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Lyricist Javed Akhtar opens up about latest book 'Talking Life', AI's impact on art, and much more

When asked why he didn't write a conventional autobiography, given his prolific writing skills, Javed Akhtar explained that it was "never on the cards".



Book signing event hosted by real estate company TARC (The Anant Raj Corporation) in Delhi for his latest book, 'Talking Life: Javed Akhtar in Conversation with Nasreen Munni Kabir'. (Source: TARC India/Instagram)

Javed Akhtar, the renowned poet and lyricist, has left an indelible mark on Indian cinema with his unforgettable contributions. Beyond his illustrious career, **Akhtar's** own life story is nothing short of a Bollywood movie — filled with ups and downs.

Born to a staunch Communist father, **Akhtar, fondly known as 'Jadu'**, grew up believing that Joseph Stalin was his grandfather. Orphaned at an early age and abandoned by his father, he found himself in the care of various relatives — some loving and others less so.

His journey to Bombay marked the beginning of a life filled with challenges, yet he remained remarkably unembittered and undaunted. His breakthrough came when he teamed up with script writer **Salim Khan**, leading to a string of blockbusters like *Sholay* and *Deewar*.

The turning point in his life came with the 1981 film *Silsila* where director Yash Chopra asked him to write the songs.

At a recent book signing event hosted by real estate company TARC (The Anant Raj Corporation) in **Delhi** for his latest book, 'Talking Life: Javed Akhtar in Conversation with Nasreen Munni Kabir', which explores Akhtar's life, he shared insights from his childhood to his **contributions to cinema**, among other things.

When asked why he didn't write a conventional **autobiography**, given his prolific writing skills, Akhtar explained that it was "never on the cards".

Raised by distant relatives after his mother's untimely death when he was eight, he realised that an honest autobiography would require expressing sentiments and experiences that might hurt others. "I would also have to include romantic encounters. That would be a sort of a kiss-and-tell. It would be disrespectful," he says laughingly.

Akhtar's passages from the book revealed how his mother Safia's death had altered the course of his life. His father's emotional distance, the pain of being separated from his siblings, and the struggle of finding his way in Bombay as a young man were lesser-known aspects of his life. When asked if these experiences found their way into the iconic "Mere paas ma hai" dialogue from *Deewar*, Akhtar chose not to dwell on the past.

“If all that misfortune has brought me to this moment — my good fortune — then I won’t mourn over it. Let us not try to edit our lives,” he says.

The discussion also touched upon Akhtar’s role in championing the Copyright Amendment Bill (2012), which grants artists and composers lifelong rights to the royalties earned by **music labels** and production companies.

He expressed his gratitude to both the Opposition and the government for their collaboration in passing the Bill, which closed a loophole that had allowed production companies to deprive artists of their rightful royalties.

‘Declining prominence of Bollywood songs a reflection of societal changes’

Regarding the declining prominence of songs in **Bollywood films**, Akhtar noted that this shift is a reflection of societal changes. “Language is receding from society, attention spans are shorter, and the tempo of music has become frantic — making lyrics less impactful.”

Akhtar highlights that contemporary songs often lack emotional depth and relevance to the storyline, as they are usually played in the background rather than as part of the narrative. “So how can they be so effective?” he asks.

On the subject of **artificial intelligence (AI)**, Akhtar acknowledged that technology will continue to advance, but it should be controlled to serve humanity rather than harm it.

“We will have to make different disciplines and laws to control that...but I don’t think right now AI is capable of doing creative work. Writing a letter or a resume is different. The tech is based on data, but creative writing cannot happen only from data. There is some kind of leap of faith in creative writing,” he says while expressing doubts about AI’s capability to produce creative work.

'Talking Life: Javed Akhtar in Conversation with Nasreen Munni Kabir' is the third part of the trilogy that explores Akhtar's life. The first two books, 'Talking Films' (1999) and 'Talking Songs' (2005), were about his contributions to the Hindi film industry.

