-century fiction: there was Turgenev, there was Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy – I've always been an especially great admirer of Turgenev, because of the way he wrote. But by the time I came to write this novel, I had read some twentieth-century fiction too, and I'd learned that another kind of novel had now appeared in the west. And that kind of novel too appealed to me, so perhaps its influence might have come into it. In what way it came, I don't know; because at that time too I didn't know how to analyze it.

The novels I read were those of André Gide and Thomas Mann. I'm not mentioning Joyce's novel, because at that time it was beyond my grasp, and now it's still beyond my grasp. As for as Joyce's stories and short novels, I admire them greatly. Beyond that, I fall into confusion. So these other novel writers – the novels of Kafka, what kind of a novel is *The Castle*, what about *The Trial*? Kafka above all – in those days I had just read him very recently and freshly, and I thought about what kind of novel this was. So I began to have a small acquaintance with twentieth-century fiction, especially the novel.

But I think that when I wrote this novel, *Basti*, I hadn't completely absorbed the technique of the twentieth-century novel. Perhaps in some way or other there might have been some reflection of it. But in any case, it went some way beyond the nineteenth-century novel.

*Well, you've referred to all the changes in the western novel. Your contemporary Naguib Mahfouz, who's writing in an eastern nation, says that the technical experiments in the western novel, and the technical sources, reveal that their moving spirit is the stories in the Quran Sharif and the Arabian Nights that inspire them. For example, a story can start in the middle, and a story can also be shaped like a circle. He asks why it's necessary that a novel should be based on the western novel.*

You did well to remind me. I've said these things long ago; they might have come into my essays as well. For one thing, you referred to the Quran: twentieth-century fiction, with regard to stream of consciousness and 'free association', is present in the Quran. You can see examples of this, and a glimpse of these new techniques, in the way the way events are described in the Quran. A single event, the whole event, isn't described. An event is referred to, there's some small description of it, and after that the text moves on. Then after the text goes on for some time, that same event returns. So if it's considered from this point of view, then the Quran's narrative technique is extraordinary.

Now about the *Arabian Nights* – while reading it I also read the *Katha-sarit-sagar*; and through it I seemed to have reached some other world – what sort of technique was this? The technique of the *Katha-sarit-sagar* seemed in a way to entrance me. No story comes to an end: from it a new story emerges. From that new story still another story emerges, and from that one stories continue to emerge. So the whole *Katha-sarit-sagar*, which is in nine volumes, is one single story, but within that one story are so many stories that it becomes like a bundle of stories. Perhaps it has some relationship with the Hindus' philosophy of life, which is Vedic philosophy or Vedanta. I haven't considered it in this regard, but to look at the whole of life as consisting of many stories, but despite these many stories there is one story – that technique so entranced me that I wondered why I hadn't yet been able to use it, or in what way I would be able to take advantage of it. So now, after becoming acquainted with this technique, the techniques of the twentieth century don't appeal to me as much as they used to, before I read the *Katha-sarit-sagar*.

*You said when we were talking about the western novel that it seemed that from the time of Nazir Ahmad, Sarshar, and Sharar, up to the present day, the Urdu novelist has had a continuing dilemma: critics try to judge him according to the western novel. Because they all – all those critics, like Ahsan Faruqi and Viqar Azim and*

*others – have read the western novel, and they view the novel's qualities in this light. And where they see a shortcoming, then if they have before them a novel by Walter Scott, then they discover faults in Sharar; if they have before them a novel by D. H. Lawrence, then they'll see some difference in Basti.*

But please consider another aspect of this situation as well. You've referred to Viqar Azim, but the critics who have studied *dastans* [heroic romances] and done research on them say that they've taken dastans as far as they can go: now they're finished with their research, and there's nothing further to be said. And when they come to the fiction of our time, all their research on the dastan vanishes from their memory, and they don't so much as mention it. So when they read a story of mine, they see it only in terms of western fiction. They'll never think of the *Arabian Nights*, or of ancient Indian fiction. For them, this is all relevant only as research material, not beyond that.

It's been a continuing tragedy for us: when we accepted the literature from over there, our own literature became meaningless to them. Especially fiction. In poetry, they still consent to refer to our classics. But in fiction, they don't find such reference acceptable. Among the classics, Hafiz and Saadi are acceptable to them, but when the discussion is about fiction, tales by Shaikh Saadi or a story from the *Arabian Nights* – such references have no meaning for them.

*While for you, these references are very important. And the progress of the novel, and the fundamental technique of the novel, rest upon these tales and in a way upon the rediscovery of these tales. And in Basti this process is very important.*

Yes, I've done this in *Basti*. In my short stories – the technique of the *Arabian Nights*, the technique of the *Katha-sarit-sagara*, how do they differ? That's one question. Then the technique of our own short fiction, which includes tales and Sufi *malfuzat* anecdotes and other such things – what kind of method is this, how are dastans narrated and stories told, what is a tale? I've had a little interest in this too, although my exploration of eastern fiction has not been very extensive. I haven't read widely in Sufi anecdotes or in Persian tales. But whatever little I've read has made me ask myself about this kind of technique, and how I might use it in this age.

Then comes the other reference, to the Jataka tales of Mahatma Buddha that are like a circular novel. He's telling stories – Mahatma Buddha doesn't tell a long dastan, but he goes on telling stories, all in the exact same style. One story, another story, and in exactly the same manner they're all joined together to become a circular novel, in my opinion. So what is this? Should we accept these as short stories, or put them all together and consider them a circular novel, that a single very voluminous novel has been made out of them all? All these questions come up if you enter the world of eastern fiction. It's a world that has its own magic, but the west has seized us in such a grip that we don't even try to go in that direction.

*All right, so in this way is it possible for us to read all your stories in the form of a single novel, and Basti in the form of a story?*

There's this friend of mine, Muzaffar Ali Sayyid, and when this term 'circular novel' first appeared he used to discuss all this, how my stories aren't stories but are a circular novel. He considered them as such, and that friend of mine has had a lot of influence on me. I learned a lot from him, and gained a lot from his companionship.

*All these different experiences – perhaps in Basti you tried to pull them together and incorporate them, more than in any other of your writing. This in any case gives Basti a certain importance.*

In *Basti* it's as though 1857 has come, and either ancient Hindustan comes into it, or the small little things in the Upanishads – for one thing, there's the style of our tales, the style of the tales in the Upanishads, which has its own place. But there are also other books of this kind, with small little stories. They too attract me, so the reflection of this can be seen here and there in *Basti*. There's this whole cycle, and somehow when I sit down to write, in a novel there's more occasion for them to appear in fragments in one place or another. And when they

come together – some meaning develops in them; or perhaps this is only my sense of it. From those dastans, from stories, from fables, from tales, these things enter through this connectedness, and perhaps they might not be able to create any larger meaning; I don't know. But they do come. In *Age samundar hai* too they've come.

*You've mentioned Age samundar hai, but among the various different novels that you've written, does Basti have any special importance in your view, does it deserve any special rank?*

No, I look at these three novels in a sequence [*silsilah*], while *Chand grahan* ['Eclipse'] is different. *Basti*, *Tazkirah* ['Anthology'], and then *Age samundar hai*. To me these three novels seem to form a chain; they can be seen to show how in this country turmoil and a sequence of turmoils came about. And each of the three novels was written about a single turmoil. We've talked about *Basti*; *Tazkirah* too was written in a special time, during the period of Zia ul-Haq. And *Age samundar hai* too was written in a time of turmoil to which I've alluded, of which Karachi became a symbol. They can't be called a trilogy, but in one or another way these novels are connected.

*Yes, I was wanting to ask whether they seemed to you to form a kind of trilogy.*

No, the idea of a trilogy came to me just now while we've been discussing it. I'd never thought of it this way before. But while we're thinking about it, it also occurs to me that all three novels are connected, through their national situations.

*All right, this national situation is very clear in Basti. But in Basti one word is used a number of times: that 'this is the time for revelation [basharat]'. People are waiting for 'revelation' – whether it will come or not come. Life goes on in a routine, ordinary things keep happening. So in the midst of it all, why this waiting for a revelation, why is it so important?*

Only the novel itself will tell you how the word 'revelation' came about, and how the novel comes to an end at that point. I can't explain why the novel ends at that time, and in the way it does. It wasn't in my mind how the novel would end. The novel of its own accord went that far and then ended.

*All right, the way it ends there, we know that the character longs for a revelation, but does he receive a revelation, or does he simply have a feeling? How far does that take him?*

If I tell you this, then I will be starting to interpret the novel. This is something I won't do. I oughtn't to do it, because if I interpret it, then I'll limit its possibilities. It's open-ended, a thing that you construct in different ways. Its doors are open; it has no closed ending. And now if I start to interpret it, that means I've closed the door: this is how it ends. And I won't do such a thing.

*Yes, at the end of the novel that door should remain open, that's the best thing. But this longing for a revelation, if we take it as a longing to enter miraculous time, in which everyday time comes to a stop – then time of stories, of dastans, is what the character really wants to enter.*

While you've been speaking I've just remembered another novel. At one time I was also very much influenced by the author André Gide. In his novel *The Counterfeiters*, just at the end new characters enter and are introduced. And then beneath it he writes 'To be continued', and with this the novel ends. The way this novel ended seemed very strange to me, and for quite some time I remained under its spell – right at the end new characters come in, and they're not developed, and at that very place he ends it, and says the rest will be in the future. But the rest in the future isn't there; it's the end of the novel.

*All right, since we were talking about Basti, and it's been such a long time since that novel was published, and the situation in Pakistan is what it is – do you think that this book has any relevance to the turmoil that's happening today?*

I can't make any claim, but when I look back on some of my writings – it seems to me that some of my stories, some of my novels, used to have little relevance, but now with the things that are happening, they're more relevant. In fact when I think about *Akhiri admi* ['The Last Man'] I feel that perhaps I wrote it before its time. I should have written it now. Why did I write it then? If I wrote *Akhiri admi* now, I don't know what form it would take. So to me some of my writings now seem even more relevant than before.

*Do you feel the same about Basti too?*

No, I won't say about *Basti* that I feel I should have written it now. But about this story I've had the thought repeatedly.

*And if you wrote Basti now, what form would it take?*

Now I don't know, but I reflect that the current turmoil in Pakistan has come at a time when I'm about to finish my creative lifetime, so perhaps this turmoil won't be able to come within my grasp. And perhaps there won't be any writing about this, any novel about it, because I am ending up and the turmoil is only beginning.

*What we can call Basti's locale is urban, whereas Pakistani society is to a large extent rural, and rural changes are not your subject. What are your thoughts about this?*

I don't feel any difficulty. Rural life has its place, and should be described in its place. But whatever happens in our country, whatever decisions there are, whatever turmoil arises – it all happens in the cities, and because of the cities. Rural life plays no part in this turmoil. That is, what happens in Karachi, in Lahore, in Islamabad, results in turmoil. Since my subject is turmoil, national turmoil, this urban life is my circle; I have to keep going around in it.

*You've evoked the Shiraz in such a way that the conversation there advances the novel. You've mentioned Muzaffar Ali Sayyid – he too made an observation about it: that our novel-writers and story-writers don't get out much, they don't go out and wander around and look at war and other things as Tolstoy did. Their round is only as far as the tea-house. So are you seeing the whole sequence of events from the Shiraz? Does this establish a kind of limit for the novel?*

No. At the time when *Basti* was written, in our society the culture of restaurants was very strong, and all these discussions and disturbances took place in restaurants. That is, during the 1950's and 1960's, intellectual life was connected to restaurants, and you couldn't separate the two. Now that culture has disappeared. But if you want to imagine that period, if you are portraying that era, then you can't ignore the culture of the restaurants.

*So Basti is in its place, the Shiraz has folded, and we don't know whether there will be a revelation or not –*

This is exactly my question, this is just what I am perplexed about (laughter). Where did that culture go, and now what is this 'settlement' [*basti*]? The 'basti' I'm in – is it that same one? It seems that while we've been sitting here in the city we've made an Emigration [*hijrat*], and many 'bastis' have become for us part of the past. I find that I'm living in a 'basti', and when I turn to look back, that 'basti' has vanished, and I'm in that 'basti' but still I'm not in it. And this is a new nostalgia.

*And perhaps that's why in the books you wrote afterwards, Chiraghon ka dhuan ['The smoke of lamps'] for example, you portrayed Lahore in more detail. That is, it's not a mythical 'basti' but a living, breathing city.*

Which disappeared –

*Yes, which disappeared. All right, when Basti was published, it was well received, it was reprinted a number of times. Some critics made objections to it, some critics appreciated it greatly. Does it seem to you that there were some aspects of it that were important and that were not noticed by the critics?*

To me this seems a very mysterious process: the writer doesn't know which of his pieces will be a hit, which story will achieve wide fame. And the very story to which he himself gives much importance will somehow fall between the cracks. I don't know why *Age samundar hai* didn't achieve the same popularity that *Basti* did. To me, that novel too is very important.

And some stories are such that I still can't understand the secret of their popularity. There's one story that I wrote when I was writing the stories collected in *Gali kuche*. Which story is it? It's in every anthology, and every critic certainly discusses that story.

*You mean 'Bin likhi razmiyah' ['An Unwritten Epic'].*

I used to think that these were the early stories, these stories from *Gali kuche*; they were a special period. But from there people picked up this particular story. From Mumtaz Shirin to Muhammad Umar Memon to Alok Bhalla, in one way or another they all take it up. So the writer himself doesn't know what meaning the readers and critics search out; a story has its own importance, and it's not necessary that the writer have a complete estimate of the importance of his writing.

*Did you have any idea when you were writing Basti that this would be a different book, and would have a special literary value, and a great importance in the corpus of your work?*

No. I did feel that in the stories I had been writing, the national situation appeared divided up, in fragments; the past too was in fragments – while in the novel I was writing, it was becoming a complete whole, and I was presenting an overview of the national situation. This I definitely felt, and as for whether it would be popular or not, I didn't think about it.

*You dedicated Basti to Muhammad Hasan Askari. What did that dedication mean?*

That was a tribute. That is, probably Muhammad Hasan Askari had just died, at that time. The novel was published after his death. I had a relationship with Askari Sahib, and his passing was a blow to me. So when the opportunity came, in this mood I inscribed the book to him. There's no other significance.

*The whole idiom of Basti, its language, has a special expressiveness; but it's significant that despite that, the book was published in Hindi, and translated into English. So can the language of Basti, and its situation, be translated? Do you think it can be done?*

My view is that in Hindi, more or less the same language was used; perhaps here and there they changed a thing or two. But as for English – the kind of language I write, and when I think of my later books – for example, *Zard kutta* may have been translated, but how can the language I wrote be duplicated in English? It's impossible for that style to be reproduced. Because of this fear, I haven't read that translation. But a capable person did the translation, who's acquainted with this style.

*This translation of Zard kutta has been done by Daud Rahbar.*

Daud Rahbar did it, and I have a lot of confidence in him. He's thoroughly acquainted with this tradition. Still, I can't look at the story from a critical perspective, as to how it's been translated into English.

*Do you read your critics?*

Some of them I do read, if they're my friends. I think that they must certainly have said something or other worthwhile. But all the criticism – no, it's too much for me to read.

*So did you find anything useful in the critics' writing, from your perspective?*

I won't say anything about that. That's between me and them. It's personal (*Laughter*).

*Do you ever reread your work?*

Yes, when a newly published book arrives, at the time the writing looks new to me. So at that time I definitely read some parts of the book.

*Have you read Basti for a second time?*

I think that when it was first published, I must have read it over.

*But not afterwards?*

No, not afterwards.

*If you were to read it, how might it seem to you now?*

One thing that I've learned from the critics is that in some cases, I said something and layers of meaning have emerged from it. On the authority of my good critics I say that to some extent, at the time of writing the full meaning of what I wrote was not completely apparent to me. Later on I came to understand it. For example, the story 'Kishti' ['Boat'] – Suhail Ahmad Khan wrote about it, then [Gopi Chand] Narang Sahib wrote about it. Their writings helped me fully understand: all right, I wrote the story in this way, and it has such-and-such a meaning. So this can happen too.

*Yes, this is revealed through the work of the critic. Did any such thing happen in connection with Basti, that any aspect of the book was illumined by some critic's opinion?*

Not in connection with *Basti*. But with regard to the stories it's certainly happened. I gave the example of 'Kishti', and there are others. For another example, when I wrote the story 'Sirhiyan' ['Staircase'], I didn't understand how I had come to write such a story. Afterwards, from Narang Sahib's reaction, and the views of other critics, I realized what exactly I had written. Or the story 'Bin likhi razmiyah' – Memon asked me about it: when I wrote it, how did I understand its technique, how had I come to write it in a certain way? So I said I myself didn't know – the story just got written. So he told me some things, and I understood what real significance and meaning the story had. The same thing happened with 'Sirhiyan'. Some critics said that I had written 'Sirhiyan' in my very earliest period. I said yes indeed, I wrote it – when did this story get written? – perhaps in 1956; it's a story from 1955-56.

*And it's a very fine story. It's one of my favourites among your stories.*

So this is what happens – a man writes, and then some friends or critics tell him what he's written.