



MATHRUBHUMI INTERNATIONAL  
FESTIVAL OF LETTERS

## Alienation & Loneliness in Cairo

*Bh* Bhavik Nair

**E**gyptian author and journalist Mansoura Ez-Eldin, while speaking at a session during the opening day of The Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024 on Thursday, said she owes everything to reading and literature.

“My mother helped me a lot. When I decided to move to Cairo, she was very supportive and this wasn’t common at all in the Egyptian countryside. It wasn’t common for a little girl to live on her own and move to such a huge city like Cairo,” she noted.

Ez-Eldin noted that she was intimidated by huge buildings and wide streets but said this feeling of alienation and loneliness in a big city helped her discover her true self. “I began to invent a parallel city and this appeared in my novel *Mariam’s Maze*. It is quite an imaginative novel but at the same time it is like an autobiographical novel as well. Not about myself as everybody sees it but about my inner self, my authentic self,” the author said.

According to Ez-Eldin, when she began writing, she had aspired to mix all the traditional heritage of Islamic and Arabic storytelling with most modern techniques. “And I think *Mariam’s maze* was the first

fruit of this dream,” she said.

Ez-Eldin also shared a ‘strange’ incident which she encountered while on a literary tour in Europe with her peers. She said their readings attracted a huge audience and a few even praised them for being brave while asking how it feels to be a female writer in Egypt. “I was shocked. It was very strange,” she said.

The author noted that Egypt appears to be an exotic place, maybe even a barbaric one to many outsiders. “We have a huge tradition of writing and we have wonderful female writers,” she said.

When asked about the Egyptian revolution, Ez-Eldin said its failure was sort of a personal defeat. “But I still think revolution is a work in progress. I think it had a huge impact on Egyptian literature,” she noted.

Ez-Eldin also expressed her admiration for Indian author Arundhati Roy. “She is one of my idols. I respect her a lot for her vocal voice. I feel that she is always on the right side of history. She is very supportive of some marginalised victims. You are very lucky to have such a respectable voice like Arundhati Roy. I also read Salman Rushdie and I like his writing. I like his novels a lot,” she said.

Mansoura Ez-Eldin



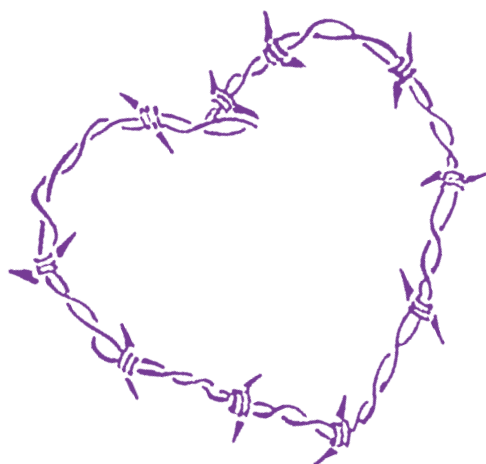
Photo|P.P. Ratheesh



“My mother helped me a lot. When I decided to move to Cairo, she was very supportive and this wasn’t common at all in the Egyptian countryside.”



Mistakes in history should be rectified. During the Emergency, the slogan 'India is Indira and Indira is India' was propagated and the entire nation's hope and future were placed in the hands of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This was a grave mistake when considering the fact that no leader should be placed above the voices of the people.  
- **V.D. Satheesan**, Opposition leader



# War against Love Jihad



Scaremongering by propagating ideas of the Hindu religion being in danger fuels most of these 'new dangers' being identified.

- **Mariyam Alavi**



*Mariyam Alavi and Sreenivasan Jain*

**T**hat love jihad is the bugbear of the Indian middle-class is no understatement.

And the aim of journalists Sreenivasan Jain and Mariyam Alavi, former colleagues at NDTV, to exorcise this evil spirit of disbelief simmered at a discussion on their book 'Love Jihad and Other Fictions: Simple Facts to Counter Viral Falsehoods' at the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024. The session held at the 'Hall of Letters' was moderated by author and journalist Nirmala Govindarajan.

The speakers highlighted the need to focus on facts at a time where falsehoods and propaganda are making their way to media headlines and are pushed to the

forefront by prominent persons. They spoke on topics such as 'love jihad,' 'population jihad' and the controversial movie 'Kerala Story.' Jain and Mariyam lamented the sad state of affairs where such fabricated claims translate into real-world threats for minorities in the country.

"Scaremongering by propagating ideas of the Hindu religion being in danger fuels most of these 'new dangers' being identified," said Mariyam. She spoke about how we live in a world where one's name determines one's crimes and where hateful lies and bigotry take precedence over truth.

Jain explained how Kerala became synonymous with 'love jihad' on the basis of an insignificant court

case which was caused by an event that occurred over a decade ago. "Selective facts are published by veiling significant aspects and this is the case with the 'population jihad' narrative that puts forth the theory of the 'increasing' fertility rate among Muslims and how this is a means to take over the general population of the country," he said.

This bigotry is not limited to Islam alone but also encompasses the alleged 'Christian Conversion Mafia' that is not as much apparent in Kerala as it is in the northern states of India, the speakers said.

The authors added their book aims to hold a mirror to reality and fight hateful lies with facts.



In today's world, meta-narrative is the word. The best example of this is Dharmapuranam by O.V. Vijayan. There is nothing provocative in the use of language. The text is the context and hence should be looked upon from that perspective.

- M. Nandakumar, Writer

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# Anthikad's Sandesham@MBIFL

**L**ife is a journey and we should enjoy every single moment, said eminent director and scriptwriter Sathyan Anthikad during the discussion 'Kochu Kochu Santhoshangal' (small moments of happiness) as part of the ongoing Mathrubhumi Literature Festival of Letter (MBIFL 2024) in Kanakakunnu Palace on Thursday. He discussed how new meanings and perspectives emerge in this modern period and how films are often criticised.

"We should have a good mindset to enjoy the little moments in our lives. Movies are meant for entertainment and laughter, not entirely for deep thoughts," Anthikad said.

Anthikad also expressed his concerns about making movies with messages in the age of intolerance and political correctness. No one can



discuss religion or politics the way one used to do earlier since these representations can create severe consequences, he noted.

The director noted the difficulties

in filming scenes that depict a lush, green village in Kerala since such places are few and far. It is often a combination of shots taken across multiple locations that is finally depicted as a single village in a movie,

he explained narrating his experience while shooting the hit film *Manassinakkare*.

Anthikad noted that unlike earlier times, theatre releases are limited to a short window due to the impact of OTT platforms. He also opined that film reviews should be done 3-4 days after the release of a movie so that people have enough time to soak-in the feature. The director strongly criticised movie promotions which he believes are overdone.



*We should have a good mindset to enjoy the little moments in our lives. Movies are meant for entertainment and laughter, not entirely for deep thoughts.*

## Indian Films Enamour This Swedish Playwright

**F**rom the frosty snow-covered plains of Sweden to the warm sunny weather in the lush green terrain of Kerala (may be a bit too much heat, he admits with a smile), Swedish actor, theatre director and playwright Bjorn Dahlman is excited about his first visit to God's own country.

At the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024, the 41-year-old talked about his journey to the world of theatre. Bjorn was a geeky kid during his school times and wished to become a psychologist when he grew up.

But the day he watched Michael Jackson's concert on television for the first



time, Bjorn realised what he wanted. He liked the attention and adored the stage. Even though he was terrified to pursue it, worrying about a stable income stream, he still took the plunge. Bjorn convinced himself to give it a shot for one year.

"That one year is still not over. It's been 21 years now," he said.

The actor believes the best thing about theatre—the crux of it—is the interaction with the audience. "It's all about people. I can tell you one thing, theatre can be intelligent, but not intellectual," he remarked.

The playwright is fascinated with the art of film-making and how Indian films are a vital part of the country's culture. "I am in awe of the films here. It's all so diverse—the regional languages, the movie itself. It's diverse, it's beautiful."

These days, he's learning about shamans (healers or shamans are intermediaries between the physical and the spiritual world) and the possible



*The best thing about theatre—the crux of it—is the interaction with the audience. It's all about people. Theatre can be intelligent, but not intellectual.*

# MBIFL 2024 Best actor lights the lamp



photo  
gallery



**R**enowned actor Mammootty inaugurated the fifth edition of the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters (MBIFL 2024) at the Kanakakkunnu Palace on Thursday. The veteran actor noted that literary events like MBIFL are essential in an age where public spaces are shrinking and reading has transpired from flipping real pages to social media posts.

“Just as the sun acts as a natural purifying agent against germs in the atmosphere, literary fests and dialogues help remove the germs from our mindset and the society at large,” he said, adding that smaller editions of such festivals could be held in the countryside as public spaces are shrinking.

“Instead of limiting our world to ourselves, let us use these platforms to share our emotions. It will help remove many poisonous thoughts from society,” said Mammootty. “When there are no public spaces, we tend to cocoon ourselves and that is when poisonous thoughts creep in, keeping us from interacting with one another or share our emotions.”

He also underscored the role of Mathrubhumi in the renaissance movements of Kerala and the development of language and literature.

During the inaugural ceremony, Egyptian

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Mammootty

writer and journalist Mansoura Ez-Eldin said she never takes writing for granted and believes in the power of the written word. “We live where literature is very important. The visions present before us are often clouded and literature is a bridge that can help us cross various barriers and see the world as it really is.”

“We writers should resist any kind of inequality; we should speak against injustice,” she said, adding that most of us are prisoners of fixed ideas.

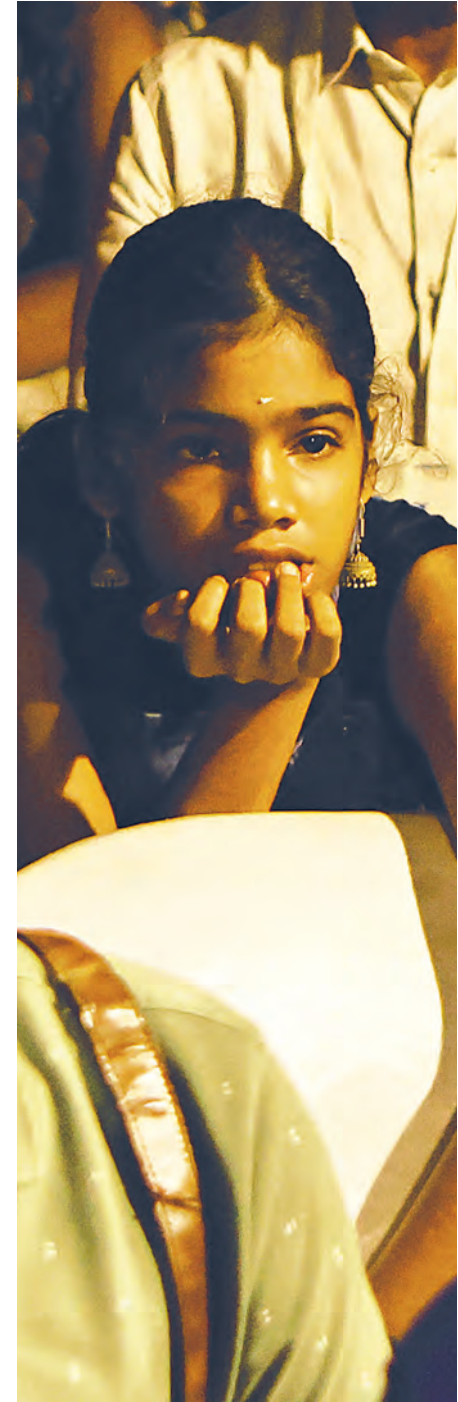
Writer Sarah Joseph delved into the significance of plurality and the need of creating pluralistic spaces at a time when voices of dissent are subdued and silenced. Democracy is in danger, and such public spaces of dialogues are where the protest against autocracy begins, she added. The author said India has always celebrated plurality and Kerala has a special role in it. Sarah Joseph

also stated that India is a collective of many languages and the societies that represent these languages as well as its cultures. She said such festivals reflect our responsibility to recapture the equality as envisaged in the Constitution.

MBIFL Chairman and Mathrubhumi Managing Director M.V. Shreyams Kumar said in his speech the world is lacking plurality in current times. One is losing the freedom to make an opinion or to disagree with another. “This festival discusses the need for plurality in such times,” he noted adding that India is a pluralistic nation and anything that goes against it will destroy its culture. “MBIFL focussed on plurality keeping this in mind,” he said.

Later, Mathrubhumi Managing Editor P.V. Chandran said the newspaper has been at the forefront of promoting art, culture and literature right from the beginning and used words as a weapon in the fight against the British. He also said the founder editor, writer, philosopher and the working president of Kerala Sahitya Akademy K.P. Kesava Menon was the one who kickstarted the struggle for the right to speak in our mother-tongue.

Mathrubhumi Joint Managing Editor, P.V. Nidheesh delivered the welcome speech. Mathrubhumi daily and digital editor Manoj K. Das proposed the vote of thanks.



Peruvanam Kuttan Marar, Mattannur Sankarankutty and Jayaram at the session Melapperumkalangal



Once poetry is cosmopolitan, it's gone.  
Poetry arises from nothing. As long as there is  
linguistic music in it, poetry works.  
You cannot have a boundary.  
- **Sonnet Mondal**, Poet



# Bridging the Divide between Politics & Literature

The dialogue session 'Aadum Maanthalirum' at the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024 transcended stereotypes as acclaimed Malayalam writer Benyamin engaged in a captivating conversation with veteran politician and Congress leader Ramesh Chennithala.

There is a misconception that politicians lack literary enthusiasm. However, contrary to popular belief, Chennithala passionately expressed his love for writing and literature, shattering the notion that politicians are estranged from the world of words. He revealed a long-cherished dream of penning a novel centered around the narratives of migrants – individuals who traverse oceans in pursuit of a better life, leaving behind the familiar shores of their homeland.

The dialogue delved deeper, emphasizing the presence of literature aficionados within political spheres. Chennithala drew inspiration from political stalwarts such as the late Somnath Chatterjee, former Speaker of the Lok Sabha and Mani Shankar Aiyar, former Minister of Panchayati Raj of India, acknowledging their voracious reading habits as guiding lights in his own literary journey.

Through 'Aadum Maanthalirum,' the MBIFL served as a platform for bridging the perceived gap between politics and literature. Beyond the corridors of power,



*Ramesh Chennithala & Benyamin*

amidst the tumult of governance, lies a reservoir of literary passion and intellectual curiosity, waiting to be explored and celebrated. As Chennithala's narrative unfolded, it became evident that the realms

of politics and literature are not mutually exclusive but rather intertwined, enriching the tapestry of human experience with diverse perspectives and voices.

At the 'Aadum Maanthalirum' session with Benyamin, Ramesh Chennithala passionately expresses his love for writing and literature, shattering the notion that politicians are estranged from the world of words.



For me, the language of poetry is important, more than the poetry itself.

-Ashwani Kumar, Poet

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# Across the Abyss: Exploring Plurality through World Poetry

**I**n the dimly lit hall called 'The Bard Room' of the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters-2024, amidst the whispers of eager listeners, Manu Ramakant's voice resonated like a gentle breeze carrying the weight of poetic wisdom. With his session titled 'Across the Abyss: Attempt to Connect,' Manu embarked on a journey through the realms of world poetry, where the abyss between man and nature, between man and the world, stood as an enigmatic chasm waiting to be bridged.

"In life, many times, maybe it is a stranger who completes us," he mused, casting a contemplative gaze upon the audience. His words hung in the air, weaving a tapestry of introspection and longing. The abyss, he explained, was not merely a physical void but a metaphysical expanse separating poets from the rest of the world. From the war-torn landscapes of Palestine to the embattled streets of Ukraine, poets grappled with the daunting task of conveying their experiences to a world seemingly indifferent to their plight.

"A poet is always yearning for contact," Manu remarked, his voice tinged with empathy. "But the reader, the rest of the world, is always disconnected." It was a lamentation, a poignant acknowledgment of the distance that separated



the poet's words from the reader's heart. Yet, amidst the abyss, there lay a glimmer of hope – the poet's unwavering desire to establish a connection, to be heard, to be understood.

"What does the reader get in exchange? Why should they hear us?" Manu's query hung in the air, in-

viting responses from the listeners, who, like pilgrims seeking solace in the sanctuary of poetry, spoke of anguish and yearning. "We feel like somebody has at last discovered me," they murmured, their voices echoing the collective yearning of souls adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

As the conversation unfolded, Manu delved deeper into the essence of poetry, likening it to a reverberation in the innermost core of the soul. "There's a closed room inside us," he mused, his words unravelling the intricacies of human emotions. "We walk around the room, avoiding its depths, circling around but never daring to enter." It was a poignant reflection on the human condition – a perpetual dance between vulnerability and resilience, between longing and belonging.

In the fleeting moments of the session, amidst the ebb and flow of words, Manu painted a portrait of poetry as a bridge spanning the chasm of the abyss, a beacon of hope illuminating the darkest corners of the human experience. Across the abyss, amidst the echoes of world poetry, lay the promise of connection – a testament to the enduring power of words to transcend boundaries and unite disparate souls in a symphony of shared humanity.



*There's a closed room inside us. We walk around the room, avoiding its depths, circling around but never daring to enter.*





# Tale of two wanderlusts from Pala

**T**wo globetrotters from Pala—Paul Zacharia and Santhosh George Kulangara—shared their travel experiences with an enchanted audience at the MBIFL.

“While the temptation for my travels is SK Pottekkat, it was my readers who made me travel all around, because ninety percent of my visits are on their invitation,” Zacharia said. Interestingly, it was at the behest of Mathrubhumi that he travelled to Africa for a period of five months and wrote about his travel experiences.

Santhosh George Kulangara recollected that his uncle, who was working in Brazil, wanted him to become a priest. “Though he used to send letters to different people at home, the last two pages of all these letters



were devoted to kids and that would have graphic description of the life over there—people, places and their food habits,” he said.

Those descriptions enamoured little Santhosh who believed if he became a priest, he could travel the world. However, he realised later in life that one can travel the world without making these commitments. That’s how ‘Sancharam’ was conceptualised, which visually captivated whatever Pottekkat por-

trayed in words.

Talking about politics, Zacharia opined that no parties have shown any commitment to the poor Malayalis in Kerala. At the same time, Santhosh said that he never felt democracy is the best way of governance. There are places where dictators rule in a very good manner and the stand of those who rule is important, he added. When a member of the audience asked him about a potential trip to North Korea, Santosh joked that it could probably be his last trip ever!

Meanwhile, Zacharia believes no one will gain anything by listening to saints, preachers or politicians but that’s not the case with the travelogues of Santhosh George.

**MBIFL24**  
**Day 2**

## Here lies the action!

Enjoyed MBIFL's opening day? Don't miss out on these stalwarts whose discussions could make your day.



**KK Shailaja**  
MLA/Former Kerala Health Minister  
Session: Sthreekal Nirmicha Keralam



**Manu S. Pillai**  
Author/Historian  
Session: What is History?



**P Samuthirakani**  
Actor/Director  
Session: The New Tamil Cinema



**Gopinath Muthukad**  
Magician  
Session: Vyathyastharaya-varkkum Saadhyamaanu!



**Ouseppachan**  
Music Director  
Session: Paattinte Pattunool