



The Dialectics and Polemics of the “Experience of Literature” in Literature festivals

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Abstract: *Literature festivals as cultural events have situated themselves at a rather peculiar junction of criticism. On one hand, they are critiqued for their close allegiance to commerce, and by extension consumerism. On the other hand, as the number of literature festivals and the presence of authors and thinkers and crowd participation in them seemingly grow, it paves way for their interpretations of potentially democratizing literature. What this paper does, is attempt to analyse the pertinence of several criticisms that surround literature festivals as cultural events and argue that it is in the very polemical nature of such events, can we perhaps try and understand how literature itself is experienced in present times and the strangeness that lies in the nature of literature itself, especially in conjunction with modernity.*

Keywords: Literature, Popular Culture, Modernity, Literature Festivals, Consumerism, Market, Politics, Readers.

It was as recent as 1949 that the Cheltenham Literary Festival inaugurated the celebration of festivals of a unique nature that soon grew popular worldwide. It took little time for countries in South Asia to catch up with currently countries like India hosting almost seventy literature festivals every year. Of why one would call these events as “polemical” is probably of their peculiar nature which G Sampath (2006) describes as “the popular sites for the happy convergence of literature, private capital, and the state as they stage a seductive spectacle of

culture, tourism, and the simultaneous production and consumption of both.” (Sampath, p.1) It is because of this characteristic which unapologetically celebrates the confluence of literature and commerce (a relationship which is conventionally known but often hushed or glossed over) that the event of literature festival has garnered different arrays of critique, of contradicting nature. Being events, primarily aimed at celebrating literature in a large gathering of authors and their readers, it has managed to gather fame both commercially and as a lucrative sphere to attend for numerous enthusiasts of literature.¹

The simple transaction of one buying a book and the author and the publisher getting paid in turn is not what pervades the criticism about literature festivals. The structuring of literature festivals is such that the market economy transcends this simple relationship and manifests itself in everything else that is beyond the one on one relationship between the author and the reader. It is not an annual affair of buying books, probably at a lower discount, that occurs in book fairs. It is a spectacular event of excess where the surplus that exists beyond a singular act of reading is what is celebrated and commercially accounted for. The understanding of commerce here is complicated because given the egalitarian logic of a festival, most literature festivals provide free entry to all with free sessions and ‘meet and greets’ with authors but one would encounter lucrative business ventures everywhere in the pavilions of the festival where one automatically becomes a consumer. Literature festivals are themselves subjected to huge market politics of sponsorships and are aided by powerful governmental as well as corporate organizations. If we are to go back to the polemics, the slight economic exchange of one buying a book is always pushed to the periphery when one thinks of the reading experience as such, but in this case, it can appear as if what is being celebrated is not one’s passion for literature but one’s status as a committed consumer of books. Such an understanding of literary festivals has led to critiques mostly of the order of the Frankfurt school that are suspicious of festivals manipulating the psychological needs of people on a mass scale, followed by the commodification of authors and creating fetishes which are always detrimental to the real essence of art works. The reverse side of this critique is to precisely emphasize on the fact that these festivals truly uphold an egalitarian spirit of readership (again pertaining to the free entry) with freedom to talk to or question the author, be informed of other books etc. and all of these are thought to be outside the paradigm of any institutionalism

¹ It must be noted that a certain generality is assumed here in the name of literature festivals. The fact that each festival is somewhat context bound and would not necessarily exhibit characteristics that are thought to be the norm is relatively overlooked over here for the sake of the larger argument and the scope of this essay.

like that of academics; informing the reader more about the intricacies of issues that dominate the literary world. On the other, hand if we are to adhere to what Jacques Derrida claimed in 'This Strange Institution Called Literature': there is perhaps nothing which can be called as the true essence of literature except something which is not. This "strange institutionality" of literature would bestow unto it the property of accepting everything that is refused under all other institutions. Literature therefore can only be defined in terms of negation as a liminal experience and therefore, whatever is a surplus or an excess, becomes crucial to the understanding of literature. Literature festivals, with their spectacle and commerce which manifests itself in terms of an excess, in a sense, probably does justice to this understanding of literature. These festivals create a public sphere which one can say somewhat creates a dialectic of literature and commerce.

This essay more than trying to understand this dialectic better, will strive to look beyond it. It would attempt to analyse how despite exhibiting certain aspects of critiques from different sectors, how do literature festivals reflect a certain transformation that is characteristic of the modern literary world and how within this framework, literature festivals create opportunities for subversions that are but much needed.

In *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (1947) Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer looks at the way art has reconfigured its structure and production with the intervention of industrial modernity with utmost suspicion. They theorise that both artworks and their supposed connoisseurs have been molded into the formulaic patterns of the product to be sold and the psychology required for its consumption; claiming that "Only what has been industrialized, rigorously subsumed, is fully adequate to this concept of culture" (p.104). The exclusivity of the art work, they propose, gets overpowered by market politics, further alienating the artist and to some extent their respective audience, not very unlike Karl Marx's conception of "estrangement of labour". A typical scene from a literature festival would be of large decorated pavilions and alleys, segregated spaces marked by fancy pandals, not so inexpensive food stalls and shops of garments, jewellery and other accessories strewn all over, with prominent hoardings of advertisements of book releases and other sponsorships. There are sessions or talks of diverse nature from a public discussion with eminent authors and celebrities, book launches, theatre, music, meet and greet etc. The extremely popular, Jaipur Literature Festival, in India also has ongoing evening concerts. These aspects form a part of the tourist programs where certain hotels are tied up with

the festival organizers. Once one enters the arena, one is interpellated in the profusion of such excess, while becoming a potential consumer to all the commercial ventures present there. One can spot a similarity in the way Adorno and Horkheimer describes the nature of multiplexes and shopping centres:

Because the inhabitants, as producers and as consumers, are drawn into the center in search of work and pleasure, all the living units crystallize into well-organized complexes. The striking unity of microcosm and macrocosm presents men with a model of their culture: the false identity of the general and the particular. Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through. The people at the top are no longer so interested in concealing monopoly: as its violence becomes more open, so its power grows. (Adorno, Horkheimer, p. 95)

The sectors of different consumerist ventures mentioned above, in certain literature festivals can be read along the lines of the Frankfurt school critique where what is to be actually celebrated, the 'literary' and nuances of the experience of readership is probably obliterated. The autonomy of the reader is then compromised as they are lured inside the pavilion by fitting their consumerist desires as per the standardized pattern for commerce. Literature then becomes the illusory excuse that commerce is known to well to create among the users. It is pulled down to the order of utility. The whole organized nature of literature festivals becomes symbolic of the immense power of capitalism where the so called democratic lure is but the numbing of the imaginative powers of the individual reducing them to mere statistics. The sectors of commerce and that of literature become one and the same the façade of the harmony of their co-existence as a whole, hardly bears any coherence in the real sense. Such an understanding for the literature festivals have formed one of the most common critiques that are there in this area. Cori Stewart summarizes the prevalent critiques of this nature in her work:

Ruth Starke in her thesis, *A Festival of Writers: Adelaide Writers' Week 1960–2000*, claims that writers' festivals have erroneously evolved to serve the commercial interests of book publishers, and specifically multi-national book publishers. She is critical of Adelaide Writers' Week, saying that it metamorphosed first into Readers' Week and then into Publishers' Week (2000: 225). The Festival's increased emphasis on satisfying the desires of publishers, she proposes, has led to a festival program that appeals to a general public, rather than the more discerning 'literary' audience that the Festival ought to cater to. What is more,

the growing culture of authors required to be entertainers at writers' festivals is a role Starke claims they are reluctant to adopt. Author and public intellectual Robert Dessaix made this point as early as 1998, commenting to Writers Week audiences that "writers now have to tap dance as well as write books (Dessaix in Starke 2000: 228)." (Stewart, p.11)

These sorts of criticism are quite evidently uncomfortable with the palpable confluence of literature and commerce and with the presence of the sectors of entertainment which presumably compromises the acclaimed "literary-ness". G. Sampath in his article also talks about this ethical distancing of literature from commerce to be on "modernist perch", where one is clearly the adversary of the other:

The modernists wore literature's supreme uselessness as a badge of honour, preferring to wait forever for Godot than stoop to justify literature on the basis of its economic or other utility, or to suggest that it suck up to the market. Lit-fests sit uncomfortably in this ethos." (Sampath, 3)

Admittedly, the claims made by this school of criticism are grounded on certain realities of literature festivals. It is because of this accused nature of consumerist excess that many a young, broke scholar or literature enthusiast would be alienated and out of place. Additionally, at some level, the literature festivals would be class specific drawing in crowds mainly from either the elite or the urban middle class. However, the question remains that this is but one part of the somewhat unfortunate material reality of literature festivals and hardly can they be thought to dictate the nature of literature and the sense of the literary or readership that these festivals celebrate or propagate. It can also perhaps be unjustified to think that whatever crowd comes in the festivals are but passive mindless consumers who have been lured by the show of consumerism. A trivial empirical evidence of this would be the fact that for example, despite the presence of such ornamental business ventures, the majority of the crowd would be in the discussion areas with the authors or the lectures and the debates or the book launches. Only an extremely limited section of the crowd would consider shopping in the adjoining stalls. It might still work well with the logic of consumerism and the little section who partakes in shopping are enough to generate massive profits, but in no way does the economic ventures which are carried out in the name of literary festivals, can be thought of as the sole determinant of the nature of these events and their contribution. The ethical

distancing of commerce and literature should also be something which requires questioning. So does the distancing of the actual “literary essence” from other spheres of “entertainment” which are presumed to be forms of art subservient to literature.

To identify the possibilities of criticisms and analyses that literature festivals offer, one has to disassociate oneself from the archaic sanitization of literature from the hands of commerce and moreover from the anxiety of the alleged loss of the true essence of literature. To go back to Derrida, given the strange paradigms of literature which is so elusive and ever expanding that the very task of defining what would be the limits of literature is near impossible. (Derrida, p.84) To be involved in literature either as a writer or as reader itself means to be at the cusp of institutionality. If there is pleasure in a readerly experience as such, it is not restricted to the text but something that transgresses the text, an experience which thinks of the personal presence of the author but also has the potential to obliterate it. It is this liminal experience that lies at the margins of the text and that lies beyond it, and perhaps literary festivals can be thought of as the event that celebrates this peculiarity. This analysis might seem sudden and that is what this essay will try to illustrate in the following sections.

Bemoaning for the loss of “literary”, quite obviously entails a very restricted and albeit elitist perception of what indeed is the “literary”. However, such an anxiety is not entirely misplaced and uncommon for that matter. During the initial years of the intervention of technological modernity in the domain of art evoked a collective sigh of the loss of the “aura of the art” in the possible chain of endless reproducibility of artworks. Walter Benjamin in ‘Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction’, says that more than often this association with the aura of the work of art is what derives from the classical ritual element of the artwork. It is the nature of artwork that provides itself with a certain sacral aura that has the capacity to transcend criticism (p.223). He mentions that when confronted with the mechanical reproducibility of art, people responded with a certain theology of art which gave rise to the negative theology of the “pure art”, “which not only denied any social function but also categorizing by subject matter.” To draw a very loose parallel with Adorno, he too mentions a certain “functionlessness” of art which is the nature of pure art and hence it what gets tampered with the intervention of cultural economics. This “functionlessness” of

Adorno is different however, since it focuses on the responsibility of the artist not to be responsible for any certain sector which Derrida also talks about in a similar manner. However, when artworks are ascribed with an absolute “functionlessness”, it has the potential to form conceptions that artworks are only to propagate notions of beauty that is of the order of the divine and it should not be subjected to any politics or criticism. Benjamin with reference to the comparison between the painting and the cinema says that the mechanical reproducibility of artworks have successfully done away with the ritualistic. The intervention of technology has secularized art and has finally emancipated it “from its parasitic subservience to ritual”. And it is from “this point onwards, work of art instead of being based in ritual it begins to be based in another practice, politics.”(Benjamin, p. 224) Literature festival schedules are mainly sessions of debate and discussions on issues pertaining to the “literary” as well as issues beyond the literary that are discussed by eminent personalities where the audience can weigh in and ask questions and put forward their opinions. Mass participation in such events, can then be seen as the extension of criticism on a massive scale which leads to the possibility of politicization of literature. It should also be noted that literature festivals pride themselves to have distanced themselves successfully from politics. Nevertheless, it is only institutional politics that they have been able to distance themselves from. The discussion of political matters including the political dimensions of art work and mass participation in them is something which can be fostered at the spaces of debates and discussions in these events. One can however claim that the possibility of such politics can only be of a certain populist nature, but because of the diverse public sphere that it creates, this discussions does not defeat the logic of democratic participation in criticism of art which again partakes of the politicization of art which Benjamin says is crucial for the survival of art in modernity.

Literature festivals have discussion of topics pertaining to all possible spheres that demand attention, from issues of themes and content in literature, art, music, and current issues of political and humanitarian importance or even sessions on the technicalities of publishing and how to be a successful author. The myriad of issues partly can fan the anxiety of feeding the masses with formulaic matters of popularity which in a way again would imply the “literary” being obfuscated. But the diversity in the discussions at

literature festivals indicate a resonance of a similar tendency to expand its vastness to include all matters of cultural and social importance to that of the recent interdisciplinary inclinations of the discipline of Literature in universities. A refusal to ascribe to the formal categorical dictums by literature festivals can also then be perceived as mass democratization which arguably forms the nature of literature itself. Notably, in panel discussions that take place, the primary object of intrigue for the masses is the discussion itself. It is but the critique that becomes the spectacle. Such a unique phenomenon would inevitably blur the lines of what we know as literary. Derrida remarks:

I would rather emphasize that the existence of something like a *literary reality in itself* will always remain problematic. The literary event is perhaps more of an event (because less natural) than any other, but by the same token it becomes very "improbable," hard to verify. No *internal* criterion can guarantee the essential "literariness" of a text. There is no assured essence or existence of literature. If you proceed to analyze all the elements of a literary work, you will never come across literature itself, only some traits which it shares or borrows, which you can find elsewhere too, in other texts, be it a matter of the language, the meanings or the referents ("subjective" or "objective"). And even the convention which allows a community to come to an agreement about the literary status of this or that phenomenon remains precarious, unstable and always subject to revision." (Derrida, p.86)

According to this line of argument, the concern that the commercial aspect of literature festivals subdues the visitors into passive bunch of consumers and everything is done at the loss of the "literary" is something only partially applicable and would largely be unjustified.

Let us for the time being deviate from this train of thought and focus on another prevalent perception that exists about literary festivals. We can find numerous blog articles which vests ample trust in literature festivals to truly facilitate an egalitarian culture of doing away with the boundaries of "low" and "high art" and connect several world literatures together, which they strive to achieve mainly through the autonomy invested on authors to openly market themselves which comes off as a fitting project of the neoliberal economy. One such blog article which advertises the Jaipur Literature Festival reads as such:

The Jaipur Literary Festival has become a fountainhead of ideas and human expression on topics that cover all aspects of human life. A veritable list of guest speakers and personalities from all over India and across the world also attend this Festival. The Festival gives promising writers the opportunity to showcase their writing, even as the Festival celebrates different viewpoints and human perspectives on a barrage of serious questions facing the world, whether literary, political, social, historical and even economic ones...The Festival is also known for applying best practices in logistics and hospitality and has elicited words of appreciation from patrons and organizers of most reputed literary Festivals. The Festival is supported by the state tourism department, various institutions and Trusts.”²

The advertisement might imply that since the festival is aided by powerful patrons and organizers that they can facilitate a truly effective pluralistic culture of best writers and showcasing their work to the public. G. Sampath remarks that oftentimes for the sake of their creative autonomy, do the authors make use of capitalism to get access to their audience. This also creates the project of the selling of “intellectual labour” that the author primarily harps on to increase their simultaneous function of being an entrepreneur. Sampath goes on to describe how authors here have to refashion themselves as public figures and celebrities by building up suitable personalities to sell themselves to their reader. The conspicuous neoliberal nature of the cultural economy present in the literature festival would not only celebrate the “freedom” of the market as mentioned earlier but also invest the utmost capability of the market to validate and hierarchize artworks. This might propagate the myth of the absolute autonomy of the figure of the author by establishing themselves as the independent creative entrepreneur but indeed such a reading too is problematic and inadequate as per the first set of critiques against festivals that we had covered.

It is somewhat true that commercial grasp of literature festivals would influence them in generating certain kind of content the market feels would be of interest to the public. However, it cannot be the seamless propagator of democracy and pluralism in the sphere of literature. Unlike what is advertised, neither will it generate universal approval from the authors as well as the public. The intervention of market on the contrary does also unfold the

² <http://www.indiaonlinepages.com/festivals/rajasthan/jaipur-literature-festival.html>

discriminatory and hierarchical relationships with which it works and also in a slightly positive way, because of the unraveling of something which would otherwise be glossed over, open up the possibility of critique which can emanate from the palpable realization of such discriminations and hierarchies. For example, many literature festivals have evoked criticism from many authors about the uneven payment of the author and the preference of other celebrities. Dolores Montenegro complains in a New Statesman report complains:

Many festivals have a two-tier approach to author care. The big names get limos, love and impeccable organisation whereas the smaller names are shunted off into small venues and quietly forgotten about. Often there is nobody to show them where they are supposed to go or introduce them on stage. This is not a good time to be an author – most don't make enough to live on and yet at festivals everyone is being paid except them. (p.2)

Mostly, there would be other prominent discriminations where only famous authors after an event would have their own stall for book signing and meet and greet while the relatively newer and lesser known ones would. Now these concerns would have been relevant either ways even in the publishing world and it would then be relatively silenced with hardly any visible concern raised against it. The possibility of criticism increases in such a set up and the public too has the chance to be aware of these. It would be wrong to read too much into the egalitarian and effective possibility of the market to create autonomous content. It is rather the festive set up and presence of diverse masses that fosters newer forms of critique and bears the ability to transform the popular understanding of literature.

One such important issue at hand is the supposed celebrity status of the author which both the lines of critique somewhat believes in. Admittedly, the supposed creation of the celebrity persona of the public figure of the author is what the literature festival focuses on. However, it is rather unimportant to try and unravel the appropriateness of such a claim and what goes in the minds of the festival makers and the authors who come in. But it is pertinent to look at how the public communication of the author and the readers reflects a changing perception towards the reception of literature.

In many cases, the audience which surrounds the author either comprises of their devout readers or of people who had not read them and would perceive them as the speaker who just spoke about their work (or ideas, depending on what the talk is about). The audience commonly questions the author about their failure to understand the work at certain places, their alternate readings of which they seek some validation, their disapproval or appreciation about certain aspects of the work, what the work means to the author (the pre-authorial elements that lead to the development of the work) or even how can they write like their favorite author. Given the fact that these conversations are not of the formal nature with the certain prior limitations of an academic or even a news interview, the direct questions of the readers to their authors bear the potential to transform and reveal certain nature of the polemical nature of literature itself.

Maurice Blanchot's essay *Literature and the Right to Death* speaks about the consequences a literary work is constantly subjected to, once it reaches the readers and hence how that also reveals a strangeness of the institution of literature. According to Blanchot, there is an inherent anxiety in the fate of a literary work regarding its disappearance. But before that, one needs to understand that after the work has been written, the sole existence of the writer is enclosed in the work. A piece of literature is special precisely because "it is the perfect act, through which what was nothing when it was inside emerges into the monumental reality of the outside as something which is necessarily true, as a translation which is necessarily faithful, as the person it translates exists through it and in it." (Blanchot, p. 305) However, this anxiety also arises once the work reaches others:

The author sees other people taking interest in his work, but the interest that they take in it is different from the interest that made it a pure expression of himself; and that different interest changes the work, transforms it into something different, something in which he does not recognize the original perfection. For him, the work has disappeared; it has become a work belonging to other people, a work that includes them and does not include him, a book which derives its value from other books, which is original if it does not resemble them, which is understood because it is a reflection of them. (Blanchot, p. 306)

Blanchot suggests several ways by which the author might try and cope up with such a problem. The author can withdraw into themselves completely and secure their work to the extent that it is resisted from all external readings, so that it purely remains for the author alone. But this would deny the very existence of the work as it is, since without the readership and an external outlet to truth, it ceases to be what we commonly perceive as literature. The author can also simply decide to write solely for his readers and do whatever pleases them without considering themselves but that too according to Blanchot is a “hopeless endeavour.” For he says that would be of “no use to the reader.” A reader always searches for “an alien work in which he can discover something unknown, a different reality, a separate mind capable of transforming him and which he can transform into himself.”(p.306) An author can only therefore accept the path where he can concern themselves “as art as pure technique”; with technique as “than nothing more than the search for means by which what was previously not written comes to be written.” But one who has been so much involved with the work cannot be completely oblivious to the results; one cannot help but accept that

...his experiment is not worthless in writing; he has put himself to the test as a nothingness at work, and after having written, he puts his work to the test as something in the act of disappearing. The work disappears and the fact of disappearing of the work remains and appears as the essential thing, the movement which allows the work to be realised as it enters the stream of history. To be realised as it disappears. In this experiment, the writer's real goal is no longer the ephemeral work but something beyond that work; the truth of the work where the individual who writes—a force of creative negation—seems to join with the work in motion through which this force of negation and surpassing asserts itself. (Blanchot, p.307)

The moment the author reads from their book in public, or talks about the book yet to be launched or even discusses his previously written works, they perform their authorship in public and invite the revealing of readings and criticisms they would be otherwise unaware of. Because of this unique performativity, the supposed nothingness of work materializes into a myriad of readings and the act of disappearing hidden inside the work is translated into the strange co-existence of several kinds of works which lies in the subjective reading and interpretation of each reader. The confluence of all these interpretations with the authors retelling or

recreation of their work (in the answers given by the authors) creates even more permutations and combinations of readings and the existence of the text as such. This bears resemblance to the singularity of experience as a reader that Derrida talks about. Each reading of the reader would be singular in itself and the performance of such in the discussion with the authors, that these singularities would be performed. Such strangeness of the performance of authorship and readership and the blurring of the lines of the two that occurs in these events that transforms the conventional notions of readings by the intervention of mass opinion and at the same time reveals the inherent strangeness in the nature of literature itself.

Benjamin talks about a similar phenomenon which occurs in the public performance of artworks like that of the film. He says that because of the peculiar technicality of such artwork that “anyone who witnesses the accomplishments of the artwork is somewhat of an expert.” He finds himself intermeshed with the reach of the art work and finds himself a part of the artwork itself. He draws the parallel with the reception of literature which gets manifested as editorial letters where each and every critique is valued and they exhibit an authorial potential. The market equivalent of the identification of this unique aspect in the crowds of the literature festival occurs when events are introduced of how one can become a successful author because the aura of the festival has the potential to invoke the authorial and critiquing desire in everyone who visits. Therefore it is not the market economy which creates a democratic platform but the very nature and framework of the festival as such which blurs the boundaries between readership and authorship, and each individual’s experience with literature is celebrated.

Undoubtedly there exists a dialectic of literature and commerce in literature festivals. But this dialectic is not the sole determining factor of the nature of the festival. What determines the festival is but the pure carnivalesque nature of festivities which celebrates the “strange institution called literature.” Because of this nature, which actually worships literature, it can be responsible enough to be absolutely irresponsible of any set rules of perceptions and can lead towards the transformations which were previously unthought-of. And isn’t this lack of responsibility and the desire to constantly redefine its boundaries what is expected of literature? The celebration of literature over here evokes meaningless ecstasy which might even emanate from the absolute alienation that one faces in the gnawing presence of capitalism. The mass culture of literature festival might be thought of as the

proletariat's way of reacting to gnawing autocratic structures as Benjamin thought of. It is as if "their self-alienation has reached such a degree that they experience their own destruction as the aesthetic pleasure of the first order." (Benjamin, p. 242)

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