

Jaipur Literature Festival, the Gendered Literary Field, and the MeToo Movement in India

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Article abstract

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JAIPUR LITERATURE FESTIVAL, THE GENDERED LITERARY FIELD, AND THE METOO MOVEMENT IN INDIA

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Yoda Press

ABSTRACT

As the literary field in India begins to become more complex, layered and diverse in terms of its gender representation despite the stubborn persistence of many aspects of its “tradition” male bastion character, the most celebrated and successful literary festival in the country emerges as a microcosmic manifestation of this tussle for power. Based on an autoethnographic account of the literary festival over eight editions and a close narrative of the sessions in its 2018 and 2019 editions along with a look at how these editions were reported in the media, and placing them within the frame of scholarship researching literary festivals as representations or fragments of “public culture”, this article looks at gender representation at the Jaipur Literature Festival in the immediate aftermath of the two waves of the MeToo Movement in India.

RÉSUMÉ

Le champ littéraire, en Inde, se complexifie, et gagne en strates et en diversité quant à la représentation du genre, malgré la durabilité à maints égards du personnage masculin archétypal et traditionnel. Dans ce contexte, le festival littéraire le plus réputé et le plus couru du pays apparaît comme une manifestation microcosmique de cette lutte pour le pouvoir. Le présent article s’appuie sur un récit autoethnographique s’échelonnant sur huit éditions du festival, sur le récit détaillé des séances des éditions 2018 et 2019, ainsi que sur ce qui s’est écrit à propos de ces éditions dans les médias. Dans le cadre de la recherche sur les festivals littéraires en tant que représentations ou fragments de la « culture publique », l’article examine la représentation du genre au Festival de littérature de Jaipur, au lendemain des deux vagues du mouvement MeToo qu’a connues l’Inde.

Keywords

JaipurLitfest, Public Culture, Publishing, MeToo, Autoethnography

Mots-clés

JaipurLitfest, culture publique, édition, MeToo, autoethnographie

In the fall of 2018, a short video¹ played on loop on innumerable Indian social media timelines till it went viral. It showed a well-known PR magnate of Delhi, Suhel Seth, inappropriately touching an eminent journalist as she walked past him on stage at the start of a panel discussion at India's most talked-about annual literary extravaganza, the Jaipur Literature Festival. The video, recorded originally in January of that year, went viral many months later (in October) when multiple women came out with sexual abuse allegations against a number of prominent men in the media and cultural spheres, including Seth, on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, a moment seen by Indian feminists as the second wave in the country of the MeToo movement which started in 2017.

This article examines the interplay between gender and a newly emerging sphere of “public culture”—that is, the literary festival—by looking at the organization, programming, and actual on-the-ground experience of the Jaipur Literature Festival in the immediate aftermath of the emergence of the MeToo movement in India. Beginning with the premise that JLF represents a microcosm of the “literary field” that is the Indian book and publishing industry, the article contends that the interplay between gender representation and gendered experiences at the event reflect similar dynamics to those in the Indian book industry. Finally, it attempts to arrive at some conclusions about how the narrowly “literary” definition of JLF is what has kept it from being a more accessible and truly democratic and representational (including in terms of gender) space of public culture, as it often claims to be.

Narrative Ethnography and Layered Accounts

The present article is based on my experience of the festival over 11 editions, although I draw particularly on my experience of JLF 2018 and 2019, the editions that followed the two waves of MeToo protests in India in the fall and winter of 2017 and the fall and winter of 2018, the second of which had particular significance for the English-language literary

community in the country. I use autoethnography as my primary method of research for its fundamental imagination of what the space of social science research would become if “it were closer to literature than physics, if they preferred stories rather than theories, and if they were self-consciously value-centred rather than pretending to be value-free.”² My own location in and long experience (a little over two decades) of the publishing industry in India give me an outlook that might have been denied to an outsider-researcher looking at the festival, while my experience and emotional and cultural investment in the industry, its ancillaries, and larger ecosystem, mean that if I were to turn an analytical eye to my professional world, it would never be a “dispassionate” one. I use the word “dispassionate” as something undesirable and not in the sense of “objective,” keeping in mind my hope that this article will be read and used not just by researchers looking at the literary public culture in India in the future, but by also organizers and curators of other book culture events like the JLF, or perhaps those of JLF itself.

In effect, as an autoethnographer, I “recognise the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process,” and being first a practitioner and then a researcher, I remain aware that the traditional perspective can never comfortably be mine. Autoethnography, on the other hand, allows me to “open up a wider lens” on the world that I want to examine and eschew “rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research.”³

I base my analysis on observing and conversing with attendees, delegates, speakers, and organizers about how they related with each other, the festival program, and the spaces where they interacted with each other and spoke to the audiences. I use a first-person eyewitness account at points in the paper to foreground my own experience of the event and shift to third person to establish context and report findings when needed. Since it would have been impossible for me to have attended all the relevant sessions, as many of them happen simultaneously, I also rely on photo documentation of the two editions, festival videos as well as shorter videos shared on social media, media coverage of the event, and the tweets by the Twitter handle @JLFInsider. Finally, I requested and was furnished with figures relating to participation and attendance by women in both the 2018 and 2019 editions by the festival organizers. In effect, I use a method which combines

“narrative ethnography” with “layered accounts” to provide a “thick description” of the Jaipur Literature Festival in terms of its interplay with gender, and gendered representation, particularly immediately after the MeToo movement in India.

Part of my analysis in the present article harks back to the sociological construct of the “literary field” by Pierre Bourdieu, which sees literary practices as vested in a “specific set of social agents,”—that is, authors, publishers, literary critics, and agents—and are contingent upon “rules” that have been put in place by said social agents, forming in effect a specific space which functions according to the logic of the market.⁴ While a large part of such a view plays itself out with textbook accuracy within the Indian publishing industry and the diverse literary community in the country, it fails to address in entirety the particular case of literary festivals in India, which, no matter how much they try to pose as literary events, can never just be about literary matters. Drawing upon the Habermasian idea of a “literary” public sphere, and Casanova’s exploration of “literature as a distinct domain of ideas produced in and through politics, competition and the economy at the interface between the local (national) and the global,” Giorgi’s understanding of literary festivals is more in keeping with how these events have evolved in India: “literary festivals [are] a new phase in the democratization of culture, whereby commercialization remains a fact, yet the new-found permeability of boundaries and the joy at experimentation creates new opportunities for culture-reasoning or even a critical public.”⁵ Stewart’s work on the Brisbane Literary Festival, where she sees literary festivals as representing a slice of public culture, which cannot be understood or theorized with narrow literary ideals as the primary prerequisite, helped me crystallize my own thoughts about the conundrum that JLF now faces, in terms of claiming to represent public culture without in fact doing so.⁶ The work of Simone Murray, Milicent Weber, Claire Squires, and Beth Driscoll helped me further in firming up my views about JLF as a distinct space of gendered public engagement where “literary” parameters are finding themselves increasingly powerless to “control” or “redirect” the consequences of such an engagement.⁷ The present article also makes an attempt to fill the gap created by a lack of research into JLF, aside from Per Stahlberg’s 2019 article, which focused on the important idea of inclusion/exclusion at the festival with regard to the token nod the festival makes to literature in Indian languages, and the

consequent criticism of the festival by the Hindi writers whom Stahlberg spoke to.⁸ Finally, the present article also attempts to add to the burgeoning discussion in scholarly writing on the gendered nature of literary festivals after the incident at the 2019 Sydney Writers' Festival involving Junot Diaz.⁹

The Indian Publishing Industry: An Interesting Mix of the Feudal and the Millennial

I joined the publishing industry as a copyeditor working for the New Delhi-based office of a large multinational trade publisher in 1998. This was a few years after the liberalization of Indian economic policies in 1991, which aimed at expanding the role of foreign investment in order to make the Indian economy more oriented to the global market. Arundhati Roy had just won the Booker Prize, and multinational publishing houses from the West were once again eyeing India to set up offices (the first wave of interest in India had occurred soon after Indian independence). The biggest excitement—or nervousness, depending on what your business model looked like—at that moment was about the arrival of chain bookstores, a phenomenon which after the initial fanfare never really took off in India. Twenty years on, the industry looks entirely different, and yet you turn a corner and bump into the same faces who were around two decades ago. Many other “landmark” moments such as the inauguration of online retail and the emergence of the eBook and eReaders have been anticipated and addressed in these two decades. As things stand now in the industry, we have a number of multinationals with their own offices located in India (mostly in Delhi, which has always been the hub of the book industry in the country). The BPO sector is huge and plays a major role in the profitability and incredible growth story of the Indian publishing industry over the last 20 years. Digital printing is the order of the day, and everyone is looking for better machines to make costs even more viable by printing faster than they are now. POD, or print on demand, has revolutionized the availability of the printed book once more, even though bookstores have had to radically redefine themselves in order to survive. In a developing country like India, where complete literacy still remains an unrealized goal, general and trade titles might make a lot of book news, but it is the textbooks sector that rules the roost, followed at some distance by academic books. An industry notorious for not having been able to produce any statistics for its various sector parameters got a shot in the arm in terms of how the world perceived

it with the Nielsen India Book Market Report, which valued Indian publishing at USD 3.9 million and pegged growth in the industry at an astonishing 20 percent annually.¹⁰

The three business models that generally make up the industry are, first, family-owned businesses, many of which have become as corporate in their functioning as the multinationals, even though next of kin, many of them women, necessarily form the succession plan; second, the independents, who continue to publish lists with an eye on the prevailing discourses on social justice; and third, the multinationals, many of whom came in to find a market for their expansive lists in India, but stayed to grow Indian lists as well. More recently, there have been instances where independent houses have emerged backed by substantial investment from players in other industries, and we have also seen a burgeoning trend of joint imprints between big and small publishers.

While one can safely say that there are more women in editorial teams across the industry, traditional male-bastion sectors such as finance, production, and sales remain more populated by men. CEOs who head multinational and large corporate houses are mostly men, while the independent publishing houses, which have always been a dynamic, vocal, and visible part of the industry, are mostly led by women. Across the industry, certain sectors such as Marketing and Promotions, which were earlier more male, are beginning to be populated and headed by women. Online publishing has also emerged as an important force over the last five years, and many of these platforms focus on new feminism and other identity-based solidarities, and are led by queer women, trans people, and young people belonging to communities that have hitherto been invisible within mainstream discourse. The industry is a curious mix, therefore, of the feudal and the radical.

Throwing the Lid off the Can: The MeToo Movement in India

Following the start of the MeToo movement in US after the Harvey Weinstein revelations, MeToo found its feet in India when a young scholar, Raya Sarkar, published a crowdsourced list of names of sexual harassers (LoSHA on Wikipedia) in Indian academia in the fall of 2017.¹¹ The publication of the list led to a hard-fought debate on social media about

the veracity and validity of the process that went into creating such a list, since the accusers could not be “held accountable” because they were left anonymous. This was the moment when a growing impasse between older and new feminists in India first became evident.¹² Indian academia and what happens within its rarefied realm, however, generates little interest in mainstream media, unless someone wins the Nobel Prize. It was another year, therefore, before India felt the full impact of the MeToo movement. In the fall of 2018, a large number of women in mainstream media, advertising, and Bollywood came out with allegations against a number of prominent and powerful men in these fields on social media; the PR magnate Suhel Seth, mentioned above, was one of them.¹³ The revelations were followed by an intense public discussion about the sexual violence rampant in Indian workplaces. The lid had finally been blown off, and every day a new case of one-time or sustained sexual violation arrived in all its sordid details on our social media timelines. There were resignations, some of the accused were fired by their employers, offices sat up to take cognizance of the importance of clearly enforced sexual harassment policies, and even First Information Reports were filed by the local police in some cases, sometimes even when the allegations were about incidents that occurred more than a decade ago. The JLF editions of 2018 and 2019 which followed these two critical phases of the MeToo movement in the country were compelled to acknowledge it and were affected in more ways than one by these events.

“The Kumbh Mela of Litfests”

The Jaipur Literature Festival began as a sub-event of a larger heritage festival held in Jaipur, which at some point ceased to be organized, while the literary part of the event grew into one of the biggest literary events of the world. Its venue from the beginning has been the sumptuous, if initially rescued-by-the-festival-from-going-to-seed, Diggi Palace, close to the heart of the city. In 2018, half a million people attended JLF, making it the most attended edition the festival has ever had and earning the festival branding the tagline “The Kumbh Mela of Litfests.”¹⁴ Indeed, in terms of the number of visitors, JLF is without doubt the largest literary festival in the world. But then, given the population of India, that is hardly a remarkable fact. What is more remarkable, however, is that a literary event in one of the world’s most under-literate countries¹⁵ can enjoy such scale and attention. Indeed, JLF is

now on the annual calendars of some of the greatest writers in the world, and major authors such as Margaret Atwood, Germaine Greer, Orhan Pamuk, and J.M. Coetzee have rubbed shoulders with bright-eyed schoolchildren on the grounds of the festival's resplendent venue over the last dozen years.

It is the “internationalization” that Giorgi speaks of that marks JLF, made possible to a large degree by the efforts of one of the three principal organizers, author William Dalrymple, that has established JLF as the most significant literary festival in India. This process of “internationalization” allows festival organizers both to amp up the narrative of pride in Indian literature and culture and to ensure a nod to plurality:

Internationalization strengthens these trends by confirming and at the same time undermining cultural nationalism. It confirms cultural nationalism insofar as it presupposes the existence of national literatures; at the same time, it undermines cultural nationalism by promoting plurality—of language, style but also taste or quality. Literature festivals build on this pluralism and its newly-gained legitimacy.¹⁶

Alternatively, as Stahlberg puts it in his study of JLF itself: “one may trace a common feature of international festivals—a tension between the presentation of cultural productions in particular places and at the same time presenting them as belonging within a global repertoire.”¹⁷

In the case of JLF, the tension between the desire to showcase local talent and the need to show off the visiting international constellation of writers often results in an apologetic nod to India's plurality. The festival has often been criticized for the fact that Indian cultural and linguistic plurality remains troublingly underrepresented in its sessions beyond token lip service, while local authors writing in English rule the roost.

Publishers and agents vie to have their respective star authors featured at JLF for almost a year preceding the actual event. To be in a session at JLF adds to the credibility and potential sales of any author's work. The author's own saleability is heightened, as it were. And at this point, one is not even referring to the feverish sales of featured authors' books in the festival bookstore. Critics swarm the festival as well, moving from session to

session, sharpening their pens on the audience response each panellist garners. However, voices that are backed by brands have a head-start over authors representing themselves or those represented by smaller or independent houses. This hierarchy emerges not just in the festival's programming year after year, where a select few publishing houses and authors among the small, independent or marginalized appear in rotation while the lion's share is retained by the big multinational houses and voices, as well as at the JLF bookstore, where books published by small or independent houses, or self-published, are rarely featured.

In 2014, the festival organizers introduced a business platform largely for attending book tradespeople from the country and across the world. Jaipur Bookmark, which for the first three years, took place in an entirely different venue located a short distance from Diggi Palace, was moved into the festival venue in 2018. As the JLF website claims,

Jaipur BookMark (JBM) brings together stakeholders of the book trade from across the world—publishers, literary agents, writers, translators, translation agencies and booksellers. It gives them an opportunity not just to “talk business” through relevant sessions and focused roundtables but also provides the right and fruitful atmosphere to inspire conversations and a space for one-on-one meetings and networking. This intimacy forges relationships and allows the occasional contract to be signed too.¹⁸

However, participation in this closed event is incumbent on the payment of a fairly steep registration fee, and so even the organizers confess that it is mostly attended by large and multinational publishers who already have the event on their annual calendar, as well as those who have been invited by the organizers to speak on various panels and roundtables. In order to raise funding for the event, organizers have started reaching out to visiting foreign publishing delegations. For instance, for the last five years, an Australian publishing delegation that visits the country at this time of the year, under the aegis of the Australia Arts Council, has been attending JLF and JBM. Evidently, genuine representation of the industry still eludes this “trade” event, since not only is it not regularly attended by the independent and smaller entities based in Delhi who are not invited to speak at the event, but neither is it attended by representatives of the plethora of

Indian-language publishing houses located across the country that are not interested in travelling to Jaipur to attend an event that means little to them.

Numbers

As mentioned above, half a million people attended JLF in 2018. In order to get a sense of female attendance and participation at the event, I wrote to the festival organizers. According to their figures, the proportion of women among festival attendees has grown from 35.6 percent in 2016 to 46.3 percent in 2019. For observers and industry people like myself, this is heartening and bears out what we have been saying all along: that despite a dangerously skewed sex ratio, even in India, women are reading as much as men, if not more. All the same, it has to be said that these numbers can often be misleading, since a certain number of those attending JLF cannot be classified as readers, and are essentially there just to hang out: take selfies, attend the sessions that feature Bollywood stars, and spend time at the large number of cafes, restaurants, and bars located at the rear of the festival venue. The 2019 numbers are interesting though because this was one year that no big film stars were featured in the program, and one can therefore conclude that there were more avid readers attending the event. In any case, each of the seven venues at the festival location runs at full capacity for each and every session on all five days. Thus, while not all the people attending are readers, most certainly are. In such a scenario, the almost 50 percent attendance by women at the festival takes on added importance.

JLF Edition	Total number of JLF panelists	Number of women JLF panelists	Number of Indian women	Total number of JBM panelists	Number of women JBM panelists	Number of Indian women
2018	389	168	108	129	61	34
2019	364	150	103	133	76	55

Source: Jaipur Literature Festival, 2019.

As for panellists participating in the festival program, the total number went down between 2018 and 2019, perhaps for the first time since JLF began in 2007, and many attributed this to impact of the MeToo movement. The number of women panellists at JLF too went down between the same two

years. The number of Indian women on the panels, however, largely remained the same between the two years.

As for JBM, there has been a jump in the participation of women from the Indian publishing community in the event, as is clear from the table above. Roughly half the panels are still made up of men, though, which is interesting considering (and as mentioned before) that the editorial and promotions sectors of the publishing industry in India are primarily populated by women. In effect, it can be said that JLF and JBM remain popular with the (mostly male) CEOs in Indian publishing, unlike many other literary festivals elsewhere in the country.

In an era of growing worldwide dissent against the phenomenon of “manels,” or panels made up only of men, across cultural and intellectual fields, the number of Indian women panellists at JLF and JBM acquires even greater significance. This is even more notable in the context of a month-long media study of 28 TV channels in India undertaken by members of the Network of Women in Media India in early 2019, which found that only 13.6 percent women are part of panel discussions on Indian TV news channels (NWMI 2019).¹⁹ These findings are in line with global trends concerning panel discussions in news media, where women’s representation is either totally missing or minimal. In as many as 65 percent of the total TV news programs monitored, there wasn’t even a single woman in the panel discussions held during primetime news and talk shows on leading TV channels of India. Looked at against such a background, the fairly equitable division of women and men attendees and participants at JLF sends the right message about the greater access to equal visibility across the gender spectrum in the literary sphere. Numbers, however, show only part of the picture, as we are well aware, and it was clear that the 2018 edition of the festival, which was held just a few months after Raya Sarkar’s list, would be observed closely by feminists across India, who wanted to see the organizers’ ability to respond to the moment.

2018 Edition

Since its beginning, JLF, while being hailed as the most significant literary event to emerge out of South Asia, was plagued by local criticism regarding their wooing of prominent men in the literary and ancillary fields who had a

reputation for being “mansplainers” and for panels where even one man would hold forth for an unacceptable length of time and often talk down to his women co-panelists. Once the MeToo movement escalated and exposés began emerging on a daily basis on social media, many of the same men were unsurprisingly accused as perpetrators of sexual misconduct.

In the 2017 edition, for instance, JLF had been at the eye of another controversy when it asked the prominent adman Suhel Seth to moderate a panel on mansplaining. As it played out, the conversation was reduced to the women panellists having to work hard to put the moderator in his place repeatedly. It was a result that the organizers should have expected. As the *DailyO* reported,

As many women in the audience wondered, what was Seth doing in the panel, Gupta amused them all by calling the December 16 Nirbhaya gang-rape, as the “famous bus rape.” Most were too dumbfounded to react. Exactly why Gupta asked Seth to respond why “toxic masculinity exists,” who goes on a mansplaining spree.²⁰

In its reporting on this event, Womensweb.in said exactly what many of us in the audience were thinking:

The most hotly anticipated session at the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) which concluded yesterday—at least among the people I follow on Twitter and Facebook—was the panel on “Manelists, Misogyny and Mansplaining.” Unfortunately, the reason was not positive: it was the inclusion of known mansplainer and anti-feminist Suhel Seth in the panel. Why invite him to such a panel? Probably to court controversy, to make sure the panel is talked about, that there are “good” quotes. All of which objectives were achieved. But if the JLF organisers are actually interested in misogyny, maybe instead of inviting a misogynist to create shallow controversy, they could have given more space to the other voices on the panel.²¹

Unfortunately, this criticism has been levelled at more than just one session in one edition of the festival. As Youth Ki Awaaz reported, referring to another important recent panel,

Mansplaining at the Jaipur Literature Festival manages to make headlines nearly every year, and this year was no

different. Vir Sanghvi, an Indian columnist and television journalist, was called out for his rude behaviour when he was moderating a panel with Kota Neelima, Sarah Raven, and Lathika George on “Glimpses from ‘Food for Thought.’” The women on the panel had written entire books about gender issues and the political climate in India, and had to sit through Vir Sanghvi, who was supposed to be moderating the session, constantly interrupting them, undermining their knowledge on subjects they are experts at, and mansplaining his way through concepts and ideas they had published books about. His behaviour was unexpected, but unsurprising at the same time. It has become a trend at JLF for women speakers or moderators to be talked over, talked at, and ignored by their male counterparts. They have to struggle to be a part of any conversation being had, no matter how qualified and knowledgeable about their subject they may be.²²

Others felt that the status the festival had garnered, as a representative to the rest of the world of India’s literary community, was the reason that the festival could not take an ambivalent stand on the matter.

Many in the literary circles feel the benchmark that JLF has itself set over the course of its journey, its coming of age and gradual but distinct shift from controversies to substance in the recent years, its fast spreading presence in the international arena, calls for a more substantial stand on its part, as far as MeToo is concerned.²³

In such an atmosphere of continuing critique about manels and tokenism, the JLF organizers decided to focus the 2018 editor’s concluding debate on the question, “Do Men Still Have it Easy?”. During the debate, powerful women speakers such as writers Bee Rowlatt, Pinky Anand, and Ruchira Gupta managed to put contrarian columnist and popular novelist Manu Joseph in his place when he raised the #NotAllMen placard. They were ably supported by journalist and novelist Sandip Roy and moderator Namita Bhandare, the latter a powerhouse in the MeToo movement herself. The 2018 edition of the festival had earlier featured the legendary novelist Nayantara Sahgal, who has always been known to wear her politics on her sleeve. She spoke fearlessly about the state of affairs in the nation as well as about issues of caste and gender and how they intersect in modern India.

Another powerful voice on a terrific panel during the 2018 edition was that of Korean investigative journalist and writer Suki Kim who had us all nodding in unison when she said: “When men go undercover, it’s called investigative journalism. I went undercover and it was called a memoir.” Given the fact that New Feminism had begun to make its presence felt fiercely on and offline particularly from the latter half of 2017 onwards, young observers and participants wanted more. They were looking for genuine inclusivity, not just a nod to the times, and JLF 2018 made a valiant attempt to rise to the occasion. As the Youth ki Awaaz reported:

The goal of the festival should be to be a safe space for people of any gender, race, or religion, to be inclusive, to not only be tolerant but also accepting, to be what people expect it to be. The powerful female writers, filmmakers, and journalists in this year’s line-up of speakers was a great way to start, and the several discussions that were had about the issue of gender equality and feminism at the festival were a huge step forward for our country. Clearly, more men are starting to understand and support the feminist movement, and that is progress. Bee Rowlett ended the closing debate at the Jaipur Literature Festival with a quote by Mary Wollstonecraft that seems quite fitting: “I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves.”²⁴

Petition

In October 2018, the editor and writer Rajni George floated a petition on Change.org entitled “Jaipur Literature Festival: please support MeToo India, stand against sexual harassment.” Part of the petition read as follows:

As India’s largest and most recognised literature festival, we believe JLF is ideally placed to take the lead in addressing this *urgent issue* To this end, we ask that the festival takes a firm stand by supporting MeToo, issuing a statement declaring zero tolerance of sexual harassment. We ask that you ensure that those who have been credibly named are not invited to attend this year (if invited already, to rescind the invitation). We ask JLF to provide a forum for redressal, should complaints arise within the space of the festival this year and in the future.²⁵

The “urgent issue” the petition referred to was the second wave of the MeToo movement, which had emerged online in the early days of October in India. As mentioned earlier in the article, unlike the first wave back in late 2017, when it was mostly the scholarly community that had been affected, this time women came out on Twitter and Facebook and later on Instagram to break the silence about the sexual violence, violation, and harassment they had faced at the hands of prominent members of the entertainment, media, literary, and arts communities within and outside of the workplace, in big cities and small towns throughout the country. The petition asked the Festival to take a stand against this history of misconduct. And there was a more direct connection here as well. A number of the “prominent” men who were accused that fall, both from the literary community and outside it, had been longstanding speakers, guests, and “heavyweights” at JLF, Suhel Seth among them. The petition was signed by 1,100 people, mostly from the publishing and literary communities. It was featured prominently in important dailies and platforms across the country, such as *Midday*, *Mint*, *Business Standard*, *Scroll*, and *The Wire*. Within a few days, the JLF organizing committee responded by saying that they were taking a firm stand against sexual harassment. They wrote:

The Festival organisers have always worked and continue to work towards creating a safe, protected and conducive environment for all its attendees which includes women, the elderly and children.... The Festival unequivocally condemns all sexual harassment and gender discriminatory behaviour and supports what the MeToo movement stands for.... Our speakers list has been completed and does not feature writers who have been named currently in the MeToo movement.²⁶

The petitioners then wrote back asking for details of the systems the festival would be putting in place to ensure their commitment to the safety of their speakers, delegates, and attendees in this regard. It remained to be seen how the 2019 Edition would choose to address the relevant issues at this point.

2019 Edition

The second wave of the MeToo movement made it evident that sharper discussion and genuine redressal were both vital and could no longer be glossed over, as workplaces in India had done for generations. As then

Books Editor of Scroll.in, Harsimran Gill wrote in his article about the import of the MeToo revelations for the Indian literary community,

Popular literary events and festivals—which are thronged by a giddy mix of authors, editors, publicists, journalists and hordes of enthusiastic readers—can be vulnerable spaces particularly for those who do not occupy powerful spots in the literary and publishing hierarchy. Besides, they serve as opportunities for authors to consolidate their reputations and popularity. Some incidents of harassment involving authors that have come to light have taken place at literary events. Some of the figures against whom allegations have been made are regulars on the circuit, most prominently at the “greatest literary show on earth”—the Jaipur Literature Festival.²⁷

In keeping with this understanding, the JLF 2019 edition announced a “stellar lineup” of women speakers. As it turned out, the edition had a slew of panels featuring no men at all (perhaps for the first time at JLF), and many of them were focused on topics other than gender. As I noted elsewhere:

This was also the JLF with the maximum number of panels made up of only women—talking about more than just gender. There was never a more heartening sight than the panel on Mughal India with authors Parvati Sharma, Ira Mukhoty, Audrey Truschke and Rana Safvi, with the venue full to the rafters, and people queuing outside to get in. And, of course, those magnificent conversations with Sohaila Abdulali, author of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape*, and Mary Beard, author of *Women and Power*; there was no place to stand, let alone sit, in both these sessions. Two more outstanding all-women sessions were the ones on mental health and on millennials, both featuring the veteran child psychotherapist Shelja Sen, who is always a pleasure to listen to.²⁸

The big-ticket Front Lawns session at JLF 2019 featured not a (male) Bollywood personality or a popular (male) politician as had happened countless times before, but feminist icon Germaine Greer. Bee Rowlatt, a festival favourite from the year before, engaged her in a terrific conversation, in which she did not shy away from putting the Great Greer on the spot concerning her recent views on MeToo, which had come under

fire from younger feminists. I reported elsewhere on a particularly important moment during the conversation: “My takeaway moment from that session was when a young schoolgirl asked Greer a question about sons being favoured even in this era. She responded to Greer’s rather bland answer by saying, ‘But now girls are the same as boys, na?’ A deafening cheer went up from the audience.”²⁹

The festival has been known throughout its decade-long life for new controversies every year, and it seems appropriate to the time that the most important controversy of the 2019 edition involved members of the trans community in India³⁰ and a woman author. In late 2018, the first book on female-to-male transgender people, or the transmasculine community, in India was published by Penguin Random House India, authored by journalist Nandini Krishnan. As the jacket matter of the book claimed, the book aimed to “burrow deep into the prejudices encountered by India’s transmen, the complexities of hormonal transitions and sex reassignment surgery, issues of social and family estrangement, and [to examine] whether socioeconomic privilege makes a difference [to them].” The book was entirely based on a series of interviews with Indian transmen from across the country, and understandably, the literary and publishing community, particularly those like me who had been engaged in LGBTQ writing and publishing for some time, were looking forward to reading it. Within weeks of its launch, however, transmen across the country, including many who had been interviewed, were up in arms protesting the book and the liberties its author seemed to have taken. As well-known transman activist Gee Imaan Semmalar wrote in his caustic review:

This problematic portrayal of trans men by Nandini Krishnan in her book has been strongly criticised by trans men, many of whom generously lent their voices to the book in good faith The book, apart from being a thinly veiled ethnographic account replete with caste prejudices and transphobia, makes factually incorrect statements The author for the rest of the book transforms into a detective constantly viewing and describing our bodies/gender expressions and giving her own unsolicited opinions on how “feminine” or “masculine” we are, with a generous topping of caste prejudices.³¹

What made the situation far worse was that the book was fronted by a Preface by Manu Joseph (referred to above as having featured in the MeToo closing debate of JLF 2018), who is described by many as an anti-feminist. Although the author responded to the critique immediately and without shying away, there was no word on the controversy from her large multinational publisher. Ultimately, there were questions about whether the author would turn up for the JLF panels for which she had been slated, one of which was due to be moderated by me. The day before the panel, I was informed that members of the trans community had reached out to the festival organizers asking for a slot on the panels featuring Nandini Krishnan but had been refused. At the panel that I moderated, after the readings by the panellists were over, and in response to questions posed about the critique by myself and her other co-panelists, the author defended herself and made it clear that she believed no apology was required on her part. In response, noted feminist and publisher Urvashi Butalia, who was on this panel, made the important point that in this era of marginalized voices finally receiving representation, it was problematic that the first book about a hitherto invisible community on the gender spectrum like that of the transmen of India had been written by a cis woman. The rest of the Q & A session passed without further controversy, although on other panels the author was quite blatantly questioned about her motivation for asking Manu Joseph to write the Preface to the book.

It was amply evident by this time that the festival was not going to be able to just pay lip service to “adequate” gender representation anymore, and would have to add to the discourse in a more substantial and focused manner. The controversy also indicated to many of us that the feminist movement in the country was certainly not dead, as many older feminists would have us believe. On the other hand, the movement had grown to become one of feminismS—plural, with a capital S. It was now a movement of multiple voices, where queer people, trans people, Dalits, Adivasis, and other minorities like the Muslim community of India had decided to band together in solidarity. In other words, the movement was no longer the stronghold of privileged, urban, upper-caste, upper-class Hindu women, and the JLF, a prominent festival with the capacity for broad outreach, was finally waking up to this fact.

Gender Roundtable at JBM 2019

Another important session at the JLF in 2019 was the Gender in Publishing roundtable, held within the JBM section of the festival. Led by senior publishers and attended by senior and younger members of the industry, the roundtable raised and discussed important points such as offline as well as online harassment in the form of social media trolling. It also considered the longstanding “glass ceiling” issue, since many independent publishing houses were now led by women, as well as the male bastions that are the marketing and sales departments of publishing houses, and the important concern of authors being named as sexual harassers.

An editorial director of a Hindi publishing house spoke about how being part of different language traditions within the publishing industry problematized its gendered nature further. Others at the roundtable agreed that whether houses were big or small, women and queer people had at some time or the other faced difficult situations at the workplace, and were mostly left to deal with these situations on their own, as grievance redressal mechanisms had only started being put in place recently. The roundtable discussed the need for a support group and ended by affirming that discussions such as these, as well as workshops and regular meetings, need to keep happening so that younger members of the industry feel free to talk about the challenges they face. The roundtable was important in the sense that it was the first of its kind to be held at an industry event in the Indian book trade, and thus it indicated the growing importance of women’s voices in that sector.

Conclusion

Millicent Weber writes of the “influence on festivals ... of tensions and conflicts that structure the literary fields in which those festivals are situated” and further describes literary festivals as “a microcosmic replication of the literary field as well as an active element within it.”³² In this sense, JLF 2019 can be considered a truly representative microcosm of the literary community in India, where multiple voices were finally entering the spotlight and jostling for their rightful place. It must be said, however, that the festival organizers were scrambling to respond to and struggling to keep pace with these changing currents, rather than taking a powerful visible

stance on the issues. It was equally clear that much of the transformative momentum around the discussions and words being spoken at the festival was arising organically, something no organizer could have predicted or controlled or curated.

A few concluding observations focusing on JLF 2020 would bear out the prediction that the highs of 2019 in terms of more equal representation across panels and programming turned out to be mere tokenism. In the run-up to the 2020 edition, immediately following the unveiling of the program details, well-known Pune-based editor and journalist Vinutha Mallya shared the following FB post:

Vinutha Mallya

...

7 Jan at 1:39 pm • 🌐

Dear Jaipur Literature Festival, glad to know you will "celebrate the vast bounty of Indian languages" this year.

With a clutch of Rajasthani and Hindi writers; a panel discussion featuring three North East writers (who happen to be more than just representatives of languages); a panel discussion on Sanskrit (with academic scholars); readings by one Assamese and one Malayalam writer.

Out of more than 300 speakers.

I don't know if more names are coming on the list, but the press release I've received tells me this is how the vast bounty of languages is being celebrated.

Bombast much?

Like

Comment

Share

JLF 2020 also followed the start of a widespread national movement against a discriminatory citizenship bill made into a constitutional law by the current Indian government. Spearheaded by women and students from universities across India, it is perhaps the most important political movement many of us have seen in our lifetime, and the 2020 edition of the festival came under tremendous criticism when a flash mob consisting of five young women and men shouted slogans outside one of the program venues and were manhandled as they were led out by festival security, local police, and festival volunteers.³³ As a widely circulated article reporting on the edition said:

An Indian author (who preferred anonymity) attending the JLF for the first time, as an invited speaker, told *BLink*, “A lot of us (writers) are very uncomfortable about Zee sponsoring the festival... I was reluctant [to take part in it] but was told, ‘Everyone is using this opportunity, why not you?’ After seeing the way the (anti-CAA) protesters were beaten up, I don’t think I’ll be returning next year.”³⁴

Finally, one of the suggestions made in the petition submitted to the festival organizers by Rajni George in 2018, which we all signed, was that in the 2020 edition, the festival would have visible signage making its stance against sexual violence clear. Not a single such sign could be found at this year’s festival edition.

In conclusion, then, it is this article’s contention that in order to truly represent the contemporary public culture in India even as it continues to “bring world literature to the country,” the organizers of JLF need to take a long, hard look at how genuine their engagement is with the national (and not just Delhi-based) publishing industry, including the literary community of the entire nation, not just in terms of regions, but in terms of marginalized voices that have hitherto remained invisible or unheard. They also have to understand that this must be deep and sustained engagement, and that a token nod is simply not going to be enough. There is an interesting discussion occurring at present among women in Indian publishing about how diversity in our offices will also logically lead to more diverse publishing. For JLF to be a genuinely representational site of public culture, perhaps it is time for similar ruminations among its organizers.

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Notes

¹ See the video here: <https://www.facebook.com/rajrishi91/videos/2219579788319551/>. And for more details on the sexual allegations against Seth, see Media Scanner, 2018, “#MeToo: Suhel Seth Disappears From Public Eye As Allegations Of Sexual Harassment Pile Up,” 20 October, available at <https://newscentral24x7.com/metoo-suhel-seth-disappears-from-public-eye-as-allegations-of-sexual-harassment-pile-up/>.

² Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, 2011, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36, no. 4 (138): 2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ As cited in Alain Viola and Michael Moriarty, 2000, “The Theory of the Literary Field and the Situation of the First Modernity,” *Paragraph*, January 2, PROJECT MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/198415.

⁵ Liana Giorgi, 2011. “Between Tradition, Vision and Imagination: The Public Sphere of Literature Festivals.” SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 1781241. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, 7, 17.

⁶ Cori Stewart, 2013, “The Rise and Rise of Writers’ Festivals,” In *A Companion to Creative Writing*, edited by Graeme Harper, 263–77. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118325759.ch17>.

⁷ Beth Driscoll, 2014, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (Chapter 5 is on literary festivals); Beth Driscoll, 2015, “Sentiment Analysis and the Literary Festival Audience.” *Continuum* 29 (6): 861–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1040729>; Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires, 2018, “Serious Fun: Gaming the Book Festival.” *Memoires Du Livre/ Studies in Book Culture*, vol. 9, no. 2; Millicent Weber, 2015, “Conceptualizing Audience Experience at the Literary Festival.” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29 (1): 84–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2014.986058>; Simone Murray and Millicent Weber, 2017, “‘Live and Local?’: The Significance of Digital Media for Writers’ Festivals,” *Convergence* 23 (1): 61–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856516677531>.

⁸ Per Stahlberg, 2019, “The Jaipur Literature Festival and its critics: World literature as social practice”, *Anthropology and Humanism*, Vol. 44, no. 1, 2, ISSN 1559-9167, online ISSN 1548-1409, DOI: [10.1111/anhu.12228](https://doi.org/10.1111/anhu.12228).

⁹ At the 2018 edition of the Sydney Writers' Festival, acclaimed Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz was challenged while in the middle of a session by another writer in the audience, by writer and festival speaker Zinzi Celmmmons to clarify if his (then) recent *New Yorker* article on being [raped as an 8-year-old boy](#) was published in anticipation of allegations of sexual misconduct against him that might be on the verge of emerging in the public space. She also asked him if he wanted to apologise for the way he had behaved with her six years ago. Following this incident, Diaz withdrew from the festival, and a number of other women writers came out on social media with their accounts of problematic encounters with the writer. Read my article on the incident here: Arpita Das, 2018, "Fall of Junot Diaz: No one, alas, more oppressive than the oppressed," May 15, available at <https://www.dailyo.in/variety/junot-diaz-women-sexual-harassment-authors-writing-abuse-new-yorker/story/1/24025.html>.

¹⁰ For more on this, please see Vinutha Mallya's eye-opening article on the Nielson report: Vinutha Mallya, 2015, "Nielsen Values Indian Publishing at \$3.9 Billion," October 21 available at <https://publishingperspectives.com/2015/10/nielsen-values-indian-publishing-at-3-9-billion/>.

¹¹ For more on this, see Vijay Parshad's interview with Raya Sarkar: Vijay Parshad, 2017, "India's Me Too Movement: an Interview With Raya Sarkar," October 29, available at <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/10/29/indias-me-too-movement-an-interview-with-raya-sarkar/>.

¹² For more on the impasse between the older and new feminists in India, please see Nivedita Menon, 2017, "STATEMENT BY FEMINISTS ON FACEBOOK CAMPAIGN TO "NAME AND SHAME,"" October 24, available at <https://kafila.online/2017/10/24/statement-by-feminists-on-facebook-campaign-to-name-and-shame/> and the response to this article: Maitreyee Shukla & Asmita Kundu, 2017, "Et tu 'Feminists?': A Response to the Kafila Signatories," October 28, available at https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9216:et-tu-feminists-a-response-to-the-kafila-signatories&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132, as well as an analysis of the debate and the widening impasse between the feminists: Gita Chadha, 2017, "Towards Complex Feminist Solidarities after the List-Statement," December 14, available at <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/towards-complex-feminist-solidarities-list-statement>.

¹³ The allegations against Suhel Seth were some of the most intensely followed at this time, and they led to him being fired by the powerful industrial group, Tata; for more on this, see here: *Firstpost*, 2018. #MeToo in India: Suhel Seth named in sexual harassment allegations by multiple women, October 18, available at <https://www.firstpost.com/india/metoo-in-india-suhel-seth-named-in-sexual-harassment-allegations-by-multiple-women-5352921.html>.

¹⁴ The Kumbh Mela is the largest faith-based gathering anywhere in the world. Over 48 days tens of millions people gather in a city in the northern plains of India, Allahabad, to bathe at the point of confluence of the historic Ganga and Yamuna rivers and the mythical river Saraswati situated here.

¹⁵ With the second largest population in the world per the 2011 Census of India, India ranked 168th out of 234 countries in terms of literacy. The UN further puts the country's education index ranking at 145th out of 191 countries.

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- ¹⁶ Liana Giorgi, “Between Tradition, Vision and Imagination,” 8.
- ¹⁷ Stahlberg, “The Jaipur Literature Festival and its critics: World literature as social practice”, *Anthropology and Humanism*, 2.
- ¹⁸ <http://jaipurbookmark.org/>.
- ¹⁹ The Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) 2019, “Panels or manels? Desperately seeking women in Indian TV news debates: Report on a study on the representation of women in Indian TV news channels”, February, available at http://www.nwmindia.org/images/articles_pdf/Manel%20report%202019.pdf.
- ²⁰ *DailyO*, 2017, “JLF had a session on mansplaining with Suhel Seth doing exactly that to panellists”, available at <https://www.dailyo.in/variety/suhel-seth-jaipur-literature-festival-toxic-masculinity-bangalore-molestation/story/1/15251.html>.
- ²¹ *Women’s Web*, 2017, “JLF diaries: Inviting a noted mansplainer to a panel on mansplaining is a troll move”, January 24, available at <https://www.womensweb.in/2017/01/panel-on-mansplaining-jlf/>.
- ²² Tara Adiga, 2018, “How can JLF be progressive when sexism lurks in the shadows of Diggi Palace?” *Youth ki Awaaz*, available at <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2018/09/the-jaipur-literature-festival-2018-breaking-down-the-issue-of-sexism-at-the-festival/>.
- ²³ *Business Standard* 2018, “Double standards in JLF’s stand on MeToo?” October 18, available at https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/double-standards-in-jlf-s-stand-on-metoo-118101800698_1.html.
- ²⁴ Adiga, “JLF diaries”.
- ²⁵ The petition and updates therein can be found here: <https://www.change.org/p/jaipur-literature-festival-jaipur-literature-festival-please-support-metoo-india-stand-against-sexual-harassment>.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Harsimran Gill, 2018, “MeToo: Litfest organisers, publishers are being pushed to respond to charges against writers”, *Scroll.in*, October 22, available at <https://scroll.in/article/898884/metoo-litfest-organisers-publishers-are-being-pushed-to-respond-to-charges-against-writers>.
- ²⁸ Arpita Das, 2019, “A JLF Edition Unlike Itself,” *The Hindu Business Line*, February 1, available at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/know/a-jlf-edition-unlike-itself/article26147727.ece>.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Members of the transgender community in India are generally referred to as hijras, aravanis, kothis or kinnars. They have traditionally earned their living from street performances and sex work. However, over the last decade and a half, many prominent members of the community have become LGBTQ activists, entered political life, and

filled important public positions in fields as diverse as education and development work. The more visible among the community are the men-to-women transgenders. The women-to-men transgenders have generally been invisible in society as well as activism until very recently.

³¹ Gee Imaan Semmalar, 2019, “Okay, Nandini Krishnan, I read your book ‘Invisible Men’ and here is why it is offensive”, *The News Minute*, January 9, available at <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/okay-nandini-krishnan-i-read-your-book-invisible-men-and-here-s-why-it-s-offensive-94778>.

³² Millicent Weber, 2018, *Literary Festivals and Contemporary Book Culture*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 13.

³³ For a report on the incident, see *The Wire*, 2020, “Anti-CAA Protesters at JLF Detained, Organisers Say They Were Asked to Leave,” January 27, available at <https://thewire.in/ri-ghs/rajasthan-anti-cao-protesters-jlf-detained>.

³⁴ Aditya Mani Jha, 2020, “The Festival and its Funder,” *The Hindu Business Line*, January 30, available at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/blink/read/the-troubling-association-of-zee-and-jlf/article30693362.ece>.

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