

By **Nadir Hassan**

At first glance, the second iteration of the Karachi Literature Festival (KLF) was a rerun of the first, with the same venue and the same authors talking about the same books. A closer look at the programme, however, showed that this was a continuation, not a retread. Sure, most of the authors from last year were making a repeat appearance but the line-up had more than tripled. With more than 100 authors on the slate, there was something for everyone even if, with three sessions running simultaneously, it wasn't possible to get more than a sampling of the panels on offer. If the KLF continues growing at this rate, it may soon need to add another day to its schedule.

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If there is one thing the KLF 2011 showed it is that there is no space safe from politics in Pakistan. Whether it is because our authors are all political by nature or politics is so ingrained in our DNA that we demand it even in literary settings. Some of the most popular and heated sessions revolved around politics.

Things got particularly contentious in a session titled "Reimagining Pakistan" where the three panelists, Ayesha Siddiqi, Tahira Abdullah and Maleeha Lodhi, all presented competing

visions for the direction Pakistan should pursue. Lodhi, ever the diplomat, unlike the two other panelists, wanted to concentrate on some of the positives that are still present in Pakistan. The moderator, journalist Omar Warraich, and the other two panelists felt that this was an attempt to bury the intrinsic problems that plague the country and pointed that out to Lodhi. From the audience, former minister Javed Jabbar twice asked the moderator to allow Lodhi to speak and defended her point of view. This was a rare note of incivility in the otherwise fraternal festival but, given the air of hostility that surrounded the session, it was to Jabbar's credit that the next day, while he was moderating a talk by Basharat Peer, he publicly apologised to Warraich for his tone.

Melancholic agreement was on the menu at "Taking Stock: Where is Pakistan Now" with panelists Zahid Hussain, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Nasim Zehra and Ahmed Rashid all providing similarly dire prognoses for the country. Moderator Khaled Ahmed echoed many of the same concerns. Particular attention was paid to the outpouring of support for Salmaan Taseer's killer Mumtaz Qadri. It seemed like all five of the experienced journalists and columnists had been stunned to discover that Pakistani society was, in many ways, even more poisonous than they'd believed. Hoodbhoy made the particularly pertinent point that the battle against extremism could not be won over without having the army on board. He believed that there had been a slight shift in the army's attitude towards the Taliban and that this would have to be encouraged and nurtured. Zehra called for publicly debating extremist elements and defended having a member of an extremist group on her television show on those grounds.

Even some panels that had star-studded literary figures as panelists couldn't avoid remarking on the political atmosphere. That was the point of the session "Literature in the Age of Extremism," which was moderated by Raza Rumi and included Zaheda Hina, Madeeha Gauhar and Fahmida Riaz among its panelists. Hina perhaps best summed up how it's impossible to divorce literature, or indeed any art, from politics in Pakistan today when she said, "In these times, it is difficult to be the voice of truth." She went on to argue that it was a writer's job to take on the mantle of justice and truth and to be at the forefront of the battle against extremism. While not completely agreeing with Hina, Gauhar and Riaz also saw a special role for writers in society. Gauhar got the biggest applause line of the session when she said, "It is not the Taliban in the tribal areas that is the only problem. It is also the Taliban within us." A session on Sufism in Pakistan was also filled with similar laments for how Pakistan's cultural tradition was being slowly obliterated by elements who warped religion for their ideological aims.

For those who had their fix of politics, respite was found in the gravitas of Sara Suleri and Aamer Hussein. Their discussion was enlightening, fascinating and even funny. Suleri explained why she dislikes the word “memoir” preferring instead to think of herself as something akin to a personal historian, someone who presents her life and that of her family with unflinching honesty. She illustrated the point with an anecdote about her father who, after reading what Suleri had written about him, said that he hopes God takes it easy on him on Judgment Day since he’s already been judged in his lifetime by his daughter. Hussein was equally illuminating about the writing process, translation and inspiration. He also voiced his regret that he had never learned his father tongue, Sindhi, despite having mastered many Pakistani and international languages.

If there was one celebrity at KLF, it was author Mohammed Hanif. His talk with Sadia Shepard was fascinating even for those who have been over-exposed to Hanif. Spending less time on *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, he instead reeled off joke after joke on his painful writing process, the time he spent teaching in Palestine and gave tantalising hints about his second novel. Hanif also read out extracts from an essay about the different places he’s lived in Karachi (which was also published in the January 2011 issue of *Newsline*) and patiently answered many questions from audience members.

Hanif was also among the many authors seen milling around the café area, talking to attendees and signing autographs. With a crowd that approached a thousand, the popularity of these writers is a sign that the Karachi Literature Festival is here to stay, and may even have outgrown its current venue.