

THE CITY AS PALIMPSEST: WRITINGS ON THE CULTURAL SPACES IN LAHORE

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Introduction

Palimpsest¹: The Spaces Within the City

Located on the banks of Ravi, the river that originates in the district of Kangra in Himachal Pradesh, India, the city of Lahore crisscrosses between the roads connecting South Asia with the Central Asian regions on the one hand and Kashmir and Tibet with the Sindh province in Pakistan. network of roadways and waterways permit the layers of cultural influences through migration and settlements. Historically, the city was a target of several invasions leading to destruction and reconstruction of the Walled City by the subsequent rulers leading to the creation of *mohallas* within and beyond the Walled City that provided the character of a palimpsest. The narratives of the city include travelogues, chronicles, memoirs, and fictional writings in different languages. Megasthenes, a Greek Ambassador, and several foreign travellers and poets like John Milton, Sir Thomas Moore, John Jockwood Kipling, and Rudyard Kipling followed by several writers have personalized the city of Lahore in their literary imagination. A much quoted proverb in Punjabi states, “He who has not yet seen Lahore hasn’t been born” to emphasize the inseparability of the city of Lahore and the culture of Punjab². The syncretic culture of the city, as reflected in the architectural heritage has been attracting the attention of the poets and fictional writers. Thus, the city is known for the poets for their love of the place like Madho Lal Hussain, Bulleh Shah, Mohammad Allama Iqbal, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Kishwar Naheed and fictional writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Intezar Hussain, Rudyard Kipling, Bapsi Sidhwa, Mohsin Hamid and Sara Suleri apart from historians.

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The paper is an attempt to examine the palimpsest nature of the city of Lahore. The origin of the city of Lahore is traced back to the legendary hero *Lav* who fortified the city. Many travel accounts reveal the presence of a temple dedicated to *Lav* in the middle of the city. However, the books on the city of Lahore reveal the cultural heritage of the city that is embedded in the timeless past. However, the historians point out that Malik Ayaz, the early Ghaznavites Governor walled the city during 1037-1040. It is believed that consecutive Hindu kingdoms ruled the place prior to the fortification by Malik Ayaz. The golden era for Lahore was during the reign of Masam, a son of Sultan Ibrahim who ruled during 1059-1099. Thus, the city assimilated many layers of cultures through political interventions under the rule of several dynasties. Though the cityscape has been the subject of many poets, saints, artist and several fiction writers, the paper focuses on Samina Quraeshi's *Lahore: The City Within* (1988), Bapsi Sidhwa's *City of Sin and Splendour: Writings on Lahore* (2005), Anna Suvorova's *Lahore: Topophilia of Space and Place* (2011), and Ian Talbot and Tahir Kamran's *Lahore in the Time of the Raj* (2016) to explore the cultural spaces in the city. The writings detail the popular narratives about the city through architectural heritage that marks the cultural spaces in the city.

Samina Quraeshi's *Lahore: The City Within* (1988)

The Islamic Inheritance:

Samina Quraeshi (1939-2013), a well-known art designer and architect from Karachi, has worked extensively to document the life within the Walled City. She makes an entry into the living museum with 13 gates through the visions of the Persian and the Urdu poets who lived in the city. Her book, *Lahore: The City Within* (1988), is frequently referred and quoted by the researchers since the book is richly endowed with the less known narratives along with several photographs of the paintings captured by the author during her several trips to the Walled City. A large number of palaces and gardens were constructed outside the walled city in the Moghul era that resulted in the popularity of the city across Asia and Europe. The author points out the contributions of a Persian Poet *Abul Faraj Runi* (D.1091), and *Mas'ud-ibn sad-isalman* (D.1131) who wrote the prison poems and the author notes that the poems fascinated the poet *Faiz-Ahmad Faiz*. Another important mystical preacher, *Umar-al-Jullabi-al-Hujurwiri* (1072) lived in the city whose tomb attracts every

visitor to Lahore marks the cultural plurality of the city. The tomb is popularly known as the *Data Ganj Baksh* which inspired Moahammad Iqbal's poem *Secrets of the Self* (1915). Further, the author narrates the functions and the fall of the 13 gates of the Walled City after the invasion of the city by the British. The walls not only protected insiders by providing a sense of security, but also created a sense of division between the inner domain and the external world. The author is quick to add that the city had expanded beyond the ancient walls due to increased business activities and the construction of neighboring towns. The walls of the old city were known to exert a sense of familiarity and community for anyone inside the Walled City. The author provides statistical details about the number of dwelling places, demographic character, schools, mosques and monuments recognized by the Government of Pakistan.

The author details the function and significance of each gate in the Walled City in relation to the security and prosperity of the people of the city. Further, the author relates the story titled "A Day in the Life of Aziz Ahmad" to illumine the common people's pursuit for pleasure like wrestling, kite flying, music, dance, poetry, while the rulers of the city were busy experimenting the fusion of the Punjabi and the Persian cultural legacies with the Islamic art and architecture. Significantly, the Moghul's priority for Gardens prior to the construction of palaces and *havelis*, led to the beautification of the city. The sprawling gardens with fountains and decorative arches are evidences to the unique contribution of the Moghuls to the architectural heritage of the city. The beauty of the gardens earned so much fame for the city in Europe that John Milton (1608-1674) equates the beauty of the gardens in the city to the imaginative Heaven in his magnum opus *Paradise Lost* (1667):

To Agra and Lahore of Great Mughal' extends the view of the newly created Adam when God showed him the great marvels which future generations will produce on earth" another scholar and chronicler in the court of the emperor Akbar, Abu'l-Fazl, writes in *Ayin-I Akbari* that "Lahore... is the resort of people of all countries whose manufacturers present an astonishing display and it is beyond measure remarkable in populousness and extend (Quraeshi.1998: 19).

Thus, the rulers of the city were the patrons of not only poets and saints but also architects. Samina Qureshi notes the presence of the 'Nine Jewels'³ in the court of Akbar. Further, the author focuses on the pillage and prosperity of the walled city and analyses the golden era of the King Akbar, who immensely contributed to the prosperity and the fortification of the city realizing the strategic importance of the

city in regulating the trade between South Asia and the central Asia. The author states that the city belonged to the Quraishis of Multan before the city was invaded and occupied by Sultan Mohammad of Ghazna in 1026 and developed the city into 'Little Ghanza'. However, the author does not forget to note the significance of the Grand Trunk Road, which extended from Khyber Pass through Lahore linking Punjab, Delhi, Bihar and Bengal facilitating the emergence of Lahore as a major trade Centre. The city of Lahore checked the movement of the people from central Asia to South Asia.

Bapsi Sidhwa in *City of Sin and Splendour:
Writings on Lahore* (2005)

The City in Literary Imagination

Bapsi Sidhwa's *City of Sin and Splendour: Writings on Lahore* (2005) captures the city of Lahore from the ancient past of India to the present times and brings out the diversity of writings that remember with nostalgia, yearn to unite at the time of separation, but at the same time mourn and deplore the events that threaten the Lahori's love for the city. The collection of poems, essays, short stories, travelogues, and extract from the novels reveal the cityscape and the ways the creative writers have attempted to imagine the city. Bapsi Sidhwa in her *Introduction* to the omnibus of the narratives of the city calls the city of Lahore as her beloved city. She submits that "the city of eight million provides the geographical location of my novels. The city's ambience has moulded my sensibility and also my emotional responses" (Sidhwa. 2005: xi). The novelist provides extracts from her novels to trace the promises that the city held for the migrants and the fall of the city after the invasions and disturbances. She includes Muhammad Allama Iqbal's "On the Banks of River Ravi" which identifies the long unending stream of life with the river Ravi and the river marks the life in the city that is unceremonious and the time that is slippery. The poet mourns the fall of the day due to the influence of the time, while a cluster of minarets stands majestically in the city where bravery of the Moghuls sleeps. The poet marks the temporality of the urban society and appreciates the immortality of the nature. Secondly, Faiz Ahmad Faiz in his poem "City of Lights" treats the city on the path of illumination even though he is imprisoned in a dark cell. The lights in the city mark a ray of hope in the darkness of the heart.

Bapsi Sidhwa does not present only the romantic image of the city, but also brings to the forefront the trauma and violence witnessed

by the city during the period of Partition and after. The communal violence has been realistically captured by creative writers like Saadat Hasan Manto, Ishmat Chughtai, Kushwanth Singh and other novelists and short storywriters. Bapsi Sidhwa in “Ice-candy Man” (1988) details the suffering and predicament of the rich and poor as narrated from the perspective of girl child Lenny. Aimed at providing an impartial version of the events in the city during the Partition, the novels present the Zoroastrian perspective. In addition, the readers are provided with the painful account of Toba Tek Singh by Saadat Hasan Manto and “Ranamama,” an extract from Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence*. Thus, the omnibus edited by Bapsi Sidhwa is rich in illustrating the sense of Topophilia⁴.

Anna Suvorova’s *Lahore: Topophilia of Space and Place* (2011)

Understanding Topophilia

Dr Anna Suvorova⁵ explicates the phenomenological understanding of the sense of Topophilia in literature with specific reference to the City of Lahore by explaining the tools of phenomenology by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). The author points out that the sense of Topophilia is a palimpsest in the postmodern sense of the term (2011: 02) and acknowledges the significance of the most influential book *The Poetics of Space* (1958) by Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962). Further, the author emphasizes the relationship between the home and the city:

The city is a place that gives the individual shelter, protection, and safety in the space of Topophilia. The individual needs the city to overcome his horror of the void. A city is made up of walls, roofs, vaults and towers that protect us from the onslaught of jungles and deserts. Cities are built on borders, protect borders, and always remain metaphysical frontiers (2011: 07).

Tracing the emergence of the sense of Topophilia, the readers are introduced to the philosophical contribution of the *Lettrists and Situationists* who critique the capitalist Urbanism particularly in Paris in 1950s. After a detailed understanding of the term “topophilia”, the author records the presence of a large number of mosques and tombs in the city between which the spiritual chorology is extended. According to the author, the Data Durbar, Mia Mir Tomb, Madho Lal Husain’s Shrine are the three major ritual sites in the city. More importantly, the rulers went on constructing extensive gardens in the city. The author categorizes the Moghul Gardens into four

categories that include, Residential Gardens around palaces and mansions, Funerary Gardens surrounding mausoleums and tombs, journey gardens where rulers stayed during voyages, the pleasure gardens for rest and recreation is the fourth and the final category of Moghul gardens. The famous Shalimar Garden was built by Shah Jahan in 1641. It is noted that the Shalimar Garden had about 410 fountains in the garden. The Shalimar Garden was the main attraction in the city. The author concludes the book by bringing out the mythological connection between Lahore and Lucknow, since the city of Lucknow is believed to be built by Lachman. Thus, the conclusion opens up the possibilities for studying the historical interconnectedness between Lahore and Lucknow.

Ian Talbot and Tahir Kamran's *Lahore in the Time of the Raj* (2016)

The Colonial History of the Urban Space

Tracing the history of the city from the travelogue of Hiuen Tsiang, Ian Talbot and Tahir Kamran, the two historians provide newer sources for studying the history of the city from cultural perspective. Though the focus of the book is limited to the colonial era, the history of the city is traced from the legends. The historians point out, "The British took pride in the new provincial capital, with its wide thoroughfares, gardens and mix of capital, gothic and Indo-sarcentic buildings. Charles Dilke, who visited the city as a young man in 1867, recorded that Lahore 'is far more English than Bombay'" (2016: 15). At another level, the book illumines the city as a hub for transnational revolutionary networks during the nationalist movement. The roles played by Bhagath Singh, (1907-31), Rajguru (1908-31), Sukhdev Thaper (1907-31), Udam Singh and Madan Lal Dhingra, and the Ghadr Movement have become the indispensable narratives of the revolutionaries during the Nationalist movement. However, the markers of the British imperial city became visible in the city of Lahore. The city became a consumer of the European goods appropriating the influence of the British rule of the city. "The Indian elite adopted a western style of consumption that was catered to by the new retail shops and grocery stores opened in Anarkali and the Mall. A number of grocery shops were run by the migrant Parsi community whose numbers fluctuated at around 200 during the colonial era" (23). The city transformed beyond the city limits after the laying of the railway line between Karachi and Lahore. The clock towers were added in the middle of a square or a circle. The people

of the city busied with the economic functions. The requirement of unskilled labour was met by the immigrant Pathans and men from the hilly areas. The city was full of migrant population that consisted of artisans and labouring classes due to the expansion of the railway network. The study argues, that the city throughout the colonial era was marked by the circulation of people, ideas and goods. By the time the British departed, Lahore had transformed.

The book assumes its importance in the study of Lahore since the authors provide the details of the Colonial engagement with the city, the city's physical expansion in terms of networking, postal communication, and the establishment of the Government College, and Mayo College of Arts. However the contribution of Sir Ganga Ram as an architect in the construction of administrative buildings in the city is remembered and acknowledged. However, the historians point out that the walls of the walled city were removed to make the Circular Road by the British. The authors point out the presence of All India Radio, and the Falleti's Hotel which are still the cultural landmarks of the city. The names of the places and buildings signify the history of the spaces thus created and connect the memories of the people with the city and the nation with its cultural heritage and history. The residential localities at *Mochi Gate* and *Bhati Gate* mark the cultural richness of the place. Wrestling, *mushairas* and cricket are a popular pass time of the people. Interestingly, the book provides details about tourism in the city during the colonial era. The records of Thomas Cook (1808-92), *The Newell Guide to Lahore*, *Motorist's Guides to Lahore*, and *The Webbs* are some sources regarding the nature of tourism within the city and the pilgrimage undertaken by the residents of Lahore to Mecca.

Conclusion

An Interrogation of the Cultural Spaces

The legends of *Lav*, the immured *Anarkali*, the tales of the Kanjari women in *Hiramandi*, the stories about the poets and saints surrounds the multilayered architecture around the city. The shops and eateries around the Walled City, the coffee house, the wrestling grounds, apart from the historical the Badshahi Mosque, the tomb of Data Ganj Baksh, the Shalimar Garden and the *Shahdara*, are the recurring images of the city that have caught the attention of the historians and creative writers. However, the number of writings on the impact of Partition on the city of Lahore increased, detailing

the trauma of Partition. The Hindus and the Sikhs who owned business houses in Lahore left the city after the Partition. At the time of Pakistan's first national census in 1951, the refugees accounted for 43 per cent of the population. After the Partition, "Lahore became a Muslim city. Its cityscape was transformed as a result of the disappearance of familiar landmarks through change of usage, and destruction, as in the case of Ganga Ram's statue whose fate formed the plot for Saadat Hasan Manto's satirical short story "The Garland" (Quraeshi.1998: 171). After the Partition, the film industry received a setback. However, the former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto attempted to provide a newer image of the city with the construction of Allama Iqbal International Airport and the Moghul style Gaddafi Stadium. Thus, it is argued that an identity of the city is embedded in the spaces that the inhabitants of the city create through spatial practices that would contribute to the making of spatial stories and the language that gets created as a result of a spatial practice and the sense of the place that the people evolve. Locating the place in terms of its architecture and socioeconomic activities pattern the spatial map of the city and contributes to the emergence of spatial narrative of the city. The artist, moving like a flâneur in a labyrinth composes stories in the language that the city has produced. Resultantly, the texts thus produced encompass a sense of Topophilia. In reality, the cultural spaces that the city nourishes are consistent with the inconsistent nature of the spatial practices. Thus, one can argue that the city writes its own spatial stories overwriting what is already written, but yet containing the elements of what was previously written. This is the cause for the multiplicity of narratives of the city like the city of Lahore. However, the writings are silent on the communal conflicts, the legal system, the presence and the fate of the non-Islamic and the non-Sufi architecture, the presence of the religious minorities like the Sikhs, Hindu, The Zoroastrians and the Buddhists. However, it is necessary to explore the silences or absences in the narratives of a city that are part of the palimpsest nature of the city. The details of the conflicts between the two groups within a religious community for the possession of the sacred and definition of the secular spaces within, the conflict between the state and the non-state entities for power, the citizenship and the state of stateless refugees, fundamentals duties and the ethics, media, journalism and the freedom of expression, the relationship between the judiciary and the military force, gender roles and equality, the modes of entertainment, the conflict between theocratic, democratic and bureaucratic institutions needs to be explored. The rulers and the

ruled who patronize and celebrate the city's cultural diversity and the creation of interactive social spaces that encourage literature, art, music, and architecture mark the traits of the cultural spaces. Such an enquiry of the cultural spaces of the city is being done by the Pakistani Writers in English. Thus, the city assumes the character of a palimpsest. Like a kaleidoscope, the palimpsest nature of the city helps us to understand and analyze the cultural spaces in the city from multiple perspectives.

Notes

1. Palimpsest is an ideal metaphor for the living city—a writing tablet on which layer after layer of messages was inscribed, always legible yet never completely erasing what was written before. The palimpsest city sets the values and contributions of our own time among the monuments of the past. In our casual, day-to-day experience of that dialogue between the new and the familiar we rediscover the city's charm, and that is precisely what compels so many of us to love our city.
2. The Punjab of undivided India.
3. Abu'l-Fazl, Raja Todar Mal, Abdul Rahim Khan-I-Khana, Birbal, Mulla Do-Piyaza, Faizi, Fakir Aziao-Din, Tansen.
4. The term introduced by Yi-FI Tuan to study the relationship between man and the environment in his book *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception Attitudes and Values*. Topophilia examines the search for environment in the city.
5. Professor of Indo-Islamic Culture, currently the Head of Department of Asian Literatures at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Moscow).

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