Litfest season

B Y H A M N A Z U B A I R | 2/23/2020

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| A FEW short years ago, critiques of Pakist ani literature festivals (mine included) raised questions of inclusivity, efficacy and quality of debate. These have been valuable signifiers of a literature festival`s success, but since then, the stakes have changed. A new standard by which to judge the integrity of litfests has emerged, ie whether or not they`ll be a safe space for truth-telling and dissent and not just a mouthpiece for whichever institution supports their continued existence with its patronage.  The newly founded Adab Festival was held in Karachi earlier this month. The Lahore Literary Festival is happening this weekend, to be followed by the Karachi Literature Festival and then a profusion of other, newer, region-specific or subject-specific culture festivals. Over the next month or so we`ll have collected ample evidence to examine how litfests fare against this new standard.  Across the border, the Jaipur Literature Festival has already had to contend with this scrutiny and, according to some critics, it has failed. When a group of peaceful protesters began to chant slogans against the Citizenship Amendment Act, JLF had them detained and later stated that its sponsors had requested the action. JLF`s headline sponsor is the ZEE network, a right-leaning television network.  When pressed, those behind Pakistani literature festivals privately admit their programming is constrained by security concerns, censorship and dwindling funding.  That sounds accurate: when I examined the Adab Festival`s schedule a few weeks ago I couldn`t identify more than a single session that purported to directly engage with the most consequential issues of the day, like media censorship, student activism and inept governance. The same can be said of the Lahore Literary Festival`s official schedule, which has been criticised by some for playing it safe.  However, when I attended the Adab Festival I found that those who had something to say created opportunities to say it anyway. A keynote speaker`s lecture, accompanied by his recitation of a poem by Fahmida Riaz, had the effect of calling out the state. Two women on two separate panels read aloud statements that pledged solidarity with peaceful protesters who`d been detained in Islamabad in January (they have since been released). These little rebellions mirrored what had played out at JLF earlier, where as the protest was being quashed outdoors, within JLF`s sessions some speakers like Nandita Das, Rana Ayyub, Vishal Bhardwaj etc reportedly used the platform to rail against the same inequality the silenced protesters hadsought to highlight.  One take on litfests is that if a litfest won`t overtly side with progressive agendas it ought to be cancelled. But how can we reconcile that take with the practical benefit of witnessing the heartening, if infrequent, defiance that might pepper the very same litfest`s sessions? How can we reconcile that take with the boosted morale that buoys an upcoming writer invited to speak at a litfest, a writer who spends the rest of the year fielding rejections and facing book bans? Litfest organisers may think they have to navigate between two extremes: policing content so stringently they risk being boycotted by the thinkers and activists they depend on to give them credibility, or being so openly defiant that they risk losing the funding and permissions necessary to stage large-scale events for the public. In the short term there`s another way, which is to simply get out of the way. To let speakers set the agenda. To serve as fuel for a larger fire lit elsewhere. To not intervene until after thepoint has been made.  To welcome critique even if it`s directed against their own festivals instead of participating in censorship by ignoring or blocking commentators on social media.  Today`s litfest operates under constraints similar to those faced by theactivist, the journalist and the average citizen. Each is being forced to weigh the significance of their moral imperative against the necessity of their continued existence.  As such the litfest might navigate the present moment by wilfully serving as a sort of trick mirror: a surface that soothes you the benevolent patron with glossy, shallow depictions of `the culture` that`ll be chronicled in trite essays in international publications, but allows you the discerning reader to access those with the courage to intermittently voice necessary truths.  In the long run, of course, litfests must take a hard look at their chosen sponsors and af filiations and make definitive choices.  The Pakistani literature festival must find the means to practically aid the aspiring writer who is newly tormented by slashed media budgets and the fading possibility of being courted by Indian publishing houses.  The consideration and generosity that critics might extend to a litfest right now won`t always be available. In fact, it shouldn`t. The writer is the former culture editor at Dawn.com. |