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**A festival of literature and love**

Part - II

This is the last column on the Sindh Literature Festival that brought together a multitude of people from various walks of life to the Arts Council in Karachi to listen to activists, development experts, dramatists, educationists, and intellectuals. The festival offered parallel sessions, making it challenging to decide where to go.

One of the sessions that Rizwan Gul moderated was about contemporary Sindhi poetry. Adal Soomro and Ayaz Gul were the star speakers for this session. Both have penned excellent poetry in Sindhi and they enlightened the audience about contemporary trends in Sindhi poetry especially in the 21st century. Sindhi poetry is now emerging with new strengths and showcases the realities of Sindhi society with new imagery and diction. A whole new generation of young poets is not hesitant to try new experiments in their compositions. The session was fairly informative.

Then Dr Ayoub Shaikh came up with his peculiar style of provoking the audience to think. The session he moderated was about the performance of educational and literary organizations in Sindh. Dr Qasim Bughio, Madad Ali Sindhi, Dr Suleman Shaikh and Mahmood Mughal shared their experiences of running education and literary organizations.

Dr Qasim Bughio, a former chairman of Pakistan Academy of Letters and dean at the University of Sindh, was clear about the importance of authority that an educational institution or literary organization should enjoy. As per him, ‘Responsibilities without authority do not produce intended results’. He gave the example of Dr N A Baloch who produced good work at the Sindh Language Authority thanks to his immense prestige and power with which he could circumvent bureaucratic hurdles in the organization he was leading. Dr Bughio lamented the tendency of bureaucrats who try to influence educational and literary organizations and put undue pressure on them. ‘Favouritism creeps in and the board of governor itself becomes a bunch of the handpicked who behave as a tool of the bureaucracy’.

Mahmood Mughal who is leading the Institute of Sindhology (IoS) at the University of Sindh differed with Dr Bughio and praised the university authorities who according to him ‘were all cooperative and never put any hurdles in his work’. He may be right, but he didn’t strike a chord with the audience which appeared to have reservations about the work the IoS has been doing.

Madad Ali Sindhi recalled how Ibrahim Joyo worked with his staff and could produce great works of intellectual importance. Sindhi felt that most educational and literary organizations in Sindh are overstaffed with mediocre people who are simply unable to present quality output. Dr Suleman Shaikh shared his experiences about the Sindh Graduates Association (SGA) which has played an active role over the decades since the dark period of General Ziaul Haq. Dr Shaikh was one of the founders of the SGA and has been contributing to the promotion of educational and literary activities in Sindh. He was not happy at the declining level of ownership among these organizations where both leaders and staff do not feel a sense of attachment with their institutions.

The session on the contemporary Sindhi novel discussed the quality and quantity of novels that Sindhi novelists are churning out by the dozens. Muneer Chandio moderated the session and Akbar Laghari was in an uncompromising mood to cut many novelists to size. Akhlaque Ansari was more positive and appreciated the diversity of themes emerging with new novelists. Ansari deplored the lack of access and attention to the Sindhi novels written across the borders. He said in both India and Pakistan some excellent novels have been written in Sindhi but the Indian and Pakistan Sindhi writers are gradually losing touch with each other.

Akhtar Hafeez had an issue with journalists writing about novels. He thought that criticism is a specialized field and not everyone should try to indulge in it. In his opinion, some new Sindhi novelists appear to be in a hurry to get recognition and end up churning out novel after novel, of poor quality.

Kaleem Butt who has written many novels came up with: ‘it all depends on stamina’ – if one can write fast, one should carry on writing. Akbar Laghari termed most new Sindhi novels as average and even of low quality. He gave some margin to Saleem Agha and Sahar Gul but for others he had no sympathy. He gave the example of Shamsur Rehaman Farooqi whose novel ‘Kai chand thay sarey aasman’ he considers a masterpiece. For Laghari, a great novel is something that ‘is able to change you, like Kafka’s novels did’.

The session about the role of universities in Sindh Dr Fouzia Khan moderated very well, but the vice-chancellors present were unable to impress much apart from Dr Akhtar Baloch who appeared to be the only educationist who actually understood the significance of social sciences that should be our focus more than the usual –job-oriented education. Dr Mujeeb Memon complained about the dichotomy between the federal HEC and the Sindh HEC, which according to him was causing tremendous harm to higher education in Sindh. Dr Bheeka Ram informed the audience that his university does not refuse admission to any student who is unable to pay the fee.

Zarrab Hyder moderated the session on Sindhi short stories in which Madad Ali Sindhi enlightened the audience about the current trends in this genre. His suggestions to new writers is that their short stories should reflect the life in Sindh as it is, in a realistic manner. The moderator gave Zaib Sindhi an unusually long spell to talk at the cost of other speakers. Zaib has four collections of short stories to his credit which are widely appreciated, but his comment that there are hardly two or three great short stories in the entire oeuvre of Sindhi literature did not go well with the audience.

Tariq Qureshi was more humble and impressive and even suggested some names of good Sindhi short story writers that deserve our attention and praise. The session was discriminatory against the only woman speaker Farzana Shaheen who was kept silent by the moderator most of the time as the four men spoke all along without giving much attention to one of the finest short story writers in Sindhi. She had just a brief spell to talk in the beginning but then for over 40 minutes just men spoke. Perhaps the moderator didn’t even think about her.

The best highlight of the whole day in the festival was the session that Noorul Huda Shah conducted with the literary giant from Balochistan, Dr Shah Muhammad Mari. The large auditorium was jam-packed with people keen to listen to Dr Marri who started off by highlighting the distortion of history in Pakistan. He couldn’t be clearer about how history begins in Pakistan with the Arab invasion and ends with the creation of Pakistan as its logical but incorrect conclusion. He reminded the audience that this region – stretching from Balochistan to Sindh – was thriving with culture and life much before the Arab invasion.

Lastly, the second day of the festival progressed with sessions on syllabus in Pakistan with Dr Hoodbhoy, Taimoor Rahman and Dr Tauseef Ahmed, moderated by Dr Riaz Shaikh; a meeting with the literary family of Imdad Hussaini; and an interview with Ahmed Shah by Wusatullah Khan. There were also theatre performances and poetry recitals capped with music by Taimur Rehman and others.

Concluded

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