

Hundreds show up at Delhi event to celebrate an Irish author few can understand

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Debdutta Chakraborty

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What began as a small literary observance in Ireland, Bloomsday has evolved into a global ritual over the years.



Irish actor Caitriona Ní Threasaigh at the event in Delhi | Photo: Debdutta Chakraborty | ThePrint

New Delhi: What does it take to get a crowd of people in straw hats to squeeze into a cramped room at a fancy museum on a humid summer evening? Surprisingly, a 122-year-old literary text and a 143-year-old author, whom nobody in modern times seems to fully understand, worked as reason enough to turn up.

Last weekend, the scenes at Delhi's Kiran Nadar Museum of Arts (KNMA) almost resembled a setting from a postmodern novel as hundreds gathered to celebrate Bloomsday.

Observed annually on 16 June, Bloomsday commemorates the life and work of Irish writer James Joyce and the single day in 1904 on which the events of *Ulysses* unfold. Joyceans dress up as characters from the novel and hold dramatised readings of his texts.

What began as a small literary observance in Ireland has evolved into a global ritual over the years. The date has also become an often-used symbol in pop culture across cinema, music, and literature. American author Sylvia Plath chose to get married on that date.

American director Richard Linklater, meanwhile, built his acclaimed 1995 film *Before Sunrise* around the same date.

Standing before a packed audience, Kevin Kelly, Ireland's Ambassador to India, noted how India has long been receptive to that tradition.

"Indian people love Irish literature," he told ThePrint. "They love a lot of our writers and our poets such as Yeats, Beckett, Wilde, and now Sally Rooney among younger readers."

The crowd was proof. Yet the scene was unintentionally and amusingly Joycean. There were not enough chairs. People stood shoulder to shoulder, sat on the floor (after they learned that leaning on the walls was prohibited) and craned their necks for a glimpse of the stage.

One attendee, upon learning that this reporter was there to cover the event, made a demand. "Please mention," she said, gesturing toward the crowd, "that there was no place for everyone to sit." It was a fair complaint.

The lasting impression of literature

The audience ranged from devoted Joyceans to readers who had never made it through the book. Many had come not because Joyce was easy, but because he wasn't. Everyone, however, had come to celebrate him.

The evening began with a dramatisation of excerpts from Molly Bloom's soliloquy from *Ulysses*. For an hour, attendees were transported to Joyce's Dublin in a standout performance. Reclining on a bed, Irish actor Caitríona Ní Threasaigh — who had travelled all the way from Ireland — performed the intimate portrait of a woman's inner ramblings, accompanied by a moving opera performance by Aching Shaiza, a pianist and mezzo-soprano based in India.

The collaboration, titled 'Soirée with Molly', emerged from the relationship Ní Threasaigh has maintained with Joyce's character for more than a decade.

"I just really love the character," she told ThePrint. "Every single time that I perform this, I hear different words, see different layers." Molly Bloom has become, in her words, "like a pen pal she keeps coming back to."

Part of her fascination lies in Joyce's ability to inhabit a consciousness not his own. "This was written over a hundred years ago by a man," Ní Threasaigh said. "And he really captured the inner world of a woman. I think that is absolutely unbelievable and unique."

Ní Threasaigh is convinced that his relevance remains because his works can never be called mechanical, especially in today's world where literature runs parallel to generative writing. "Can an AI today create a Joycean work?"

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Literature in a world of AI

It was a question increasingly confronting artists everywhere: What remains uniquely human in an age of machine-generated creativity?

She then proceeded to answer: “He (Joyce) was a true innovator. Joyce took risks with language, invented words and followed ideas wherever they led, even when they seemed strange or difficult. That kind of creative courage is hard to imagine emerging from an AI prompt. AI can imitate styles, but it rarely makes the kind of leaps that Joyce committed to.”

The theatre collective Kaivalya Plays, which staged an immersive dramatic reading of Joyce’s short story ‘Counterparts’ from *Dubliners* at the event, has embraced AI as a production tool. Yet Varoon Anand, the group’s founder, too draws a clear distinction between assistance and authorship.

“We are not changing a single word of James Joyce’s writing. We are using AI to make the experience more immersive. These are real places in Dublin. Not everyone can travel there, but AI can help show people what those places look like and bring those settings to life on stage. It’s a way of helping audiences see the world Joyce wrote about, without altering his work,” Anand said.

The impact lingered. “More than one person came to me and said that they never touched James Joyce because they were too scared. After seeing the performance, many changed their minds,” he added.

About 122 years after Leopold Bloom wandered through Dublin, Joyce still feels unexpectedly contemporary, he pointed out. There’s something for everyone.

Perhaps that explains why a literary festival devoted to an Irish modernist could draw such a crowd thousands of miles from Dublin. As people debated AI and artistic creation, the audience had gathered around a writer whose work seemed to embody precisely the qualities machines struggle to replicate: ambiguity, intuition, contradiction and emotional texture.

The evening ended with conversations about literature, theatre, and Ireland itself. One attendee asked Kelly whether the pubs mentioned in Joyce’s stories still existed. For the ambassador, that question justified the entire event. “It means people actually care enough to want to know more about Irish culture,” he pointed out.

(Edited by Aamaan Alam Khan)

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