



MATHRUBHUMI INTERNATIONAL
FESTIVAL OF LETTERS



Artists must uphold independence, says Ramachandra Guha



riters and film-makers or anyone involved in a creative activity should always hold their artistic independence supreme, said eminent writer and public intellectual Ramachandra

Guha. "They should never succumb to any political favours and thereby allow themselves to be cheated or deprived of their creative pursuits," he said while inaugurating the valedictory function of the fifth edition of Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters at Kanakakunnu in Thiruvananthapuram on Sunday.

Emphasizing that no writer or artist should accept favours from political leaders or from the powers that be, he said you should always insulate yourself from such baits. "In case you get an invitation, meet the person at a public place like I do. Whoever wants to meet me for a discussion, is invited to a restaurant where I pay for my coffee and the guest pays for his," he said. And even if the chief minister calls you, use the occasion to preach positive sense to them, urged Guha.

"If Kerala government and its leaders had listened to words that made sense, there may not have been so many knee-jerk political protests against developmental initiatives. That perhaps would have made Kerala a Silicon Valley," he said.

He also shared his memories visiting Kerala for



the first time in 1995, along with environmentalist Madhav Gadgil, and meeting M.K. Prasad, who was the pro-vice chancellor of Cochin University of Science and Technology. "He was standing on the platform in a bush shirt and rubber chappals, and that was Kerala for me."

This could be because of two things, he said. "One is the egalitarian culture of the state that has many roots, which is partly due to communism; though some communist intellectuals will wish to claim all the credits." Guha explained that this happened because of the social reformation movement of Sree Narayana Guru, the progressive Maharajas, and the fact that the religious organisations of the state comprising Hindus, Muslims and Christians had a socially progressive agenda compared to other parts of India.

Earlier, Guha and author Anjum Hasan put forward an in-depth discussion about the former's relationship with his friend and editor Rukun Advani, a topic which is also the subject of Guha's latest work 'The Cooking of Books: A Literary Memoir.'

Guha reminisced about his early days when he studied at the prestigious St. Stephen's College in Delhi. "When I was in the first year of college, there were many remarkable people in the third year batch. For example, our college cricket captain under whom I played was Arun Lal, who later was capped 16 times for India. Then there were people who went on to become foreign secretaries, CEOs of companies, judges of the Supreme Court and so on. But, the two most brilliant people in the third year were Rukun Advani and the person who is your current MP, Shashi Tharoor," Guha said.



I left Ukraine, but Ukraine did not leave me.
Zanna Sloniowska, Polish journalist



The Truth According To Ma Anand Sheela

✍ Shalini Chandran

A spirited woman at 74, Ma Anand Sheela, the former spokesperson of the Rajneesh movement, spoke with grace at the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024. Here are some excerpts from the conversation she had with the Editor of Mathrubhumi, Manoj K. Das.

● ***Tell us about those days, the days preceding the separation. How were you mentally preparing yourself?***

There came a point where I had to look inside myself for my integrity. Either I compromise my integrity, or I leave. That was the intuitive feeling that came up in me. It was the time when Bhagwan had started experimenting with drugs, first through medicine and then I don't know what else. I got informed that Bhagwan's house was ordering huge amounts of drugs.

I had the responsibility to protect Bhagwan and his teachings. I went up to him and asked, 'This is what I have heard. Please tell me what I have to do. This is a very volatile situation. The U.S. government is looking for an excuse to throw us out. We will be in a big situation. Not only that, it is hazardous to your health.' His answer was very casual, 'Sheela, you do not interfere. You stay out of it.'

● ***When did you decide you needed to have another Sheela avatar?***

I was very disturbed by Bhagwan's drug use. Normally, Bhagwan always supported me when I brought information. When he asked me to stay out of it, I could not compromise. He had given me a job to protect him but I could not do that. I went through six months of conflict and unhappiness. For the first time in my life, I felt unhappy in my work to a point that I would feel comfortable when I was away from Rajneeshpuram. One morning, returning from my travels, I was suffering from severe bronchitis and infection in the throat. I wrote a letter to Bhagwan thanking him



for giving me the opportunity but it was time for me to go. The next day, I left.

● ***You admit that, beyond all spiritual curtains, there was a love bond between you and Bhagwan?***

This is something you must understand. My love affair with Bhagwan was not spiritual. It was very human.

● ***Was it physical too?***

No, it was not physical. I have not had sex with him. My intimacy with him was far greater than physical involvement. He was dependent on me. I took great pleasures in fulfilling his small desires.

They were not small desires—Rolls Royce and diamond-studded watches that he got when he wanted.

● ***How did you raise money for these things?***

There are many ways. We were very good business people. We were self sustained. Bhagwan himself had a wonderful product that is relevant even today—his lectures, video and audio publications. Money keeps coming and money has to be used. If it was Bhagwan's pleasure, why not?

● ***When did he start loving the huge riches of a Sanyasi life?***

It started after Pune ashram. You can blame

that on me. I was in the U.S. My brother had a Rolls Royce and I enjoyed driving it. I thought, why not take one for Bhagwan.

● ***Bhagwan always believed in free expression of sex. That was part of the philosophy of Oshoism. You say that you never had sex with Bhagwan. What stopped the two of you?***

I never thought of it because sex is not where my feelings were. I had my own lovers and Bhagwan had his own. We didn't hide any feelings. If Bhagwan would have reason to have sex with me, I would consent to it without hesitation, without a thought.

● ***Were you ever jealous of Bhagwan?***

The question of jealousy never came to me. He made me his secretary. He said, 'I am putting you in a position of envy. Don't fall for this trap of jealousy.' Very profound words. I have not felt jealousy, even today, never.

● ***There are speculations that, I beg your pardon, you were behind the bio attack on Bhagwan. Speculations that indicated he did not take your leaving lightly and that he accused you of taking away money and things...***

The world says many things. Bhagwan accused me of many more things. That, in itself, shows it was not true. It was for my protection.

● ***How could you say it's for your protection?***

Bear in mind, when normal lovers break-up, the accusation flies from one end to the other end. Bhagwan was a comfortable man, with Sheela around. Now, Sheela is gone. Naturally, accusations will be there.

● ***Do you think the world misunderstood him?***

The world has not understood Bhagwan because we have a very limited thought process. Bhagwan talks in contradictions. You need to have enough intelligence to walk in between the contradictions. Try me.



If the media people are not safe in a country, it means the democracy is at stake.

R Rajagopal, Journalist

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Who Is Afraid of the Cartoonist?



Though cartoon cannot be seen as a language, it goes side by side with a language, and if a language is extinct, it can migrate to another language and it can never be killed,

E.P. Unny



K. Unnikrishnan, S. Gopalakrishnan, E.P. Unny and T.K. Sujith



Is the cartoon dead? Though there are efforts to kill the art of cartooning, which is a voice of dissent, it can never be killed even if it is denied space in print media, according to the practicing cartoonists who took part in a session on the present state of cartooning in the country, at Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024 at Kanakkunnu in Thiruvananthapuram.

Veteran cartoonist E P Unny, who began the discussion, moderated by writer S Gopalakrishnan, said cartoon has witnessed amazing migrations as an art form. "It has migrated from language to language and culture to culture," he said.

After the word 'cinema', cartoon is the English word that anyone can understand, he said, adding that graphic novels are highly popular among the younger generation. Though cartoon cannot be seen as a language, it goes side by side with a language, and if a

language is extinct, it can migrate to another language and it can never be killed, said Unny.

At the same time, there is also the question as to whether Kerala cartoonists today are averse to use global themes, said Gopalakrishnan.

According to K Unnikrishnan, the way the cartoonists in Kerala use politics is different, and they handle mostly socio-political issues apart from the routine politics of the state.

They do cartoons on subjects that are of public interest here, and the graffiti they did in all the districts during the times of COVID-19 underscore this, he added.

T K Sujith said cartoons have a universal language, and always uphold the voice of dissent and if that voice is throttled it is equal to throttling the voice of the citizens. He also said politics is intoxication in Kerala, in the same manner as spirituality.

All the participants in the discussion

were of the opinion that a variety of subjects, including environmental and gender issues, find place in the cartoons here, but political cartoons get the maximum attention.

There was also discussion on the absence of women in the field of cartooning, barring a few personalities like Manjula Padmanabhan and the late Maya Kamath.

Responding to this issue, Unny said this is the scenario in most parts of the world, but there is no clear-cut answer as to why it is so. However, the female presence is there in the graphic narratives. Unny also opined that Malayali cartoonists are increasingly insensitive towards gender issues.

At the session, a graphic novel, 'Vichithrasoothram', written and illustrated by Gopalakrishnan and his son and filmmaker Niranjana R Bharathi, was also released by writer Paul Zacharia, by handing over the copy to E P Unny and writer Unni R.





photo gallery



photo gallery

Curtain falls on MBIFL 2024

The fifth edition of the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters came

to a grand conclusion on Sunday evening with over 400 delegates from around the world deftly conducting sessions on topics ranging from literature to art, culture, cinema and food over a four-day period.

MBIFL 2024 witnessed the exploration of various cultures and identities while delving into plurality.

The valedictory function was presided over by notable historian and writer Ramachandra Guha along with Mathrubhumi Managing Director M.V. Shreyams Kumar, Managing Editor P.V. Chandran, Public Relations Vice-President P.V. Mini, author Sabin Iqbal and Mathrubhumi Director-Digital Business Mayura Shreyams Kumar on the dais.

MBIFL curator P.K. Rajasekharan delivered the welcome address. Renowned singer M Jayachandran and lyricist B.K. Harinarayanan composed and performed a song for 'Ka' (MBIFL).

In his address, P.V. Chandran highlighted the legacy of Mathrubhumi which has always encouraged the process of writing as well as writers, and noted that MBIFL is an extension of this



M.V. Shreyams Kumar stated that all speakers at the function were impressed by the discerning audience and this was the victory of the festival. He said it portrayed a positive picture of the state to the authors of the world. Shreyams Kumar also noted that a space to discuss varied thoughts and emotions was the need of the hour and MBIFL was successful in creating the same.

At the same time, he also announced the Mathrubhumi Book of the Year Award to Devika Rege for her book, 'Quarterlife: A Novel'. Rege expressed her gratitude and said the theme of the festival, 'Exploring Plurality,' was an apt one given the growing intolerance around us. The author was also awarded a cash prize of Rs 2 lakh.

"Inclusivity may not come naturally. The theme 'Exploring Plurality' was a conscious choice. We need to understand the different universes and at the same time not compromise on facts or truth. It is about the freedom of choice. Truth, equality and liberty are Mathrubhumi's foundation and we stand by it," said Mayura Shreyams Kumar while thanking the audience, speakers and communities who came together to make the festival a huge success.

P.V. Mini proposed the vote of thanks and expressed hope the audience will return next year.

legacy.

Ramachandra Guha began the inaugural address by reminiscing about his first visit to Kerala and being shocked at the simplicity of the people. He pointed out that there is an organic connection between intellectuals and ordinary people in Kerala. MBIFL is a manifestation of the cultural and literary tradition of Kerala and it showcased diversity at its best, Guha said.



Deep Insights into Women, History and Migrations



Radhika Retnam

In a very intensively intriguing session titled 'Reflections on Women, History and Migrations' at Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024, British novelist Mary Chamberlain got hold of the audience with her insights into the often overlooked narratives of marginalized communities, specially focusing on Caribbean migration and the resilience of women in history. Moderated by Bindu Amat, the chat explored Chamberlain's pioneering use of unconventional resources like oral history, to uncover and preserve the stories of people whose voices are often sidelined.

Chamberlain's interest in deconstructing societal structures led her to engage directly with individuals impacted by migration. At the session, she spoke passionately about her firsthand experiences conversing with Caribbean plantation labourers, exploring the deep layers of forced migration and its impact on their families. Through trans-generational history, she emphasized the importance of inclusive and generous family structures, where tables often saw gatherings of up to thirty individuals, highlighting the resilience and strength visible within these communities.

Her acclaimed work, 'Fenwomen: A Portrait of Women in an English Village', throws light on the narratives of marginalized women, offering a glimpse into their lives and struggles. Chamberlain later steered the conversation towards the limitations imposed on these women, constrained to low-paid jobs with limited opportunities for advancement.

Furthermore, Chamberlain's direct involvement in smuggling African pam-

Mary Chamberlain's dedication to unravel lesser-known narratives and amplifying marginalized voices serves as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling in reshaping historical discourse

phlets during a period of prohibition was testament of her commitment to amplifying voices of resistance and resilience. Reflecting on her clandestine activities, she recounted the challenges and risks involved, emphasizing the significance of sharing stories of struggle and resilience in the face of adversity.

Throughout the session, Chamberlain's insights underscored the interconnectedness of migration, history and the resilience of women. Her dedication to unravel lesser-known narratives and amplifying marginalized voices serves as a testament to the transformative power of storytelling in reshaping historical discourse and a deep understanding of the same.

No doubt, 'Reflections on Women, History and Migrations' offered a thought-provoking exploration of Chamberlain's pioneering work, highlighting the importance of inclusivity and resilience in shaping our understanding of history and migration.



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I Do Not Use The Word Prostitute, Says Ruchira Gupta



Literature is always truth; it is either the truth we have experienced or the truth we witnessed

Ruchira Gupta



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uring her session at the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024, Emmy-winning journalist Ruchira Gupta highlighted her journey from being a journalist to founding an NGO (Apne Aap) that works for women's rights and the eradication of sex trafficking. "Literature is always truth; it is either the truth we have experienced or the truth we witnessed," she said.

In her debut novel, 'I Kick and I Fly', she narrates real-life stories about teenage girls in Nepal. On one of her trips to the mountains of Nepal as a journalist, the author

got into a conversation with the elders of a village about the absence of girls there. To her horror, she realized the girls were shipped off 1,400 km away to Mumbai for sex trafficking. It was a trade facilitated by the families (the fathers) of these children.

"I remember the tears in mothers' eyes for their children. It was heartbreaking," she said. That marked the beginning of Ruchira Gupta's journey as an activist.

"I do not use or encourage the use of the word prostitute. I use the word 'prostituted' woman or person

instead. The word prostitute stigmatizes the victim. The word sex worker is also diabolical; it sterilises the exploitation associated with the job," she said.

In her book, she talks about a 14-year-old girl, Heera, from the outskirts of Bihar. Her family wants to sell her to a brothel for money. The story delves into how the girl is taken under the wing of a mentor, a kung-fu coach (the character is called Rini Di in the book) who teaches her to fight and to win. In many ways, Ruchira Gupta herself is the Rini Di for many girls out there.

Exploring the Essence of Language in Translation

 Radhika Retnam

As the audience sat amidst the vibrant tapestry of voices, each weaving its own narrative in the session titled 'Lost and Gained in Translation' at the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024, they found themselves immersed in a contemplative journey through the nuances of language and the art of translation.

Poet and translator A.J. Thomas, with a sage-like demeanour, proclaimed, "There is no need

to lament over the loss of something while you translate." His words gave a sense of assurance and realization that translation is not merely a mechanical process but a transformative act of creative interpretation.

Academician and translator Tejaswini Niranjana challenged the notion that translation is a mere imitation of the original. "We should learn to imagine translation as a valid form of writing," she said. Her assertion resonated deeply, dispelling the false dichotomy between originality and translation, and inviting us to embrace translation as a rich and nuanced form of literary

expression.

Amidst the backdrop of technological advancements, the conversation turned towards the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in translation. Scotland-based poet and translator Juana Adcock, with a poet's sensitivity, illuminated the limitations of machine translation, emphasizing the irreplaceable human nuance and cultural significance that enriches human translation. Her words echoed with a poignant truth, reminding us that while AI may enhance efficiency, it cannot replicate the depth and complexity of human interpretation.



‘Democracy Means the Freedom to Disagree’

Voice of dissent is also the voice of democracy, but those who boldly express their opinion always face many challenges too. Political commentator and observer Advocate A Jayashankar, who always faced bouquets and brickbats alike for his blatant political comments, was equally vocal in the solo session dealing with the importance of the voice of dissent at the fifth edition of Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters in Thiruvananthapuram.

“Democracy means the freedom to disagree, and if that freedom is there democracy will be successful,” he said. At the same time, the reality is different, and the society here is not equipped yet to embrace democracy, according to him.

“It is very interesting to talk and hear about the definition of democracy – for the people, by the people, of the people – but the reality here is not all the same,” Jayashankar said. Though we have a democratic setup here and the government is elected democratically, things get changed once they assume power, he pointed out. Most of the bigger nations face this problem, he pointed out. However, the democratic setup is successful in India because of our diversity, Jayashankar added.

“Democracy can thrive only in the smaller, developed and capitalist nations such as Denmark, Norway and Sweden, and the gulf between the rich and the poor is also very less in these places,” he said.

When caste and communal equations call the shots in choosing the candi-



dates for the elections in our country, what is the meaning of democracy, he asked.

The increasing level of corruption and disintegration on the political front will have its cascading effect on the entire system and the issues with judiciary, police and other sections should be seen from this perspective, according to Jayashankar.

At the same time, even though you can criticize the leaders, your voice would be sabotaged if you criticize the business people, because they have money power, Jayashankar added.

Talking about human rights, he said the police face one of the highest levels of human rights violation in our

country, and the increasing number of suicides among them underscores this. Jayashankar also spoke about what he termed as certain ‘undesirable’ tendencies in the judiciary and also the problems faced by the judiciary in the nation, which again affect the fabric of democracy.

“Whenever there is a problem with democracy we should raise our voice,” he asserted, adding that we should struggle against the objectionable actions that affect the meaning of democracy. It is not necessary that every struggle would be successful, but we should not stop fighting against the elements that destroy democracy, he opined.



When caste and communal equations call the shots in choosing the candidates for the elections in our country, what is the meaning of democracy?



'I Keep Explaining Who I am and Where I am From'



The idea of Africa and Uganda that is usually propagated is usually stereotyped, but her own experience of Africa was not that, asserts Ugandan writer

-Doreen Baingana

Christina Alex

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oreen Baingana is a Ugandan writer known for her debut novel, 'Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe'. The book is a collection of interconnected short stories that explore the lives of three sisters in Uganda growing into women during turbulent times. Baingana, who took part in various sessions at Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024, speaks on writing as a woman of colour.

● *What inspired you to write 'Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe', and how did you come up with the idea for the interconnected short stories?*

Initially, they were separate stories. When I was putting them all together, I realised that all three characters seemed to come from similar backgrounds. So I decided to make them all sisters, make it linked, just to show how we can all come from one place but lead very different lives. I explore that in the stories. I also wanted to explore

how girls become women. It's a whole journey. From little innocent girls who are not yet gendered, suddenly they have to begin seeing themselves as a woman. The process of this transformation through lived experiences is very interesting.

● *Would you say that your personal experiences influenced the stories that you write?*

It does to a certain extent. But more than that, it's the stories that I read in the papers and otherwise about Africa that move me to write. The idea of Africa and Uganda that is usually propagated is as some place that is diseased, poor and ignorant. These are the stereotypes and my own experience of Africa was not that. I lived a life that any girl would have lived in any other part of the world. I wanted to deal with these misconceptions. I wanted to portray what Africa is.

● *How do you approach portraying complex themes such as family dynamics,*

identity, and societal changes in your work?

The beauty of storytelling or fiction is that all these things can be analysed within it. They say God is in the details. For that, you have to go down to the senses. What did I smell, hear and touch? By writing this down, we can make the reader also sense the same and experience the story from the inside out. The language that we use also adds another dimension to the story.

● *How do you navigate the balance between fiction and reality when addressing political and social issues in your writing?*

This is always a difficult part of writing. I am working on a historical fiction novel right now. It is based on a real-life woman rebel. The information I have are facts but I have to present it as fiction. We go through fiction to bring out the emotions within a story.



Plurality should reflect the voice of the voiceless

 Annie Raja

It is significant that the fifth edition of Mathrubhumi litfest is focusing on the manifold character of plurality. The reality today is that the plurality we discuss often revolves around caste and religion, while the aspect of voice, particularly the voice of the voiceless within the context of plurality, remains largely overlooked. When we envision plurality as a garden with a variety of flowers, the unheard voice is absent even in our subconscious.

I believe that true plurality emerges when the voice of everybody is heard - men, women, and other genders. While discussing women's reservation, there is little debate on the importance of women's presence in the legislature. Even parties that vigorously advocate for this cause overlook this aspect.

The integrity of the legislature, the effectiveness of law implementation, gains significance only when the opinions of women and transgender society are considered. Legislation should reflect the perspectives of women and transgenders to be truly inclusive and comprehensive. Ironically, this issue seems to be of little concern to political parties.

The conversation often centers around increasing the number of women representatives in the legislature, but this alone will not serve the purpose if they do not



have a significant role in formulating policies and laws. Laws are not crafted exclusively for men; they are meant to benefit society as a whole, transcending gender boundaries. When we examine parliament, the majority of its members are men, and they also dominate the standing committees. In some committees, there is no representation of women at all.

It is doubtful whether the opinion of women was considered when the Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), the safe motherhood intervention under the National Health Mission, was launched. There seemed to be little

concern about the input of women. It is essential to acknowledge that female foeticide is still prevalent in many parts of the country, with advertisements promoting it.

Our approach to plurality should be gender-sensitive, viewed in the broader context of gender. Even if women were to receive 33 percent reservation in the legislature, it is crucial to ensure that their voices are heard and that they play a significant role in decision-making. They should have a clear role in debates and decision-making processes to combat patriarchy effectively.



The integrity of the legislature, the effectiveness of law implementation, gains significance only when the opinions of women and transgender society are considered.



Subhashini Ali's Reimagined India

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n the day of the grand finale of the Mathrubhumi International Festival of Letters 2024, Subhashini Ali, politburo member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), provided an insightful experience into four basic aspects where the country could have done better. In her session titled 'Reimagine India,' Subhashini delved into the areas of poverty, secularism, elimination of caste and gender equality.

Subhashini said that the kind of land reforms that were enacted in Kerala is the bedrock of the Kerala Model.

"If my grand-aunt at the age of 100 can live in a comatose condition in her house alone without any of her children, it's because the panchayat has a healthcare facility and palliative care is provided. These are things that people of Kerala take for granted. They do not exist in most parts of India," she noted, while adding that land reforms are essential for the progress of any country.

Subhashini argued that one of the reasons land reforms did not happen in India was because the country's post-independence leaders compromised with landlordism and feudalism; even though, in principle, they agreed with the need to distribute land among landless. "They did not want to risk upsetting the feudal vested interests on whom they depended for a lot of support," she said.

The veteran politician explained that when she envisages India, she reimagines a country that she once saw from the roof of her house in



1971— a time when every single field that belonged to her house was taken away by the government and given to those people who practised agriculture. "We were one of the families that did not go to court against it," she proudly recalled.

If India is to be united and if the country is to progress, the defence of secularism is absolutely essential, Subhashini observed. She also pointed out that state administrations have failed to protect minorities whenever they should have come to their defence.

Talking about caste oppression, she said the most oppressed of the Dalits belong to the states where there are the highest number of landless; where they are, therefore, also unable to access education and health.

"In Kerala, efforts are being made to improve government schools. More children are getting enrolled in government schools than private schools. That's something I feel very proud about. But in the rest of the country, government schools are being closed down," she said.



If India is to be united and if the country is to progress, the defence of secularism is absolutely essential



As Fiction Writers, You Cannot Let Fear Get In'

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It was a pleasant surprise for Devika Rege who won the 'Book of the Year' award for her novel 'Quarterlife' at the fifth edition of the MBIFL, which concluded in Thiruvananthapuram on Sunday. The novel deals with various aspects like identity politics, corporate avarice and has been described as a social and philosophical inquiry. Following are the excerpts of an interaction with Rege:

You have won this award. This is a brave attempt. How did you arrive at the theme?

I started writing 'Quarterlife' in the run-up to the 2014 elections. At the time, a certain kind of polarisation had started to take place within the middle class that we hadn't seen before.

I had just come back from writing school and had started working on the book. At the time, I didn't know I would be spending the next seven years on it. The book took a lot of research. I spoke to people from every part of the political spectrum to understand how the young people in the country think, what kind of world views they embody, what is the psychology beneath those beliefs, whether they are economic or political and what happens when those beliefs run up against your conscience. That formed the book.

How do you feel about this recognition?

I am very privileged to have bagged the award. As far as I know, Mathrubhumi is a publication that was founded at the time of the freedom struggle



and has embodied the ideals of freedom of speech. This festival, the theme of plurality could not be more important and timely. I am very touched that 'Quarter-life' won the award.

Did you face any struggle to get this book published?

The book is not polemical in the sense that it tries to present various points of view. It calls upon the conscience of the reader to decide what is happening. The book did take time to find an editor and a publisher who believed in it. There were times when I was waiting. I am fortunate to have worked with HarperCollins and my editor. I am grateful the book is now out.

My family was concerned if the book would cause any trouble but India isn't China yet. So, there is still room to take chances. I am sure non-fiction writers are more vulnerable. As fiction writers in English, if we let the fear get to us, we are allowing ourselves to compromise with society. You cannot let the fear get in because you know they say, 'For every book burnt, hundreds more may never be written.' The hope is never let that censor get internalised. So far, there is no trouble. The book is out. People are reading and they are having conversations. I am moved to know that the book has this life now.