



MATHRUBHUMI INTERNATIONAL
FESTIVAL OF LETTERS 2023



A century of thinking ahead

MBIFL'23
MATHRUBHUMI INTERNATIONAL
FESTIVAL OF LETTERS

DAILY BULLETIN
ISSUE 01

02 FEBRUARY
THURSDAY, 2023



Time to Polish
our
literary taste

PAGE 3



Ink-redible
celebration of the
written word

PAGE 4



Unveiling
Oman in
transition

PAGE 6

Word- weaving cultural connections

Unlock your creative spirit and dive into a vibrant world of literature and culture at the amazing Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters, celebrating a century of inspiring stories



Gain unique access to everything innovative and fresh in the world of literature. Explore the latest trends in prose, fiction, poetry and children's literature, all in one spot. Encounter your favorite authors and connect with burgeoning writers. Engage in conversation, exchange ideas and spark debate. Revel in dance, music and good food.

An invitation
to a spellbinding

adventure, the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters (MBIFL) summons all aficionados of literature. The event promotes an appreciation of different cultures and builds bridges across countries and communities — through the power of literature. Following a hiatus of two years due to the pandemic, the festival is now primed to enchant word lovers with its irresistible allure.

This year, MBIFL marks the centenary of its organizer, Mathrubhumi, India's pride. Established in 1923, this newspaper has been a powerful force behind India's journey to freedom and has consistently pushed for progressive changes in Kerala, safeguarding the values left behind by its founders.

Curated by writers Sabin Iqbal and M. P. Surendran, this year's edition has the theme: 'Shadows of history and lights of the future'.

This edition has an impressive list of speakers from abroad, including Abdulrazak Gurnah, Nobel laureate; Shehan Karunatilaka, the 2022 Booker Prize winner; Sjón, Icelandic poet; Jennifer Mackenzie, Australian poet; Malachi Edwin Vethamani, Emeritus Professor at the University of Nottingham and writer; Lee Seok Ho from South Korea; Futhi Ntshingila, Pietermaritzburg-born writer; Rasa Bugavicute-Pece, Latvian playwright; Beatriz Chivite Ezkieta, Spain-born writer; Niall Griffiths, English novelist;

Megan Angharad Hunter, Welsh author; Archil Kikodze, Georgian litterateur; Raquel Santanera, Catalan poet; Avrina Prabhala Joslin, Prague-born curator, Carlos Fonseca Suarez, Costa Rican writer and academic; Christian Kamil, Swedish diplomat; Banashri Bose Harrison, diplomat; Jacob Dalborg, Senior Advisor at the Helsinki School of Economics; and Mateo García Elizondo, writer and grandson of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

The list of speakers includes voices that make India proud such as Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Sudha Murthy,

Kabir Bedi, Mallika Sarabhai, Sudeep Sen, Suneetha Balakrishnan, T. M. Krishna, Sudha Varghese, Anita Nair, Shobhaa De, Josy Joseph, Nirmala Govindarajan, Priya Balasubramanian, Sagarika Ghose, Damodar Mauzo, Divya Dutta, Anindita Ghose, Anjana Menon, Anuja Chandramouli, Anupama Raju, Binoo K John, Karuna Ezara Parikh, Kevin Missal, Kiran Manral, Manreet Sodhi Someshwar, Rebecca Vedavathy, Shreekumar Varma, Rochelle Potkar, Aditi Krishnakumar, Kannan Sundaram, Biswajit Jha, Geeta Ramanujam, Jaishree Misra, Shajahan Madampat, Saad Bin Jung, Dr Alka Pande, Sreeduth S. Pillai, Peggy Mohan, Tanuj Solanki, P. K. Yasser Arafath, Preeti Das, Shobha Tharoor Srinivasan, Ashwani Kumar, Makarand R. Paranjape, Mani Rao, Jerry Pinto, Kalki Subramaniam, Sonnet Mondal, Milee Ashwarya, S. Prasannarajan, Kirti Azad, Meena T. Pillai, K. M. Seethi, Chinmay Tumbe, Aanchal Malhotra, Vivaan Shah, Vinod K. Jose, Vasudhendra, Varsha Das, Vani Mahesh, Sridala Swami, Sneha Shah, Sidharth Jain, Sara Rai, Ranbir Sidhu, Parmesh Shahani, Nilanjana Roy, Nandita Bose, Mahua Moitra, Mita Kapur, Meghna Pant, Manu Bhattathiri and Khyrunnisa.

A delegation of litterateurs from Poland will enhance cross-cultural dialogue at the festival. The list of speakers includes the who's who of Malayalam literature.

The 2023 edition invites you to explore the theme of 'Shadows of History, Lights of the Future'. Together, we will embark on a journey through time, uncovering the secrets of the past and illuminating the paths to a better future. Through a series of events and discussions, we will explore how the lessons of history can be used to inform today's decisions and create a brighter tomorrow. We will reflect on the successes and failures of our ancestors and use them to create a brighter future. By looking to the shadows of history and the lights of the future, we can gain insight into how to create a more hopeful and prosperous future for ourselves and for generations to come. ▶



■ MBIFL CHAIRMAN'S NOTE

Illuminating the past to light the way forward

• M. V. Shreyams Kumar

In a world plagued by ecological degradation and political turmoil, what is the relevance of a literature festival?

In these troubled times, we find ourselves beset on all sides by threats to the very foundations of our existence. The very air we breathe, the water we drink, the earth beneath our feet — all are under siege. Our rights and freedoms, the very pillars of democracy, are under attack. A deluge of misinformation, propaganda and deceit floods our senses, drowning out the truth. Amidst this chaos, we are called upon to navigate a labyrinth of crisis and turmoil, where every step may lead us deeper into the abyss.

At the Lviv Book Forum, a festival held in the Ukrainian city in 2022 in defiance of the Russian invasion, a question came up: in a time of violence, warfare and bloodshed, what is the use of literature? Writers said that they lost belief in the power of culture. But amidst the chaos, the literature festival served as a beacon of hope and a reminder of the human spirit's resilience. A participant observed, pointing to the primal function of art: People need to tell stories. For in the face of adversity, it is through

■ MBIFL shines as a beacon of hope, illuminating the power of literature to bring people together and guide us towards a brighter future amidst the shadows of history

the sharing of stories that we find connection, empathy and the strength to persevere.

The Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters (MBIFL) stands as a testament to this idea. As the festival returns after two years of pandemic-induced hiatus, it serves as a reminder of the power of literature to bring people together, face-to-face. This edition's theme, 'Shadows of history, lights of the future', speaks to the idea that through exploring the past, we can gain insight and wisdom to guide us towards a brighter future. The festival becomes a contemplative platform, examining the human experience through the lens of literature, art, cinema, culture, politics, technology, science and gender. It serves as a reminder that amidst the shadows of our past, there is always a glimmer of light to guide us towards a better future. ■

Grasping Gurnah

■ CHRONICLES OF EXILES

In 1964, the violent uprising in Zanzibar drove Abdulrazak Gurnah, an 18-year-old, to seek refuge in England. Overwhelmed by sorrow, poverty and a deep longing for his homeland, he started to write brief notes in his diary, which then evolved into stories about others in similar situations. Those musings, his habit of writing to document his displacement, eventually led to the creation of his debut novel and nine more works that explore the enduring impact of colonialism, war and displacement. For his poignant writings, he was honored with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021.

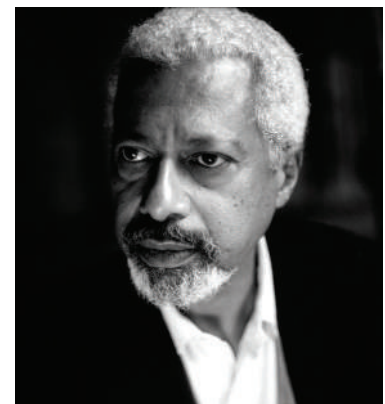
His presence at MBIFL serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of listening to the stories of those who have been displaced and of the need to recognize the trauma of war and violence.

In Gurnah's work, the idea of refugee disruption is a persistent theme; a theme that blends well with the culturally diverse nature of East Africa that he so faithfully portrays.

Gurnah's selection for the Nobel Prize marks a momentous occasion, not just for him, but for Black writers and African writers. After years of predominantly European and North American Nobel laureates, his selection was seen by many as a much-needed and long-overdue corrective.

Gurnah's first three novels — 'Memory of Departure', 'Pilgrim's Way', and 'Dottie' — captured the immigrant experience in contemporary Britain from diverse perspectives with remarkable eloquence. His fourth novel, 'Paradise', set in colonial East Africa during the First World War, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction and 'Admiring Silence', the story of a young man who leaves Zanzibar, emigrates to England and then returns to his native country 20 years later, profoundly altering his outlook, was critically lauded. 'By the Sea' (2001) told the tale of Saleh Omar, an elderly asylum-seeker living in an English seaside town, while 'Desertion' (2005) was shortlisted for a 2006 Commonwealth Writers Prize. 'The Last Gift' (2011), 'Gravel Heart' (2017) and 'Afterlives' (2020) followed, with Gurnah's editing of 'The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie' in 2007 bringing him further acclaim.

Gurnah's writing is like a gentle



■ MBIFL proudly features the esteemed Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah, whose words evoke the lasting pain of displacement and the terror of war, giving voice to those who have been silenced

blade, cutting through the noise of the world with an unflinching yet compassionate perspective. His words are a reminder that there are stories that need to be heard and that we should never forget to listen. ■

■ PASSAGES

One day, long before the troubles, he slipped away without saying a word to anyone and never went back. And then another day, forty-three years later, he collapsed just inside the front door of his house in a small English town. It was late in the day when it happened, returning home after work, but it was also late in the day altogether. He had left things for too long and there was no one to blame but himself. He felt it coming, the collapse. Not with the dread of ruin that had idled by him for as long as he could remember, but with a feeling that something deliberate and muscular was steadily bearing down on him. It was not a strike out of nowhere, more like the beast had slowly turned its head towards him, recognized him and then reached out to smother him. His thoughts were clear as the weakness drained his body, and in that clarity he thought, absurdly, that this must be what it felt like to starve or freeze to death or to have a stone crush the breath out of your body. The comparison made him wince despite his anxiety: see what melodrama tiredness can induce? *Excerpts from 'The Last Gift'*

In Ghosh we trust

Amitav Ghosh's novels are a tapestry of history and richly imagined characters, woven together with journalistic precision and a keen eye for hidden connections. Each story transports readers to vivid realms, leaving them entranced.

He will be at the MBIFL to speak on 'Stories of the more-than-human: fiction in an age of planetary crisis'.

This theme is at the heart of his recent book, 'The Nutmeg's Curse', a beautifully woven work of history, essay, testimony and polemic in which Ghosh explains our planetary crisis as the culmination of events that began with the discovery of the New World and the sea route to the Indian Ocean. The book is a haunting reminder of the Dutch Empire's merciless exploitation of nutmeg in the Banda archipelago in the 17th century, serving as a metaphor for the larger planetary catastrophe, rooted in the colonial geopolitical order established by the West. Ghosh skillfully weaves together the history of various botanical substances — spices, tea, sugarcane, opium and fossil fuels — to



INKBLOTS AND IDEAS

Experience the masterful weaving of history, fiction and current events in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, as he delves into the complexities of planetary crisis and the interconnectedness of human and non-human forces, at the MBIFL

illustrate the continuous link between human history and the earth's materials.

As the world faces the Covid pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, Ghosh sheds new light on these crises by connecting them to the colonial extractive mindset, which is at the root of the deep-seated inequality prevalent today. Through his masterful narrative, Ghosh critiques Western society and unveils the profound impact of non-human forces on human history, delving into subjects such as the global oil trade, the migrant crisis, the hyper-militarization of the U.S. and the animist spirituality of indigenous communities worldwide.

Ghosh's first novel, 'The Circle of Reason' (1986), follows an Indian protagonist who, suspected of being a terrorist, leaves India for Northern Africa and the Middle East. 'The Shadow Lines' (1988) is a sweeping history of two families (one Indian and the other English) that are deeply shaped by events following the departure of the British from India in 1947. Ghosh's first foray into science fiction was 'The Calcutta Chromosome' (1995), an alternative

history of the discovery of the malaria parasite. His other notable novels include 'The Glass Palace' (2000), set in Burma and 'The Hungry Tide' (2004), set in Bengal. 'Sea of Poppies' (2009) marked a departure from Ghosh's earlier experimental writing style and is the first book of the Ibis trilogy, which also includes 'River of Smoke' (2011) and 'Flood of Fire' (2015). His novel, 'Gun Island' (2019) is about a rare-book dealer and his journey to confront issues of his past and climate change. Ghosh also wrote 'In an Antique Land' (1992), a book combining travel writing, autobiography and memoir genres.

Ghosh's novels have been widely praised for their ability to weave together history, fiction and current events in a thought-provoking and engaging way. As he takes the stage at the MBIFL to speak on 'Stories of the more-than-human: fiction in an age of planetary crisis', one may expect him to continue to challenge readers' perspectives and inspire them to think deeply about the world around them. ▶

Time to Polish our literary taste

Discover the diverse and dynamic literary landscape of Poland as a delegation of esteemed authors delves into the intricacies of poetry, politics and experimental literature at the MBIFL

SPOTLIGHT

In Poland, the writer is king. The main square of the Polish city of Krakow, the former royal capital, does not carry a monument to a king or statesman or warrior. Instead, we find a statue of the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz.

From the late 18th century for long periods, Poland was not consistently recognized as a sovereign nation on the map of Europe. However, a shared sense of identity and language, cultivated by literary figures, kept the country united as an "imagined community."

This power will be unleashed by a delegation of litterateurs as the spotlight falls on Poland at the MBIFL.

The delegation includes Zenon Fajfer, Szczepan Kopyt, Maciej Plaza, Joanna Roszak, Dariusz Sosnicki, Bogumila Kaniewska, Tomasz Mizerkiewicz, Piotr Sliwinski, Marcin Jaworski, Justi Guziak, Krzysztof Hoffmann and Natalia Malek. They will discuss a range of topics from poetry and the language of politics to experimental literature.

The annals of Poland's history are



Zenon Fajfer



Szczepan Kopyt



Maciej Plaza



Tomasz Mizerkiewicz



Natalia Malek



Marcin Jaworski



Joanna Roszak



Dariusz Sosnicki



Bogumila Kaniewska



Krzysztof Hoffmann

Justi Guziak



Piotr Sliwinski

hearts of their countrymen and contributed to the awakening and construction of Polish consciousness.

In the 20th century, Poland was once again subjected to the tyrannical rule of Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes. Those writers who refused to bend to the dictates of the imposed ideology were either physically exiled or forced into spiritual exile. It is to these rebellious minds that we owe some of the most unique and powerful works that convey the experience of war, the horror of the camps and the resistance in the face of oppression. The literature of this period is marked by a division between

national and emigration literature. Among the writers of this time, one can find such luminaries as Czesław Miłosz, Witold Gombrowicz, Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski, Stanisław Mrozek and Zbigniew Herbert, whose works continue to inspire and enlighten to this day

The role of the writer has changed much in Poland over the years. Instead of the sovereign authority of an oppressed nation, the writer is more of a commentator and critic of its freedom. Contemporary Polish literature is a phoenix that continually rises from the ashes of its predecessors, a fact exemplified by the Nobel Prize won by Olga Tokarczuk in 2018. Throughout the years, the Nobel Prize for literature has been bestowed upon six Polish writers, including Henryk Sienkiewicz (1905), Władysław Reymont (1924), Isaac Bashevis Singer (1978, Yiddish), Czesław Miłosz (1980), Wisława Szymborska (1996) and Olga Tokarczuk (2018), each one leaving an indelible mark on the literary landscape.

The works of Wiesław Myśliwski, Andrzej Stasiuk, Szczepan Twardoch, Dorota Masłowska, Andrzej Sapkowski, Mariusz Szczygieł, Zygmunt Miłoszewski and countless others are widely read and celebrated for their unique perspectives and profound insights.

Polish literature, like Poland itself, has survived centuries of turmoil and oppression. It is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the power of words to transcend time and borders. ▶

Ink-redible celebration of the written word

The MBIFL is set to feature a diverse lineup of talented writers and artistes from around the world. They come from various backgrounds and have different artistic styles, themes and influences. They may have different perspectives on life and the world, but they all share a passion for culture, literature and the written word

Futhi Ntshingila

Pietermaritzburg-born writer

I mostly do not plan my plots right down to conclusions. I try to be led by characters and where needed I curb my imagination if it veers off too much from a realistic point of view.



Sjón

Icelandic poet and novelist

Most of my novels deal with Iceland's relationship with the wider world, on both the political and cultural level, as witnessed and experienced by people who are not part of the powers shaping their world for better or worse.



Jennifer Mackenzie

Australian poet

When I was at school I was very fortunate to have the artist, Les Kossatz, as a teacher for one year. As well as teaching art, he also gave us writing exercises. His way of life, with the studio and artist friends, seemed very exciting to me. At the same time, I was reading a lot of Patrick White and I found his prose to be a model for poetry writing. At 18, I felt I had to choose either painting or poetry and I (wisely, based on my painting ability!) chose poetry.



Niall Griffiths

English novelist

Mine wasn't a bookish household growing up, but it was filled with stories: of the old countries (Ireland and Wales), ghost stories, war stories, so I had, from a young age, a notion of the power of narrative to mesmerize and entrance. The world seemed both more manageable and more untamably vivid when it was filtered through narrative.



Malachi Edwin Vethamani

Writer

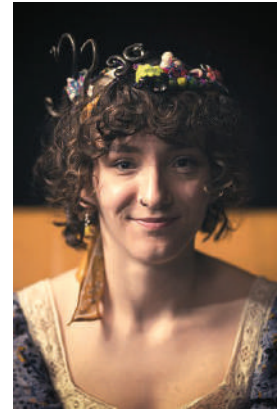
I believe every generation has had its own kind of complications. I would agree that's not often the case for many of us. The complications do give us (at least, it does for me) more to write about. It allows me to explore the various kinds of relationships we find ourselves in, not just with fellow human beings but with fellow creatures and the environment itself.



Megan Angharad Hunter

Welsh author

My ideas almost always arise from people. In my opinion, characters are the heart of every story and plotting is entirely redundant if your characters are truly alive. I think about my characters all the time and when they eventually feel like they could be as real as the world we live in, I write.



Sudha Murthy

writer

If you try to please everyone, you will please no one. It is impossible to lead your life for others' happiness.



Mallika Sarabhai

dancer-choreographer

You have treated the arts as the cherry on the cake. It needs to be the yeast.



Sudha Varghese

social worker

When I came to Bihar and saw the condition of these people, I knew I had to do something, especially for women. I lived with them for years and taught the girls in my small room. I devoted all my energy, time and love to help the Musahar community.



Kabir Bedi

actor

Acting was merely a pastime; I wanted to make films. But theatre, ah - now that was a labour of love. Can there be anything better than performing without retakes and cuts, in front of people you can see, hearing them breathe in the darkness of the hall?



T. M. Krishna

musician

In its totality, a raga is a combination of musical heritage, technical elements, emotional charge, cognitive understanding and aural identity.



Archil Kikodze

Georgian litterateur

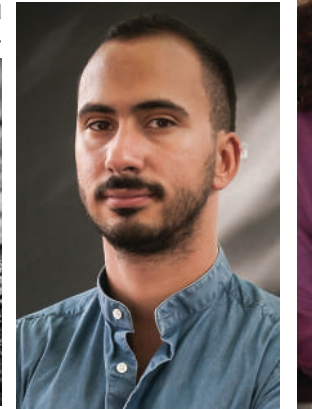
I wrote 'Southern Elephant' (his debut novel) this way because it is so uninteresting if you say, 'Russia is a bad country, it is a Mafia state and they are all bad people.' I think the moral difficulties of collaboration are so much more interesting than viewing someone, or some country, purely as the enemy. That's why in 'Southern Elephant' and most of my fiction, I tend to write about everyday experiences because even the big political issues are only experienced on a personal level.



Carlos Fonseca Suarez

Costa Rican writer

I have become, lately, very interested in art - and in particular conceptual art - as a territory lying at the limit of literature. I like Duchamp's gesture of moving art away from the immediacy of the sensory towards the realm of the conceptual. Or at least, forcing us to reimagine what the relationship between the sensory and the conceptual, between feeling and thought, might be, beyond a mere contradiction. Ideas, too, have a body, I would claim. I see contemporary art as a playful realm of liberty for the imagination and as such I see it as the limit towards which literature should aim.



Anita Nair

writer

Love is a colourless, volatile liquid. Love ignites n burns. Love leaves no residue neither smoke nor ash. Love is a poison masquerading as spirit of Wine.



An act of remembering

VISION

Sabin Iqbal

What should a literature festival picking up its journey after the lockdown years express?

Should it be pessimistic—licking wounds, mourning deaths and counting losses?

It was not the first time the world witnessed a pandemic. We have gone through it before and come out of it in spite of a huge number of deaths, poverty and hardship. We have also lived through world wars, global depression and bloody civil wars. We have overcome man-made tragedies, bloodshed and natural catastrophes.

We have triumphed. Survival is man's primary instinct. Notwithstanding the darkness enveloping us, we look around for a glimmer of hope. We look inward for the energy to move forward. How can literature, for that matter, art

and culture in the big picture, help us in this struggle?

Unless we listen to one another, we will end up feeding our own prejudices, often tending poison trees. When other festivals across the country organized digital or online festivals during the lockdown, we didn't because we believe in the magic of the physical festival. We believe in the chemistry and synergy we create when we meet—on the lawns, under the trees, on the pathways and with coffee and tea. We believe in the need for us to meet each other, hug and laugh. Nothing keeps us going like a touch or an arm around the shoulder.

MBIFL is a curated festival. We have a concept around which we plan sessions. We don't look for massive crowds swarming the idyllic Kanakakkunnu. Ours is a discerning gathering that comes to listen to particular speakers or sessions. We want to inspire, encourage and challenge young minds to take on a dispiritingly polarising world.

'Shadows of history, lights of future'—MBIFL's theme this year—is expressed in other words, 'past forward'. It is an exploration of how we can pick up the shreds of the past to move on; how history should be a guiding light.

History helps us remember what we were or what we have gone through. Remembering is an exciting exercise. In her brilliant novel, 'Infinity in the Palm of Her Hand: A Novel of Adam and Eve', Nicaraguan poet and novelist Gioconda Belli depicts the magic moment of Adam's first moment of remembrance:

He awoke and remembered being unconscious. He found it entertaining to examine the faculties of memory, amusing himself by forgetting and remembering, until he saw the woman at his side. He lay very still, observing her bewilderment, the gradual effect of air in her lungs, of light in her eyes, the fluid way she moved to recognize herself. He imagined what she was going through, the slow awakening from nothingness to being.



Sabin Iqbal and M. P. Surendran, curators of MBIFL

This is the magic of literature. This is the power of imagination. This is what 'history' can offer us.

We are excited that Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah is here with us in this edition of MBIFL. It is fitting to quote him (from 'Memory of Departure') to sum up this note:

As I walked past empty garage yards and locked-up warehouses it seemed as if I was strolling round the abandoned camp fires of a great host . . . a place that had been arbitrarily and expediently picked for a bivouac on the road to other places.

A literature festival can be a 'bivouac'—a temporary camp—on the road to 'other places'. Hope you'll have a great time at the festival. ▶

A Sanskrit symphony on stage



Kapila

MYTH IN MOTION

At the MBIFL event, Kapila, a renowned performer of Koodiyattom, is set to transport audiences back in time with an immersive residency dedicated to the ancient art form.

"We are aiming at creating an immersive experience of Koothu and Koodiyattom which happen to be one of the oldest surviving theatre and storytelling traditions of the world today," says Kapila. With a mission to showcase the intricacies and intensity of this UNESCO-recognized Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, Kapila has brought together a talented team of artistes, practitioners and scholars.

The residency promises to be a journey through the rich history and culture of Koodiyattom, with an emphasis on both the traditional and ritual aspects of the art form, as well as the innovative transformations it has undergone in recent times.

Embark on an epic journey through the ancient art form of Koodiyattom, where traditional ritual meets contemporary innovation as master practitioners, scholars and up-and-coming talents lead the way

"It is a highly sophisticated acting technique, intriguing aesthetic and symbolism, a unique system of musical accompaniment, theatre language and so on. We wish to bring in the historical traditional and ritual aspects and also take a look at the innovation and transformation that the art form has gone through in the recent past," explains Kapila.

Audiences may expect a diverse range of practitioners, including young and up-and-coming artistes such as Sooraj Nambiar, Jishnu Prathap, and Sangeeth Chakravarthy, and senior practitioners such as Margi Madhu, Usha Nangiar, Kalamandalam Rajeev and Kalamandalam Narayanan Nambiar.

"Apart from them, we are deeply honored to also have the presence of Sarojini Nangiaramma who is the oldest woman ritual performer of Nangiar Koothu and has a lifetime of experience, stories and wisdom to share with us," says Kapila. Renowned scholars Dr K. G. Paulose and Dr M. V. Narayanan, who have studied and written extensively about Koodiyattom for decades, will lead sessions.

The Koodiyattom residency at MBIFL promises to be a one-of-a-kind opportunity to delve into the depths of this ancient art form, guided by some of the greatest talents and masters in the field. Don't miss your chance to be swept away by the beauty and complexity of Koodiyattom. ▶

Jokha Alharthi's lyrical and vibrant depiction of Oman's present and past has cast a captivating spell on the world, winning her the 2019 Man Booker International Prize



Unveiling Oman in transition

THE WRITE LIFE

Jokha Alharthi, the winner of the 2019 Man Booker International Prize for her novel 'Celestial Bodies' (or 'Sayyidat al-Qamar'), has left the world enthralled with her vivid and poetic portrayal of Oman's history through the story of three sisters coming of age during a period of great change.

She will grace the MBIFL with her presence to share her reflections on life, her works and changes taking place in the Arab world.

Her characters are exquisitely crafted, depicting individuals with all their contradictory, unique and flawed qualities. The Booker judges praised 'Celestial Bodies' for providing a "richly imagined, engaging and poetic insight into a society in transition and into lives previously obscured".

Alharthi first thought of 'Celestial Bodies' while studying in Scotland, as a way to cope with her feeling of homesickness. She has since gone on to produce four novels, three collections of short stories and three children's books. Alharthi earned her Ph.D. in classical Arabic literature from the University of Edinburgh in 2011, and was offered a professorship in classical Arabic literature at Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat, Oman in 2010. 'Harir al-Ghazala' is a multi-generational saga that tells the story of major social transformations in Oman.

"Looking at Omani society in the 18th, 19th and even the early 20th century, one can hardly discern any differences in customs, traditions, methods of self-expression or even sense of fashion that prevailed then," she said. "Then suddenly, with the discovery of oil, a new chapter of Oman's history was launched. Omanis found themselves, in a very brief span of time, forced to brave tremendous changes that took other nations centuries to assimilate... It is interesting to me, as a writer, to observe that Omani families who wouldn't allow their daughters to attend a co-ed university program just 10 years ago are now willing to send their younger ones to study abroad on their own."

Her novels represent strong women, but she once mentioned she was not a feminist. "Yes, I might have once mentioned that I don't like to be labelled as a feminist, but this was in a specific context; I hate classification and I can't bear the idea of being restrained within the contours of a certain ideology that I might not be able to uphold in the future," she was quoted as saying.

Is she able to express herself freely in her writings? Or does she diligently avoid taboos? "Writers must be brave in the face of inner self-doubt and outer criticism, without courage writing will be soulless because a frightened writer will produce a dead text," she said.

PASSAGES

Green Dots in Teacher Fathia's Dress

We were both standing, she and I. We were standing face-to-face, her eyes locked in mine. My eyes were panicked, fixed on her dress and the window behind us and the fridge below.

My small hand was sunk in her big, brown hand. We were standing face-to-face. She was talking, I was shivering. The corridor was dark despite a blue light coming from a lamp hanging above us. Big drops of sweat were gathering in my hair and then dropping down my back to leave spots on my yellow school uniform. Drops of sweat were glistening on her forehead. The disappeared and then glistened again above her breast where a part of her sea-colored nightgown appeared from the neck crop of her dress. Her feet were slightly apart in her sandals. Mine were sticking together in white shoes with a plastic piece in the middle. When her hiss intensified, she leaned over me so that I was hit by her fenugreek-smelling breath. My hand was squeezed in hers. My new ring, the first I had ever owned, was digging into the flesh of my finger. But I gritted my teeth listening patiently to Teacher Fathia in this dark corridor between her room and the kitchen.

During the morning queue, she came to me. She gripped my shoulders and told me that she had heard the bad things I said about her. She looked into my eyes and I looked at her hand where a small part of the green pipe that used to be used to water the garden was dangling. And she left me.

The window behind her was covered with red tape. The fridge's door was slightly open allowing me to see piles of cans and food. There was a sour smell that filled the corridor from cooking. Teacher Fathia started began to pant tired of standing.

A few minutes before the release bell rang, she leaned on the door of my classroom and nodded at me. I followed blindly the green dots in her dress until we reached the teacher's residence behind the school's lawn. There she held my hand and entered my room and kitchen.

The fridge behind her opened completely, so I lowered my gaze. She was leaning over me more and more and talking faster and faster. Suddenly, she released my hand and I nearly fell. She pointed to the opposite corner, so I took the transparent, white plastic bag that was full of notebooks from there. She snatched it from my hand and put it in an opaque plastic bag with the slogan of a famous cigarette brand painted on it. The heavy weight of the bag of notebooks had left two red lines on my hands, but I carried it again without hesitation. She opened the door and I saw the green pipe behind it and remembered the slash on my hand. "Mark them all alone and don't let anyone see you. Bring them tomorrow," she said.

BUZZ



Transforming Soda Dr Chhavi Rajawat

Chhavi Rajawat, the youngest sarpanch in India, has been scripting a success story by bringing winds of change to her ancestral village of Soda in Rajasthan.

@Festival Hall 11 a.m.



Touching people: The Cycle Deedi Story Sudha Varghese

Sudha Varghese, also known as Sister Sudha, is a social worker who has devoted herself to the uplift of Musahar, Dalits of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

@Under the Tree 1 p.m.



India Moving: A History of Migration Prof Chinmay Tumble

From adventure to indenture, martyrs to merchants, Partition to plantation, from Kashmir to Kerala, Japan to Jamaica and beyond, the many facets of the great migrations of India and the world are mapped in Chinmay Tumble's 'India Moving: A History of Migration', the first book of its kind.

@Hall of Letters 1 p.m.



Words of Wisdom Sudha Murthy talks to Milee Ashwarya

Author, philanthropist and chairperson of Infosys Foundation, Sudha Murthy is the perfect person to take inspiration from.

@Under the Tree 4 p.m.



Life and Writing Amitav Ghosh talks to Shajahan Madampat

Ghosh, a multi-faceted writer, delves into the worlds of novel writing, history, travel writing, anthropology and environmentalism. Shajahan Madampat is an Indian writer, critic, and social commentator known for his writings on culture, media, and Middle East affairs.

@Nishagandhi 3 p.m.



Anthropocene Sudeep Sen talks to Abhayan Varghese

Widely recognized as a leading new generation voice in world literature, Sudeep Sen's 'Anthropocene: Climate change, Contagion, Consolation' is a literary and artistic response to the most urgent issues that face humanity now — climate change and the pandemic.

@Under the Tree 12 noon

Will you still love me?

Ravinder Singh

Considered the King of Romance, Ravinder Singh is a well-known bestselling author from India. An alumnus of the Indian School of Business and a former Senior Program Manager at Microsoft, Ravinder found that it's more fun writing stories than writing computer programmes. Now a full-time storyteller, he has sold more than 3.5 million copies of his novels.

@Mathrubhumi Hall ☉ 4 p.m.



Bombay Jayashri talks to Ravi Menon

Bombay Jayashri represents the fourth generation of music practitioners in her family. Mentored by stalwarts such as Lalgudi Jayaraman and T. R. Balamani, Jayashri has a distinctive style of her own.

@ Mathrubhumi Hall ☉ 11 a.m.



'Good Old Days'

('Poyakalame Vannittu Pokumu')
— Featuring Sreekumaran Thampi and Ramesh Gopalakrishnan

Poet and lyricist Sreekumaran Thampi takes a stroll down memory lane

@Hall of Letters ☉ 12 noon



'Rising tourism'

('Parannuyaran Tourism')

Featuring Kerala Tourism Minister P. A. Mohammed Riyas and Raj Kalesh

What obstacles and opportunities lie in the path of the ever-growing tourism industry?

@Hall of Letters ☉ 4 p.m.



Music and language

Featuring Sithara Krishnakumar and Harinarayanan

Music and language both involve patterns of sound and rhythm, and both have been used throughout history as means of communication and expression.

@Nishagandhi ☉ 1 p.m.



Independent music, possibilities in India

Featuring Stephen Devassy and Manoj George

What are the advantages and disadvantages of being an indie artiste?

@ Hall of Letters ☉ 5 p.m.



Programme
schedule



PASSAGES

The hills of Jerusalem are a bath of fog. Rami moves by memory through a straight stretch and calculates the camber of an upcoming turn.

Sixty-seven years old, he bends low on the motorbike, his jacket padded, his helmet clipped tight. It is a Japanese bike, 750 cc. An agile machine for a man his age.

Rami pushes the bike hard, even in bad weather.

He takes a sharp right at the gardens where the fog lifts to reveal dark. Corpus separatum. He downshifts and whips past a military tower. The sodium lights appear fuzzy in the morning. A small flock of birds momentarily darkens the orange.

At the bottom of the hill the road dips into another curve, obscured in fog. He taps down to second, lets out the clutch, catches the corner smoothly and moves back up to third. Road Number One stands above the ruins of Qalunya: all history piled here.

He throttles at the end of the ramp, takes the inner lane, passing signs for The Old City, for Giv'at Ram. The highway is a scattershot of morning headlights.

He leans left and salmons his way out into the faster lane, toward the tunnels, the Separation Barrier, the town of Beit Jala. Two answers for one swerve: Gilo on one side, Bethlehem on the other.

Geography here is everything.

Excerpts from 'Apeirogon'

'No time for hate'

SCRIBBLESCAPES

Irish writer Colum McCann brings to MBIFL the magic of his most recent novel, 'Apeirogon', an international best-seller.

It won several significant international awards including the Prix Montluc, the Elle Prize, the Jewish National Book Award in the United States, as well as being shortlisted for the Dublin Literary Award, the Orwell Prize, the Dalkey Book Prize, the German Peace Prize and the Greggor von Rezzori Prize.

McCann, born and raised in Dublin, is the author of seven novels, three collections of stories and two works of non-fiction.

Named after a shape with an infinite number of sides, 'Apeirogon' is a bewitching blend of fact and fiction, a captivating tapestry of the Israel-Palestine conflict and its many strands, from Picasso's working habits and the invention of rubber bullets to George Mitchell's peace talks in Northern Ireland and the epistolary exchanges between Einstein and Freud. The text is arranged in 1001 numbered sections, numbered 1-500, plus a bridging section, numbered 1001, and then sections numbered 500-1 — clearly intended to recall 'One Thousand and One Nights'.

Transcripts of interviews conducted by McCann with two men — Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian and Rami Elhanan, an Israeli — form the core of the book. Bassam Aramin and Rami Elhanan were united in tragedy when Elhanan's daughter, Smadar, was killed by a suicide bomber in 1997, and



In a world where hatred and violence seem to be on the rise, Colum McCann has presented us with a timely reminder that we need to embrace peace

Aramin's daughter, Abir, was shot by an Israeli soldier in 2007. To cope with their shared agony, the two men turned to the Parents Circle Family Forum, a charity that seeks to bridge the divide between Israelis and Palestinians. Through their work with the organization, Aramin and Elhanan have become close, travelling the world and giving talks about their own experiences of loss, pain and healing.

"I don't have time for hate anymore," McCann quotes Aramin. "We need to learn how to use our pain." ▶

The book

JUST FOR LAUGHS

"It was one of the duller speeches I ever heard. The Agee woman told us for three quarters of an hour how she came to write her beastly book, when a simple apology was all that was required."

P. G. Wodehouse, *The Girl in Blue*

Moons of Maali Almeida

FOCUS

As the memories of 1989's atrocities still linger in his mind, Sri Lankan author Shehan Karunatilaka makes his way to the lush greenery of Thiruvananthapuram. Just 230 nautical miles from his homeland, he finds solace in the familiar sway of coconut trees and the cool breeze that reminds him of home. He has been invited as a special guest to the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2023, to speak about his life, his concerns and most importantly, his prize-winning novel, 'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida'. Despite the darkness that once engulfed his country, the end of the 1990s brought a sense of peace as most of the antagonists in the ethnopolitical conflict vanished. With 'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida', Karunatilaka has masterfully woven a tale that not only showcases the horrors of war but also the resilience of the human spirit.

What is the book about?

In the midst of Sri Lanka's tumultuous civil war, Maali Almeida, a war photographer, a gambler and a closeted gay, awakens to find himself in a celestial realm, his



dismembered body sinking into the depths of the Beira Lake in central Colombo. With no recollection of how he met his untimely demise, Maali is plagued with uncertainty and a growing list of suspects, as scores are settled by death squads, suicide bombers and hired goons in the war-torn country. In the afterlife, however, time is of the essence for Maali as he is given a mere seven lunar cycles to uncover the truth behind his murder and reach out to the two individuals who hold a special place in his heart, leading them to a hidden cache of photographs that will shake the foundations of Sri Lanka.

Meet the 2022 Booker Prize-winning author Shehan Karunatilaka at MBIFL 2023 and explore the depths of his acclaimed novel 'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida', a tale that delves into the human spirit and resilience amidst the turmoil of war

The Booker judges were impressed with the voice of the novel — “a first-person narrative rendered, with an astonishingly light touch, in the second person – is unforgettable: beguiling, unsentimental, by turns tender and angry and always unsparingly droll.”

Shehan Karunatilaka shines as a literary luminary in Sri Lanka, acclaimed for his versatile talents that extend beyond the realm of novels. He has penned lyrics for rock songs, crafted compelling screenplays, and shared his wanderlust through travel stories. In 2011, his debut novel 'Chinaman' brought him international acclaim, earning the Commonwealth Book Prize, the DSL and Gratiaen Prize, and declared the second-best cricket book of all time by Wisden. As Neil MacGregor, Chair of the 2022 judges for the Booker said, “The Seven Moons...’ is a metaphysical thriller, an afterlife noir that dissolves the boundaries not just of different genres, but of life and death, body and spirit, east and west.”

PASSAGES

The memories come to you with pain. The pain has many shades. Sometimes, it arrives with sweat and itches and rashes. At other times, it comes with nausea and headaches. Perhaps like amputees feeling absent limbs, you still hold the illusion of your decaying corpse. One minute you are retching, the next you are reeling, the next you are remembering.

You met Jaki five years ago in the Casino at Hotel Leo. She was twenty, just out of school, and losing pathetically at baccarat. You were back from a torrid tour of the Vanni, unhinged by the slaughter, breaking bread with shady people, seeing the bad wherever you looked, and wearing your notorious red bandanna. You had sold the photos to Jonny at the Associated Press and cashed a welcome six-figure cheque. Even in Lankan rupees, six figures are better than five.

You had outplayed the house at blackjack, whacked the crab at the buffet and washed it down with some free gin. A regular day at the office.

“Don't bet on ties, sister,” you said to the strange girl with frizzy hair and black make-up. She looked at you and rolled her eyes, which you found strange. Women usually like the look of you, not knowing that you prefer cock to cooch. A trimmed beard, an ironed shirt and a bit of deodorant will elevate you above a herd of sweaty Lankan hetero males.

“I just won twenty thousand rupees,” she said.

You noticed she was alone and that no one was hitting on her, both unusual for women in casinos in Colombo.

And the chances of you winning that again are nine per cent. And this house only pays out seven-to-one, minus commission. Which means, follow that strategy a hundred times and you will lose, even when you win.

“A man who knows everything. What a surprise.”
Excerpts from 'The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida'

'Settle your debts to Africa'

HARAMBEE



Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, an incisive analyst of the African experience, offers an unsparing critique of colonial legacies, reimagining a more equitable future through her powerful works

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's presence at MBIFL lends a multifaceted perspective to its discourse on inequalities.

This Kenyan writer describes herself as “pluralistic by inclination and nationality”. It makes her an incisive analyst of the African experience, enabling her to challenge the status quo and provide insights into issues of injustice and oppression. Thus, she is a formidable force in combating the legacies of colonialism and reimagining a more equitable future.

Owuor made her literary debut when her short story, 'The Weight of Whispers', won the 2003 Caine Prize for African Writing. Her two novels, set largely in Kenya, explore the effects of history, geopolitics and trauma on families. They are titled 'Dust' (2014) and 'The Dragonfly Sea' (2019). She is deeply critical of the western engagement with Africa that has been predicated on an absurd assumption—still prevalent—that there was nothing in Africa before the Europeans showed up despite the evidence of archives, museums, culture and stories. She has called for a “forensic accounting of history”. What does she mean by that? “If Africa were to conduct an audit of all the corporations, museums and nations that have 'done business' with it over the past 400 years and demand that outstanding debts (not reparation) be settled, the topic of 'aid' would evaporate overnight. Coffee, diamonds, cocoa, ivory, humans: there are accounts outstanding. Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Sweden and Belgium are renowned 'producers' of goods they have neither grown nor mined, the value of which exceeds the pittance that is returned as philanthropy. Let's be fair. Let's settle our long outstanding accounts.”

How does this differ from reparations? “Reparations would be the outcome of an examined conscience that seeks to atone for an acknowledged wrong. It is a gesture to demonstrate an intent to repair a wound and restore broken human relations. My proposal is pure business. It's about settling a debt.”

'Harambee' means 'all pull together' in Kiswahili, Kenya's national language. It is more than a motto, it symbolizes Kenyan unity, patriotism and, most importantly, the future.

