

The Festive split in the cultural and socio-economic landscape of Karachi

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Abstract:

Festivals in Karachi serve as a platform for the fusion of different social classes. While they instigate the idea of a very modernized and urbanized structure of society, they out rightly exclude the very working class of the city. This paper is an attempt to critically analyze the details that should be taken into account while managing festivals. Using personal experiences, informal interviews and articles, the paper studies minor yet important details about festivals such as locations and pricing in order to rule out any and all assumptions. The major references used by this paper include, Hibdige's *Subculture*, Appaduria's *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*, Oswell's *Culture and Society*, and case studies from Ghana and around the globe.

Festivals as we know today are arenas of social interaction, renovators of tradition and proof of existence of life in a city, town or any social setting. While most festivals were formerly branded under the silver slogan of "tradition", humans have come a long way to see them as luxurious gatherings of people belonging to a particular social class and merely

having the time for such commitments. Testa (2014), in his text *Rethinking the Festival: Power and Politics* claims that festivals more often than not, are embedded in “given places” that work according to a certain tradition, follow certain rituals and timeframes etc., and that “such festivals can be considered as a privileged modality for the “socialization of space and time”” (p. 61). Even way before the origin of such festivals and commemorations, specifically the ones that we will be discussing further in this paper, the understanding that festivals, of not all but most had much to do with power has always existed. In 1979 Goff in Testa’s aforementioned text argued that, “only the charismatic holders of power are the masters of calendar: kings, clergymen, revolutionaries” (p. 61). It may be important here to pose the question about the kind of people who experience these cultural festivities or why they choose to do so. The answer to this is intrinsically tied to the concept of culture. In his *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, T.S. Eliot (2006) claims that, “the culture of the individual cannot be isolated from that of the group, and ... the culture of the group cannot be abstracted from that of the whole society” (p. 8). In another instance Eliot, as cited in Oswell, states,

I mean first of all what the anthropologists mean: the way of life of a particular people living together in one place. That culture is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs; in their religion. But these things added together do not constitute the culture ... a culture is more than the assemblage of its

arts, customs, and religious beliefs. These things all act upon each other, and fully to understand one you have to understand all. (2006, p. 8)

The idea that needs to be taken into consideration and be emphasized from the aforementioned extract relates to the notion of society. Activities, beliefs, arts and rituals pertaining to societies are nowhere known to be confined to any particular group. How have we, then, come to see these festivals catering only to the elite classes? This paper attempts to help identify changes in social structures and the active yet subtle exclusivity of festivals and what gatherings in Karachi offer to its wide-spread middle and lower class.

While a growing middle class indicates towards a rapidly growing economy, it also means a rapidly increasing poorer lower class. With an inflation rate of 4.16% and an average household containing 6 to 7 people, it is important to briefly talk about the socio-economic landscape of Karachi before we reflect on the injustices of these on-going festivals (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2018, p. 8). Classes in Karachi are distinguished in three major groups; the lower class, the middle class and the upper class. Karachiites belonging to areas such as Layari, Korangi, Orangi, Landhi, Lalukhet, Golimar, North Karachi and others with an income of 4,000 – 20,000 are considered a part of the lower class. These people include mechanics, government schoolteachers, drivers, tailors, plumbers etc. People living in Gulshan, Nazimabad, North Nazimabad, Federal B Area and

other such localities with an income of 50,000 - 100,000 are considered a part of the middle class; generally consisting of doctors, engineers, professors, private school teachers, businessmen etc. The upper class typically resides in Defence, Clifton, KDA and PECHS with an income of 100,000 (Subohi, 2019) and above. Now, the absence of recent statistical data on household income indicators does pose important questions of legitimacy but this paper relies on ethnographic and primary research conducted through interviews of people who have attended events such as KLF, Adab Fest, Coke Fest, Karachi Eat, Lahooti etc.

Let us consider the linguistic aspect of festivals such as Lahooti Melo, Adab and Karachi Literature Festival, all three of which took place this year in different parts of Sindh. Lahooti Melo, the brainchild of Saif Samejo caters mostly to the population of Jamshoroo and the neighboring, small city of, Hyderabad. Every year the expected audience is people from the interior Sindh region with the exception of the panelists who are usually inhabitants of Karachi. Given the location of the Festival, the medium of expression and the language pre-dominantly used should be inclusive of the audience. However, Lahooti Melo has and continues to use English as its medium of expression excluding the language of the usual folk music and very few sessions. Similarly, the Karachi Literature Festival and the newly initiated 1st Adab Festival used English as a dominant mode of conversation. Not only was Adab Festival in English, it was not very different from KLF as the founders of the festival i.e. Asif Farrukhi and

Ameena Sayied had claimed. This does not only foster an environment of 'exclusivity' but also actively "others"¹ people who are present. In a newspaper article by Dawn, Muttahir Khan (2019) writes that,

The term 'linguistic imperialism' stands for a dominant nation's practice of transferring its cultural, social, political and, even, economic features and ideologies by transferring its language to other nations. Intellectuals and linguists like Robert Philipson, who wrote the famous book Linguistic Imperialism in 1992, describe the influence of the English language over third world countries' socio-lingual horizons a continuation, in a modern pattern, of colonialism and conquest. Decades back, Nazis and Soviets also condemned this lingual imperialism declaring English the language of world capitalism. (p. 1)

Therefore, in conventions and congregations such as the one mentioned above, it becomes extremely important to pose questions pertaining to the medium of expression used. Festivals then can also be understood as a continuation, in a modern pattern, of colonialism and conquest. Not to criticize the top-notch sessions by Zarrar Khuhro and Jibran Nisar on Suicide Awareness and Youth Activism respectively and others as such, there is a need to ask the questions about who these sessions are benefiting? Already published authors? Or students (including myself) who

¹ "Othering is not about liking or disliking someone. It is based on the conscious or unconscious assumption that a certain identified group poses a threat to the favored group. It is largely driven by politicians and the media, as opposed to personal contact. Overwhelmingly, people don't "know" those that they are Othering" (Powell, 2019).

go to private institutions and are already aware of such issues? KLF, LLF, ILF alike have contributed almost nothing to the working class of this country apart from taking jibes at authors that were not present or refused to attend for whatever reason. In KLF, the session called 'Who's afraid of Umera Ahmed?' was moderated by students from LUMS and had an audience of mostly elite women of Karachi who chose to mock the absent author for her typically conventionally, fitting the state narrative novels. At LLF, a session was held where the works of Altaf Fatima, Fehmida Riaz and Khalida Hussain were discussed and when asked why there were no women on the panel, one of the three male panelists responded that "who's stopping the women?" (Amna, 2019) disregarding the old age system of oppression that never let women progress while blatantly overlooking the fact that gendered gatekeeping still exists.

Apart from being intellectually inaccessible, due to the medium of language and expression being English, these literature festivals have not contributed much to the political situation of our country. They claim to give space and recognition to upcoming authors but their claims do not really matter because all the upcoming authors who are invited to speak are US-educated/based diasporic adults who only know what is going on in Pakistan from behind a TV screen and are in reality completely divorced from modern-day realities of Pakistan. There is little impact of publishing literature that is not available or accessible to the majority of the country in any sense. Perhaps, the reason Umera Ahmed is so popular amongst the

populace is because she uses Urdu – a native language – as her medium of expression.

Moreover, these literature festivals always have ending sessions that involve either *qawwali* or folk music in what seems as an attempt to remind themselves of their religious and ethnic roots. If not completely unnecessary, such traditions then only feed into an orientalist narrative that propagates the exoticization of local culture. In a study of festival in Ghana, Carola Lentz (2001) wrote that;

Today cultural performances during these festivals are always witnessed by state television and by radio and newspaper journalists, as well as by private video cameras and cassette recorders. Local culture, therefore, is staged in a national context and is mediated by the mass media. Cultural festivals are thus also sites of cultural innovation and arenas where ethnic and local identities, national identity, popular culture, and culture staged by the state confront one another. (p. 48)

It also seems important here to recall Appaduria's take on global culture,

The central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thereby proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular. (Durham & Kellner, 2012, p. 43)

With most of these festivals, not only reaching a larger global audience, but also being highly influenced by it with recitation of Marxist poetry by Parveen Shaakir, Habib Jalib, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ahmed Faraz etc., which however, becomes redundant in front of state apparatuses and intensive gatekeeping. What we are witnessing then is the sameness of festivals all around the globe (in their literariness²) with a veil of uniqueness.

Moreover, let us consider the locations of such festivals and how it relates to the exclusion of the middle and working classes. Karachi Literature Festival has been taking place at Beach Luxury Hotel, a four-star hotel located near the port for the past eight years. Adab Festival took place at the Governor House also located far from the center of the city near Karachi Gym Khana (Official Web Portal of Karachi Metropolitan Corporation, n.d). The location of these festivals dictates the intended audience of these festivals. Has the question of accessibility through transport been duly considered by the organizers? Even if there is no purposeful exclusion, inevitably the audience ends up becoming a specific class of people who, given the setting of these festivals, belong to upper and elite classes. As a consequence, these festivals, crossroads to intellectual, political and social engagement become spaces that hinder the immersion of the middle and working classes.

2 “The definition of ‘literariness’, similar to the reference to ‘literary’ in this thesis, refers to ‘high’ culture aesthetic qualities or process. Specifically, literariness is present when form, style or authorial persona is invested with moral and aesthetic value” (Stewart et al, 2009, p.6).

For further critical reflection of this ‘festival split’, primary research was conducted in order to represent the views that people generally hold about going to these events. A 21-year-old student stated that, “*Yaar mainay tou sirf chai hee pee thi, kunkay sirf wohi free thi*” (Participant A, 2019) [trans. I only drank chai because it was free] when they went to Coke Music and Food Festival for the first time. I had no further questions for him because I could understand exactly where he was coming from with regards to financial constraints as a student from a middle-class background. Other in-depth interviews unfolded the vast realities of, and expectations from, the wide-spread middle class of Karachi. Both Karachi Eat and Coke Music and Food Festival charge an entry fee of 300-400 PKR per person. A 23-year-old freelance writer told me that she often finds herself using discount vouchers (Jazz Cash, Careem etc.) in order to visit and buy from such places. When asked how much money one should keep when going to these festivals, she suggested that if one wanted to eat properly then taking 2-3k minimum would be appropriate. Upon further inquiry from her, a reflection upon class struggle as an arena of larger identity politics became necessary when, in answer to the question about how much she would spend at these festivals, she stated that, “So you have to keep in mind that I go to these festivals often but I never eat, because I do not have that kind of money to eat properly...”.

She further stated that “all the food festivals I have been to, I have always had food before or after” (Participant B, 2019), keeping in mind this person

categorizes herself as a part of the upper middle class of Karachi. She also told me that she had noticed that large groups from the lower middle class would be present at such festivals but were never seen purchasing food. Therefore, if one of the key characteristics of festivals is the creation of a sense of community³ amongst the general population, why are then festivals in Karachi creating larger class divisions? Why are people under so much pressure to attend social gatherings that they cannot afford to? In the book *Subculture*, Hebdige (2013) refers to the work of Volosinov who stated that,

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e. with the totality of users of the same set of signs of ideological communication. Thus, various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes the arena of the class struggle⁴. (p. 151)

In another interview, a freelance graphic designer reported that she purchased two slices of pizza worth 1000 PKR at Karachi Eat this year. She further said that she could not spend any money after that during the entire festival because she “had to get home” and that the reason she

³ Goldblatt (1997) for example suggests that a festival’s key characteristic is the sense of community created (Jepson, 2012).

⁴ “...suggested by Marx, in which economic, political, and ideological conditions jointly structure and realm of struggles that have as their effect the organization, disorientation, or reorganization of classes. Classes must thus be viewed as effects of struggles structured by objective conditions that are simultaneously economic, political, and ideological” (Przeworski, 1997, p. 34).

went to Karachi Eat was because she was in the area and was forced to go by her sister. Similar such sentiments that is, budgetary constraints were shared by people of the same financial (i.e. middle class and upper middle class) and educational background. So much so that some interviewees even claimed that they usually do not have the money to get by the rest of the month when they partake in such festivals. Who are these festivals catering to, then? More importantly who are the organizers in question and what are they thinking?

When bureaucracy meets a very hierarchical social order and when paroxysmal nationalistic sentiments permeate society, as in the cases of totalitarian regimes, the moment of festival - and public events in general gains even more power of representing and solidifying hierarchies and order. (Testa, 2014, p. 63)

In conclusion, there always will be people who claim that festivals like KLF, Coke Fest, Karachi Eat or Lahooti Melo add to the 'life of the city' or help get international recognition which to an extent is true; however, we need to be critically reflective about the class structures that these festivals help cement while being mindful about our privilege. Whilst a part of a city's population has the means and the luxury to go such festivals without thinking twice about transport-related issues or general accessibility in terms of medium of language, the larger section of the society will not, share the same experience. This 'festive split' needs to be realized because it suggests an active disregard towards addressing the needs and the

rights to pleasurable activities of a huge chunk of the city's population. Therefore, this paper argues for a more inclusive and thoughtful approach towards organizing of public festivals and events in order to lessen the class and power structures that the existing festival culture seem to be perpetuating.

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