

Recontextualization of Historical Saga: The Rise and Ongoing Fall of Lahore's Cultural Imagination

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ABSTRACT

Lahore is portrayed as a city of profound cultural and historical importance, embracing diverse traditions, religions, and social norms. The paper examines Lahore's evolution through various ruling periods, including Mughal and British eras, emphasizing its enduring cultural inclusivity. The concept of 'cultural imagination' is introduced, describing Lahore's ability to nurture intellectual and creative minds across various disciplines. This environment has produced numerous luminaries in literature, politics, music, and science. The paper delves into the philosophical aspects of culture and imagination, exploring how they shape societal identity and historical narratives. It emphasizes the role of

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cultural imagination in contextualizing past, present, and future, influencing art, literature, politics, and societal norms. In short, the paper highlights Lahore's contribution to global discourse and progress through its cultural landscape, fostering innovation and excellence in various fields.

Introduction

Lahore is everything and anything that life can offer to us. It is elegant, historical, and splendid because it gives an impression of totality, with an acceptance of temporal and spiritual attributes. Its diverse culture, norms, and traditions welcome individuals of all backgrounds, regardless of colour, caste, creed, or faith. Much like Moscow to Tolstoy, Petersburg to Dostoevsky, London to Dickens, and Lucknow to Quratulain Haider, Lahore holds a profound significance to its inhabitants. Roaming in the streets of old Lahore allows acquainting yourself with the untold history, with the unsung heroes, and with the unheard stories.

Lahore has a long-standing reputation for embracing those attuned to the subtleties of life. Its beauty lies in the mindfulness of its surroundings, and its unparalleled status comes from its ability to transcend the constraints of time and place. Anna Survova (1949–2023) aptly defines it in one of her interviews, “Gradually and slowly the city, together with all its streets, squares, crowded bazaars, noisy teahouses, historical monuments, festivals, seasons, sounds, colors, and gardens sailed into the harbor of consciousness.”¹

History is intrinsically linked to nostalgia as it evokes sentimental longing for the past by instigating imagination beyond time frame, making it an unending process of recalling the good old days that are irrecoverable now. Historical events, places, and artifacts often trigger nostalgic feelings, inducing reflection on cherished memories and longing for bygone eras. Nostalgia suffuses history with emotional resonance, shaping our conception and

1 Column: “Walking the Streets of Lahore,” *Dawn*, January 26, 2012.

connection to the past. This nostalgic profoundness compelled Bapsi Sidhwa (b. 1938) to recollect the memory of the city, woven around myths, effulgence, and historical saga:

Lahore—the ancient whore, the handmaiden of dimly remembered Hindu kings, the courtesan of Moghul emperors—bedecked and bejeweled, savaged by marauding hordes—healed by the caressing hands of successive lovers. A little shoddy, as Qasim saw her; like an attractive but aging concubine, ready to bestow surprising delights on those who cared to court her—proudly displaying Royal gifts.²

Lahore's distinctive culture, its evergreen norms, its splendid architecture, and most of all its undisputed history are some of the factors that make Lahore a city to be revered and commemorated to the finest. It is hardly surprising that Lahore, as the cultural epicenter of Pakistan, embodies all the quintessential aspects expected of such an honorific title: unique skills, refined tastes, diverse social-religious affiliations, distinct mannerisms, vibrant festivals, rich political discourse, ancient ideologies, and engrossing architecture. These elements, along with its multicultural fusion of South Asian, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and Western influences, led to Lahore being honored as the 'City of Literature' by UNESCO in 2018. Its vibrant literary scene, social diversity, and historical significance as a hub of creativity distinguished Lahore as a beacon of scholarly excellence. And perhaps that's why, famous poet Ahmad Faraz (1931-2008), recalled its charisma as, 'The sight of Lahore amazes the eye, and the magic of Lahore enthralls the soul.'

Referring to this historical background of Lahore, it is easy to discern the roots of legends produced by the diverse environment of Lahore, which has been changing over time. It reached its pinnacle during the Mughal era, and it

2 Bapsi Sidhwa, *Beloved City* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

continued to flourish under the British rule. As the Mughal capital, Lahore held strategic importance and boasted a favorable political climate. Furthermore, it served as the 'cultural nucleus' of India, attracting sustained emotional and financial investment from successive rulers. The British, recognizing its potential, endeavoured to model Lahore as a paragon for other cities, making it a period of cultural and architectural splendours. Jahangir (1569-1627) remarked, "There is no other city like Lahore, the land of the Punjab, and its people are the best of all people." This environment of generosity of spirit, termed the 'cultural imagination' of Lahore, facilitated the nurturing of brilliant minds across various disciplines, including history, literature, politics, music, filmmaking, performing arts, education, philosophy, and spirituality. Lahore has long been a focal point of scholarly attention, both before and after partition, leveraging its rich cultural heritage to cultivate intellectual minds.

Lahore's cultural imagination serves as a fertile ground for nurturing artistic brilliance across an array of disciplines. Its rich historical tapestry and dynamic sociocultural environment have been instrumental in shaping the trajectories of countless luminaries who have left an indelible mark on the world stage. As Saleema Hashmi, a passionate Lahori, would recall:

Some of the eminent personalities that I could remember from my childhood, my adulthood and now in my old age are very diverse and their contributions are essential to what we can say 'the spirit of Lahore.' Among the earliest people that I knew were; Ahmed Shah Bukhari famously known as Patras Bukhari, Imtiaz Ali Taj, Muhammad Din Tasir, and Badar udin Badar. I remember very well people like Chirag Hassan Hasrat who worked with my father in *Pakistan Times* and was also the editor of *Imroz*. I also have a very brief memory of Saadat Hassan Manto. I could also recall Dr. Nazir Ahmed who was a famous zoologist and later became the principal of Government College. If you think of Lahore, you can't forget Amrita Shergil, Umrao Singh, Mary, Roop Krishna, B.C. Sanyal, Lockwood Kipling, Percy Brown, Professor Marks, and Qurat ul Ain

Haider, all of them briefly lived here but had a very profound effect on the city's creative and cultural life.³

This internalization of the cultural image of Lahore allows us to envision culture with its two sides, i.e., the culture of mind and the culture of surroundings. In the case of Lahore, its culture had played a pivotal role in enhancing the imagination of the great minds, who have been involved with Lahore not as historians but as culturalists. Imagination of cultural directives to this extent builds up the historical facts instead of 'agendas.'

Lahore has indeed been blessed with a distinctive culture, history, architecture, natural environment, suitable geography, and anthropological features. However, the city's historical prominence is primarily attributed to its unique ability to transform ordinary individuals into extraordinary figures and infuse 'commonplace elements' with exceptional character. Lahore's hallmark signifies not only a creative and imaginative approach to life but also a practical one.

Lahore has been selected as the central focus of this research because it holds a unique position in the socio-historical and cultural canvas of Pakistan, functioning concurrently as a custodian of the past and a vibrant center of contemporary life. For centuries, the city has been a political, intellectual, and artistic hub, not just absorbing but also reframing diverse cultural influences and recontextualizing them in its own ever-evolving cultural fabric. Widely celebrated as the 'heart of Pakistan', Lahore personifies a layered identity that integrates tradition and modernity, discernible in its Mughal monuments, colonial-era infrastructure, and evolving urban space. It stands as a microcosm of the nation's cultural landscape, embodying Pakistan's linguistic plurality, religious norms, and artistic ramifications. The city's rich archival presence, artistic dynamics and literary heritage play a central role in shaping national memory and making it an ideal site for investigating

3 Professor Saleema Hashmi of Lahore, interview by Muhammad Umair Shahid Dogar, Lahore, May 20, 2024.

the cultural imagination. This cultural imagination that once created luminaries across different disciplines is fading, if not obliterating, under the dust of time. Consequently, we contend that Lahore's cultural imagination, which inherently fosters the emergence of legends across various disciplines by nurturing and ultimately acknowledging them as masters of their craft, is now at risk.

This research aims at reimagining Lahore through an anthropocentric approach by taking into consideration aspects like history, literature, music, and tradition. Lahore has already been explored with the aid of myth and legends. Still, this research shall specifically focus on the generation of cultural imagination in Lahore's historical saga, which ultimately made it the cultural capital of Pakistan. This study aims to comprehend the factors that created a separate cultural imagination of Lahore, which transformed history into eternity. Moreover, it shall investigate the reasons behind the decay of Lahore's cultural imagination, specifically with the onset of the 21st Century, which is gradually eradicating its social, political, and historical significance. It also endeavours to delve into the notable figures that have emerged from Lahore's cultural imagination, a phenomenon deeply ingrained in the city's collective consciousness. This exploration unveils the individuals whose contributions have been shaped and inspired by Lahore's rich cultural atmosphere, shedding light on the profound impact of the city's heritage on the development of incredible talent across various domains. It is also important to enquire how Lahore's cultural imagination manages to produce undisputed luminaries in various disciplines. It is equally significant to find the reasons why Lahore has changed in the post-partition time, posing serious threats to its cultural imagination.

Theoretical Framework

To examine the past in which Lahore's cultural imagination was generated and to evaluate its present outlook, the study shall apply the qualitative research method. It shall help to

provide a profound historical insight into the events, personalities, and procedures that contributed to the initiation of Lahore's cultural imagination. For the sake of having a socio-historical context, interpretative research shall be used, which implies human experiences and other social contexts. To build upon the arguments, this research shall also employ the method of interviewing, which shall aid in getting the perception of the people who have lived in this cultural imagination, both in the pre- and post-partition era. By applying the eclectic method, i.e., using qualitative and interviewing approaches, a comprehensive understanding of Lahore's cultural imagination can be attained, focusing on its enduring significance and dynamic socio-historical evolution over time.

Historical Initiation of Lahore's Cultural Imagination

The culture of any society is developed by social interactions, shared assumptions, and by staunch beliefs that are not one but many binding factors. It is formed through a dynamic interplay of various aspects over the period. Significant among these are historical influences, including conquests, migrations, and interactions with other cultures or civilizations, which shape the foundational elements of a social identity. Additionally, art, literature, music, and other forms of creative social mind reflect and reinforce cultural identity. Economic factors, technological advancements, and environmental conditions further shape cultural practices and beliefs. By these factors, culture nurtures a space for society to exist where the socio-intellectual construct unifies individuals. And in this way, "Society liberates, and limits the activity of men, sets up standards for them to follow and maintain". Society continues to create and recreate culture, hence, it becomes "a system of usages and procedures, of authority and mutual aid, of many groupings and divisions, of controls of human behaviour, and liberties."⁴

4 R. Maciver and Charles Page, *Society: An Introductory Analysis* (New York: ST. Martin's Press INC, 1957), 05.

Society and culture are profoundly interwoven, each influencing and shaping the other. Society provides the framework within which culture thrives. On the other hand, culture defines societal norms, structures, foundations, morals, and institutions, indicating how individuals interact, communicate, and organize themselves within societal structures. This symbiotic relationship affirms that societal correspondence reflects the values and traditions inculcated in its cultural outlook, while culture, in return, is perpetuated and adapted by societal patterns.

This interplay of culture and society is significant to understanding the 'imagination' around which Lahore's culture is woven; its historical affinity is so refined that Lahore's cultural imagination seems to have existed in 'metaphysical homogeneity'. How exactly was this imagination initiated, and what were those factors that worked as a spark for this cognitive space to exist? To understand this, it is significant to know about the social construction and co-construction of Lahore's cultural imagination. Social construction involves external factors, assimilating the components of cognitive dispositions, and other individual processes. Whereas co-construction facilitates with a lens and framework for opting and interpreting experiences, fashioned by an individual's past socially constructed interactions, to channelise and respond to new and evolving social construction persuasions. Both social construction and co-construction contribute to the development of self-identity and the social context of different social groups. Hence, conjuring up to become part of a unified cultural imagination. Consequently, it can be affirmed that cultural imagination has both 'material and non-material forms, but its most characteristic aspects exist in symbolic form in the human mind.'⁵

From its origins to the present day, Lahore has been shaped by a multitude of social, cultural, philosophical, and geographical factors. The name 'Lahore' has a multifaceted

5 Francis Merrill, *Society and Culture* (Lahore: Fine Books, 1957), 135.

history that goes back into antiquity, i.e., prehistoric times. Its nomenclature is believed to be rooted in Loh, the son of the Hindu god Rama, who is considered to have founded the city. Over time, the name changed from 'Lavapuri' to 'Lavapura' and eventually became "Lahore." Another myth suggests that the name could have been transcribed from the ancient Sanskrit word "Loh," which means 'fort' or 'fortress,' which would be satisfying considering Lahore's historical locality as a strategic military geographic location. This complicatedness about the early history of Lahore is aptly recounted by Fakir Syed Aijazuddin (b.1942), "The history of Lahore can be traced reliably as far back as the seventh century A.D. Beyond that point in time, its chronology, like any other ancient geology, becomes a matter of supposition, inference or belief."⁶

During this entanglement of historical occurrences, Lahore remained part of the powerful Hindu Shahi Kingdom in the 11th Century. The city was a main hub of trade and Hindu culture during this period. After that, Mahmud of Ghazni (971–1030), the renowned Ghaznavid ruler, occupied Lahore in 1021 after several military attacks. Under Ghaznavid rule, Lahore thrived as a center of Muslim learning and culture. The Mughal Empire, one of the most celebrated dynasties in known South Asian history, made Lahore its capital in the 16th Century. Emperors such as Akbar (1542-1605), Jahangir (1569-1627), and Shah Jahan (1592-1606) contributed to Lahore's architectural and cultural resplendence, paving the way for the construction and co-construction of Lahore's cultural imagination. The grandness and notability of Lahore shall remain inexplicable without Akbar the Great, who left such marks on the architectural poetry and cultural florescence of Lahore that the city never again experienced such splendour. Fakir Syed examines:

6 Fakir Syed Aijazuddin, *Beloved City*, ed., Bapsi Sidhwa (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13.

Although the ensuing reigns, Lahore would continue to develop and expand, it would never attain the same importance as it did as Akbar's capital during the twelve continuous years of his occupancy until 1598, nor would it ever compete with other two cities, Agra and Delhi, associated with this golden period of the Mughal empire.⁷

After the Mughals, Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), a powerful Sikh ruler, established the Sikh Empire with Lahore as its capital in the early 19th Century. Ranjit Singh's administration brought stability, governance, and prosperity to Lahore, with the construction of magnificent Sikh architecture. As Pran Nevile (1922-2018) highlights, it was under Ranjit Singh that Lahore 'regained some of its past glory and pre-eminence.'⁸ Right after the Sikh rule was formally brought down to ashes, Lahore came under direct British rule in 1849 after the second Anglo-Sikh War (Apr 18, 1848-Mar 30, 1849).

The British transformed Lahore into a modern city according to the needs of the time by establishing railway networks, educational institutions, and administrative buildings. And due to this socio-political interchange, "Lahore has been an important political capital off and on for much of its history. Despite its turbulent career, Lahore has somehow managed to be a cultural center with a distinctive resonance and charm. Lahore has an extraordinary charm that few other cities can claim."⁹

Lahore's culture is a hub for multiculturalism, giving space to many cultures breathing at the same time, and this is shaped by centuries of history, religion, art, philosophy, and trade. Several key factors have contributed to this unique cultural tapestry, which today defines the cultural imagination of Lahore. Situated at the crossroads of Central Asia, South

7 Aijazuddin, *Beloved City*, 17.

8 Pran Nevile, *Lahore: A Sentimental Journey* (Lahore: ILQA Publications, 2016), 17.

9 Anna Suravova, *Lahore: Topophilia of Space and Time* (Lahore: Oxford University Press, 2022), 11.

Asia, and the Middle East, Lahore became an emulsifier of diverse cultures, and this geographical diversity gave meaning to its historical imagination as well. The city served as an important hub on the historic Silk Road, promoting trade and cultural exchange. While tracing the historical initiation of Lahore's cultural imagination, the significance of River Ravi cannot be sidelined. Rivers are means of survival, a sort of lifeline that shape and preserve the culture of cities, facilitating trade, agriculture, and social life. They provide water for nourishment, allowing civilizations to flourish and prosper along their banks. They do not supply water just for the physical surroundings, but also interestingly, these waterways mature the process of human thought and experience, by intermingling human culture and imagination.

Cultures often develop distinctive practices, associations, and traditions directly or indirectly linked to river life, such as fishing, transportation, trade, voyages, and religious rituals. Rivers also exert an influence on architecture, with cities often built around their flow, which happens to change occasionally. Moreover, rivers are reservoirs of history, encapsulating tales from the past. From the Nile's involvement in ancient Egypt to the Ganges' part in India, rivers bestow cities with a sense of self-identity, social context, and socially constructed experiences that aid in connecting inhabitants to their cultural imagination.

The Ravi, flowing blandly through the heart of Lahore, holds a substantial place in structuring the city's history and cultural imagination. Flowing from the Himalayas in India, the Ravi traverses the Punjab region before merging with the Chenab River in Pakistan. Its journey has been interconnected with Lahore's growth and cultural development for centuries. The historical noteworthiness of Lahore is described by Majid Sheikh, "The story of Ravi and its treasures started in the Vedas almost 5000 years ago, when Ram and Sita, while sitting on the edge of the river at Lahore, descried it as a retainer of the largest treasure

known to man.”¹⁰ The fertile plains around the Ravi have been a significant source of agriculture, fostering settlements and providing bountiful harvests to its peasants. In Lahore’s early history, Ravi’s waters aided in producing crops like wheat, rice, and sugarcane, contributing to the region’s economic prosperity.

As far as the link between water and cultural nexus is concerned, Ravi has long been the heart of cultural exchange, enabling interactions among diverse worldwide communities. Merchants assembled their goods on boats along the river, connecting Lahore to distant lands over the globe and enriching its cultural fabric. The Ravi served as a natural obstacle, providing an edifice to the city’s defense system and urban layout. Bridges like the historic ‘Baradari’ bridge, dating back to Mughal times (1541), provided notable crossings over the river, linking Lahore to its nearest neighbourhoods. Most of all, Ravi has cultivated poetry and art, with its tranquil waters and scenic panorama serving as a stimulus for artists and writers. One fitting reference to this argument is Dr. Allama Muhammad Iqbal’s poem titled ‘*On the Banks of Ravi*’ published in *Bang-e-Darra* (1924) (translated by Parizad N. Sidhwa), in which he seemed to have been simply soaking in the serene ambience of Ravi:

Lost in its own silent rhythm, the Ravi sings its songs,
In its undulating flow I see the reflections in my heart
The willows, the world, in worship of God
I stand at the edge of the flowing water
I do not know how and where I stand
In the wine-colored dusk
Life flows on this river of eternity
Man is not born this way; he does not perish this way
Undefeated, life slips beyond the horizon,

10 Abdul Majeed Sheikh, *Lahore: Tales without End* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2015), 18.

But it does not end there

The Ravi has been more than a waterway for Lahore; it has been a source of inspiration and connection. Lahore's history is a saga of persistence, acceptance, and cultural evolution. From its ancient roots to the present day, the city has openly welcomed diverse cultures, languages, and traditions. Its name hints at ancient legends, its streets sound in the footsteps of emperors, and its monuments stand as witnesses to the passage of time. Lahore's story is not just an exaggerated tale of conquest and rule; it is a celebration of the human intellectual capability to create & recreate beauty and culture amidst the changing, ruthless tides of history.

Gates in Lahore stand as enduring symbols of the city's history, culture, heritage, and distinctive identity. These gates, or '*Darwazas*' have played a pivotal role in Lahore's defense, urban strategy, and cultural imagination. Initially, these gates were a source and symbol of defensive fortifications; major gates like Delhi Gate and Lahori Gate were once the main entry points into the walled city, fortified against foreign invasions. Just as Anna Suvorova explains, "There is no city without a gate, goes a Persian saying. The gates are metaphysical breaches and phenomenological and architectural symbols of transition from one condition or state to another."¹¹ Each gate portrays a distinguishable architectural marvel, reflecting the political reigns in which they were solidified. Their subtle designs, such as the Mughal motifs & marks adorning the gates, reflect Lahore's rich artistic heritage.

These gates serve as gathering points for festivals, markets, traditional practices, and celebrations, epitomising the spirit of Lahore's cultural imagination. They are iconic cultural symbols of Lahore, embodied in art, literature, and popular culture. They provide a sense of direction and orientation within the city. The gates of Lahore are more than merely

¹¹ Suravova, *Lahore*, 16.

entry points; they are the protectors of its glorious past, testaments to its strength, and gateways to its not-so-glorified present. Lahore's undisputed romance with its thirteen gates is ingeniously put into words by Samina Quraeshi:

To those who live within its walls, Lahore's old city is a community in the best sense of the word. A place in which all who dwell there know their environment. A place where one asks, and is asked, fewer questions than when outside. A place, where having entered, one looks for what is familiar than what is unfamiliar. A place where, whether resident or visitor, one is fully cognizant of having entered, and being 'within' until one has left again. This is a feeling that an imposing portal provides.¹²

Brothels, better referred to as 'pleasure parlours', have a long history of existence in old cities of the world, often interwoven with urban life and culture. Brothels have been there in ancient towns as centers of amusement, usually synchronous with religious and cultural institutions. In cities like Lahore, the presence of such establishments, like the infamous and controversial *Hira Mandi*, reflects the complex social, economic, historical, and cultural dynamics. *Hira Mandi*, rooted back to the Mughal era, was and to some extent still is a renowned red-light district in Lahore, known for its courtesans, music, and dance. Its cultural influence was such that this site was not just a space for supposedly felonious activities but also a hub of art, music, and literature. *Hira Mandi*, for example, was a focal ground for classical music, rare artistic cultivation, and dance forms, contributing to Lahore's cultural legacy. Just as Pran Nevile expertly comments, "The courtesan's home was essentially a place of culture. There they enchanted nobility with their accomplishments in fine arts, music, poetry, and dance. Witty conversationalists, they were engaged to teach

12 Samina Qureshi, *Beloved City*, ed., Bapsi Sidhwa (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 70.

etiquette and gentle manners to young men of aristocratic families.”¹³

Hira Mandi in Lahore served as an economic standpoint, attracting traders, artisans, and travelers who sought satisfaction and companionship. The presence of *Hira Mandi* contributed to Lahore’s economy through the collection of taxes and commerce. While being excessively controversial, it provided a livelihood for many marginalized women, offering them a means of survival in highly patriarchal societies. The existence of *Hira Mandi*, apart from anything else, sheds light on the paradox of society, where taboos and norms share the same cradle with human desires and realities. In essence, it reveals the intersections of cultural imagination, economy, and social norms, highlighting the complex and controversial tapestry of a city’s history. Summing it up with the evergreen famous couplet/saying that truly defines the inner essence of Tibbi or Heera Mandi:

Tibbi me chal ke Jalwa - i - Parwardigar dekh

Are ye dekhne ki cheez hai isse baar baar dekh

(Come to Tibbi to watch the splendours of the Almighty

It is the worthiest sight, view it over and over again)

Personalities Embodying Lahore’s Cultural Imagination

Culture and creativity are profoundly interconnected, paving way for the dynamic relationships where each influence attracts, and shapes the other. Creativity is often seen as a response to cultural stimuli, with cultural context providing the canvas for creative expression. Similarly, creative work significantly contributes to the evolution of culture, introducing new ideas, perspectives, and ways of thinking.

The symbiotic relationship between personalities and the cultural imagination is a deeply rooted one, particularly in the context of urban centers like Lahore. As poets, writers, singers, and other creative figures from a diverse range of disciplines craft their works, they not only reflect the cultural

¹³ Nevile, *Lahore*, 56.

heritage of their time but also actively redefine it with interpretations often drawn from history. Numerous esteemed personalities from different creative disciplines of art and academia have significantly influenced the cultural imagination of Lahore.

The individuals mentioned in this article belong to three main categories: those who were born and raised in Lahore, those who weren't born in Lahore but spent their professional life here, and those who spent a significant period of their professional career in Lahore, benefiting from the city's vibrant artistic environment and cultural landscape. However, all these personalities shared a common thread—their association with Lahore, which played an essential role in their social recognition and artistic acclaim. Once accepted by Lahore, they achieved worldwide recognition.

Historically, Lahore has been a center of cultural activities due to its strategic geography and socio-historical relevance. During the Mughal era, it was a hub of power and culture. Emperors like Akbar and Shah Jahan embellished the city with architectural marvels. They encouraged the arts, making it a vibrant center of attraction for poets, musicians, and artists from all over the region. As Moneeza Hashmi says:

Lahore is distinguished from other historical cities by its vibrant culture, rich art, profound literature, and beautiful gardens. Lahore was a different city because it was a city of tolerance; it allowed its people to expand, despite diversity, the environment was amazingly inclusive. The people in Lahore wanted to learn, wanted to contribute.¹⁴

Lahore's history has multiple histories within its social fabric, which is something that makes it laudable. As Saleema Hashmi puts it:

The magic of Lahore has a lot to do with the fact that it is a historical city with many histories; some run parallel

14 Moneeza Hashmi of Lahore, interview by Muhammad Umair Shahid Dogar, Lahore, May 17, 2024.

through one another and some run sequentially. It certainly gives it a flavour and aura that even in times of major changes, the one that we are witnessing currently, it still has a particular ambience and will continue to have so.¹⁵

In the 20th Century, Lahore's role as a cultural axis became even more prominent due to different socio-political happenings. The city became the hotspot of the Progressive Writers' Movement in the 1930s and 1940s, which strove to inspire socio-political change through literature. Notable literary figures such as Saadat Hasan Manto, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi were associated with this movement, contributing significantly to Urdu literature and language. Furthermore, the movement's activities in Lahore were characterized by a commitment to Marxist ideologies, pragmatism, and a Western orientation, influencing many prominent writers to advocate for equality and social justice.¹⁶

Another significant organization, Anjuman-e-Punjab, founded in Lahore in 1865 by Molana Muhammad Hussain Azad, played a crucial role in the social, literary, and cultural amelioration of the region. The organization aimed at promoting modern education, literary activities, and cultural awareness among people. "It was instrumental in fostering a literary renaissance by organizing mushairas (poetry recitals) and discussions, significantly contributing to the Urdu literary tradition."¹⁷ As commented upon by Shohrat Bukhari in *Naqosh* (1960):

No other organization / movement in the history of Urdu was as significant as Anjuman-e-Punjab. Its greatest contribution lies in the relevance that it dragged Urdu

15 Professor Saleema Hashmi of Lahore, interview by Muhammad Umair Shahid Dogar, Lahore, May 20, 2024.

16 "Chapter 2: Literature in Lahore," *Interactive Archive of Lahore* (accessed June 02, 2024),
<https://archive.lums.edu.pk/interactives/literature-lahore/chapter2>

17 Nighat Said Khan, "Community-Led Initiatives for Cultural Revival in Lahore," *South Asian Cultural Studies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 120-34.

poetry out of the elite closet and made it accessible to the common man of India. The canvas of Urdu poetry was transformed from an individual to a collective notion.¹⁸

Also, Halqa Arbab-e-Zauk, founded in Lahore in 1939, holds a prominent place in the city's cultural and literary history. This literary circle, often referred to as the most influential in the sphere of modern Urdu poetry, became a torchbearer for literary innovation and intellectual exchange. The group was dedicated to fostering new literary styles, ideas, directions, and themes, broadly distinguishing and disagreeing with the contemporaneous Progressive Writers' Movement by extensively focusing on pure artistic expression rather than political ideology, which was considered literature of propaganda. Prominent members of Halqa Arbab-e-Zauk included famous poets like Noon Meem Rashid (1910-1975), Meeraji (1912-1949), and Qayyum Nazar (1914-1989), each contributing uniquely to the modern literary landscape of Urdu Literature. As noted in an analysis, "What was most prominent and unique among the writers of Halqa Arbab-e-Zauk circle was freshness and innovation."¹⁹

Syed Abid Ali Abid, in his article in *Naqosh* (1962), enumerates several notable writers and poets of Lahore up to the 1960s, whose works were deeply influenced by the city's rich culture, history, and political outlook. Their contributions remain foundational to Urdu literature, showcasing the intellectual and cultural ebullience of Lahore. They played significant roles in fostering literary endeavours that influenced the craft of their successive generations of writers and poets (already mentioned in the introduction), further cementing Lahore's status as a cultural hub of the

18 Muhammad Tufail, ed., "*Adabi Tehreekein*," *Naqosh*, no.2 (Lahore: Idara Firogh e Urdu, 1962), 1103.

19 Shabbir Hussain and Muhammad Kamran, "Halqa Arbab e Zoq, Meera Ji and the Modern Concept of Urdu Nazm," *Zaban-o-Adab* 16, no. 1 (June 2023): 28–36,
<http://zabanoadab.gcuf.edu.pk/index.php/1/article/view/119>
 (accessed June 02, 2024).

subcontinent. Some of the leading names are Shams ul Ulema Molana Muhammad Hussain Azad (1830-1910), Molana Girami Jalandhri, Shams ul Ulema Molana Shibli Nomani (1857-1914), Shams ul Ulema Molvi Syed Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935), Pandit Brijmohan Ditariya Kaifi (1866–1955), Sir Sheikh Abdul Qadir (1874-1950), Seemab Akbrabaadi (1882-1951), Agha Hashar Kashmiri (1879-1935), Jigar Muradaadi (1890–1960), Yaas Yagana Changezi (1884-1956), Hafiz Mahmood Shirani (1880-1946), Tajwar Najeeb Abaadi (1894-1951), Falak Pema (1879-1951).²⁰

Lahore's cultural imagination is also deeply embedded in its educational institutions. There are numerous colleges in Lahore, so much so that Waheed ul Hassan Hashmi writes in *Naqosh* (1960), "Lahore is the city of colleges. It is the center of higher education in the whole subcontinent. Due to this very reason, the number of newspapers and magazines published in Lahore are higher in number as compared to any other city in this region."²¹ Most of these colleges were established under the British rule in the subcontinent. Some of them are; Government College Lahore (estb. 1864), Oriental College (estb. 1876), Central Training College (estb. 1880), Forman Christian College (estb. 1886), Aitchison College (estb. 1886), King Edward Medical College (estb. 1888), Islamia College Civil Lines (estb. 1892), Islamia College Railway Road (estb. 1892), Dayal Singh College (estb. 1910), Kinnard College (estb. 1912), Lahore College for Women (estb. 1922), and M. A. O. College (estb. 1933). Among them, Government College University and Punjab University have been nurturing platforms for many intellectuals, poets, scholars, and writers. The spirited student culture and literary societies in these universities played a significant role in promoting a culture of thinking,

20 Muhammad Tufail, ed., "*Chand Baray Adeeb*," *Naqosh*, no. 2 (Lahore: Idara Firogh e Urdu, 1962), 1060.

21 Muhammad Tufail, ed., "Colleges," *Naqosh*, no. 2 (Lahore: Idara Firogh e Urdu, 1962), 687.

questioning, debate, critique, and literary/scholarly excellence.

Musical gatherings, or mehfils, were fundamental to Lahore's cultural life. *Heera Mandi* stood as the keystone of classical music in India; a hub where musical mastery thrived across generations of performers from diverse regions of the subcontinent. Situated in the bustling cities of Delhi and Lahore, it used to reiterate the melodies of widely respected maestros. Within its several storied courtyards, inherently talented vocalists and instrumentalists polished their art under the guidance of celebrated gurus from various *gharans*. As Saleema Hashmi mentions:

Heeramandi was a place known for musical musings. People think that it was a place specified for women but it's not true. The Patiala Gharana, Shaam Churasi Gharana, and Kirana Gharana had their roots here in Heeramandi. The musical giants of these Gharanas, like Ustad Baray Ghulam Ali Khan, had their places in Heeramandi where they used to live and perform.²²

Siraj Nizami highlights some of the male vocalists whose names are now being obliterated under the dust of time but once they were icons of Lahore; Kaalay Khan (1875-1920), Mubarak Ali Khan, Akhtar Hussain Khan (1900-1960), Payaray Khan, Umeed Ali Khan (d. 1979), Ghulam Rasool Khan, Machar Khan, and Sardar Khan.²³

Heera Mandi nurtured an unmatched environment for the evolution, propagation, and preservation of ragas; personifying the rich traditions of Hindustani classical music. Apart from just being a source of amusement, these intellectual gatherings were used to exchange diverse ideas, and classical forms like khayal, thumri, dhurpad, dadra, and ghazal were rendered. Siraj Nizami, mentions in *Naqosh* the acclaimed female vocalists from Lahore whose musical

22 Professor Saleema Hashmi of Lahore, interview by Muhammad Umair Shahid Dogar, Lahore, May 20, 2024.

23 Muhammad Tufail, ed., "Mosikar," *Naqosh*, no. 2 (Lahore: Idara Firogh e Urdu, 1962), 715.

foundations were rooted in *Heera Mandi*, where they gained their melodic prowess. Some of them were Sardar Bai, Anwar Bai, Eiden Bai Akhiyan Wali, Khurshid Bai, Inayat Bai Dherowali, Roshan Ara Beghum (1917-1982), Mukhtar Beghum Amritsari (1911-1982), Fareeda Khanum (b. 1929), Noor Jahan (1926-2000).²⁴ Noor Jehan, among them, “often referred to as Malika-e-Tarannum (Queen of Melody), not only excelled in singing but also left an indelible mark on the film industry, bridging the gap between classical and popular music.”²⁵

The cultural locale of Lahore has historically served as a fertile ground for artistic expression across various disciplines, cultivating an interplay between the city’s historical, social, and cultural contexts and the creative practices of its artists, contributing significantly to Lahore’s cultural imagination. According to Shamma Dastagir, “Lahore provided not just a setting but a source of inspiration for artists from diverse backgrounds, enabling them to develop their crafts and articulate their unique perspectives within the fabric of the city’s cultural tapestry.”²⁶ For instance, musicians, writers, and poets alike drew upon Lahore’s historical grandeur and socio-cultural diversity to interrogate the world around them, considering the power of creative expression. Rizwana Mir illustrates how “the city’s dynamic environment encouraged artists to blend traditional forms with contemporary influences, thereby contributing to the evolution of Pakistani art and culture.”²⁷ This reciprocal relationship between Lahore and its artists is evident in the everlasting impact of their works, which is powerful and

24 Tufail, ed., “Mosikar,” 715.

25 Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, *Master Musicians of Pakistan: Hereditary Sarangi Players Speak* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

26 Shama Dastagir, “Gender, Music, and Identity: The Case of Female Musicians in Lahore,” *Journal of South Asian Studies* 15, no. 2 (2018): 135 (June 03, 2024).

27 Rizwana Mir, *Heeramandi: A Cultural History of Lahore* (Lahore: Lahore University Press, 2020), 78.

essential and continues to remind us what cultural imagination does, and how it should and can be used.

Dwindling of Lahore's Cultural Imagination

Lahore, once celebrated as the cultural capital of Pakistan, has experienced a crucial decline in its cultural relevance and imagination over recent years. This dwindling of Lahore's cultural imagination can be attributed to various factors, including urbanization, political instability, and socio-economic transformations over time. These elements have collectively contributed to the systematic erosion of Lahore's rich cultural imagination, extensively impacting its arts, architecture, literature, music, and overall cultural character. It has been diminishing to such an extent that Professor Shaista, who has spent her life in Lahore, says, "There's no culture in Lahore anymore; we are rather in a process of cultural erosion. And we can see that Lahore's culture is drastically deteriorating. And if we continue romancing with it, we won't be able to conserve what is left."²⁸

Rapid urbanization played a significant role in deconstructing the cultural landscape of Lahore. The city's augmentation has often come at the expense of its celebrated historical sites and socio-cultural influences. As Noman Baig highlights, "urbanization in Lahore has led to the destruction of historical landmarks, which were once symbols of the city's rich cultural heritage."²⁹ The construction of new infrastructure, housing schemes, shopping plazas, and commercial buildings has obscured many historical sites, resulting in a loss of the city's cultural identity. This urban expansion in Lahore's population from 6.8 million in 1998 to almost 11.1 million in 2017 as per the last survey and "to accommodate these extra 4.8m individuals, the city's built area has grown from 32,700 hectares (80,803 acres) in 2000

28 Professor Shaista Sonnu Sirajuddin of Lahore, interview by Muhammad Umair Shahid Dogar, Lahore, May 27, 2024.

29 Noman Baig, "Urbanization and the Decline of Historical Landmarks in Lahore," *Journal of Urban History* 39, no. 1 (2013): 45 (accessed June 05, 2024).

to nearly 40,000 hectares (98,842) in 2017.”³⁰ As Dr. Ayesha Jalal would also remark considering the shortcomings of governance, “The bureaucratic attitude towards cultural conservation is deeply concerning. The extensive disinterest and corruption have importantly impacted Lahore, making it appear unrecognizable to the previous generations who grew up here.”³¹

Political instability and fascism have also seriously impacted Lahore’s cultural backdrop. The fluctuating political environment over the years has led to irregular cultural policies, highly affecting cultural institutions and activities. As per Nadeem Omar Tarar, “the political turmoil in Pakistan has resulted in a neglect of cultural heritage and reduced state support for cultural activities.”³² But according to Saleema Hashmi, this is not something new and traces its roots back to Zia’s dictatorship. She recalls,

One cannot pretend that the city today is the same as it was; certainly, it has changed, most apparently, its cultural life. I think it was General Zia ul Haq who did most of the damage. His rightist fascist ideology could very quickly sense that the main opposition would come from the creative sector of Lahore, and that is where the axe fell. Dance was prohibited in private and public meetings, Heeramandi was closed, and extreme censorship was imposed on writing, art, and media. Punjab University and other educational institutions lost some of their illustrious teachers because they were politically undesirable. There was dissent, but it had to be in cover.”³³

30 Umair Javed, “Lahore’s Bleak Future,” *Dawn News*, October 23, 2017.

31 Professor Dr. Ayesha Jalal of TUFTS University, interview by Muhammad Umair Shahid Dogar, Lahore, June 05, 2024.

32 Nadeem Omar Tarar, “Political Instability and Cultural Neglect in Pakistan,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 17, no. 1 (2011): 78 (accessed June 05, 2024).

33 Professor Saleema Hashmi of Lahore, interview by Muhammad Umair Shahid Dogar, Lahore, May 20, 2024.

The socio-economic transformation in Lahore has further boosted the decline of its cultural imagination. The growing stress on consumerism, commodification, and modernization has altered the focus away from traditional arts, artefacts, and crafts. As Ananya Jahanara Kabir puts it, "The socio-economic changes in Lahore have led to a cultural shift where traditional art forms are increasingly being replaced by modern, commercial entertainment."³⁴ This shift has not only created a sense of otherization for local artists but has also contaminated the distinct cultural identity of the city. As per Qasim Yusuf of Sialkot, who is a distant observer of Lahore's cultural decline:

Truly civilized nations invest and focus on the preservation and promotion of their culture. In Pakistan, however, people prefer to learn and display Western mannerisms with a hint of pride. People are intentionally abandoning the values, norms, and beliefs they grew up with for Western standards. It is a matter of great concern.³⁵

The literary and artistic expressions that were once the *magnum opus* of Lahore have also dwindled. The disinterest in readership, cultural affiliation, and patronage of the arts has further intensified this issue. As Ayesha Jalal notes, "The diminishing interest in literature and arts among the younger generation in Lahore is a reflection of the broader cultural decline."³⁶ Although efforts are being made with the aid of literary festivals like the Lahore Literary Festival, Faiz Festival, Think Fest, and other platforms, the concern stated above has something to do with personal interest and individual efforts toward the preservation and regeneration of cultural imagination, which is almost equal to none. As Professor Shaista observes:

34 Ananya Jahanara Kabir, "Socio-Economic Changes and Cultural Shifts in Lahore," *Cultural Dynamics* 24, no. 2 (2012): 112 (accessed June 05, 2024).

35 Qasim Yousaf, "Cultural Decline," *Dawn News*, June 01, 2022.

36 Ayesha Jalal, "Literary and Artistic Decline in Lahore," *Pakistani Cultural Studies Review* 20, no. 3 (2014): 136.

The life of cultural imagination can only thrive if we know how to take it forward. Lahore's culture can only be saved if we own it, and that doesn't mean we should be transported back to the past. It simply means to draw from the past what can nurture and what can nourish a socially just, imaginative, and creative society.³⁷

Despite these drastic changes and challenges, there are efforts in progress to revitalize Lahore's cultural imagination. Initiatives and efforts by local NGOs, cultural organizations, and community groups (working on their own with volunteer efforts) aim to be aware of, conserve, and promote the city's cultural landscape. As Nighat Said Khan highlights, "Community-led initiatives are crucial for the revival of Lahore's cultural heritage and for fostering a sense of cultural pride among its residents."³⁸ And hope rejuvenates with Saleema Hashmi saying:

You can't do away with the spirit of Lahore's cultural beauty, which is timeless; the propagation of cultural expression is still very much there. Until we have even a single person standing, facing authority with defiance, speaking truth to power, we have nothing to fear about Lahore's cultural imagination.³⁹

Surely, Lahore will continue to be what it is until there is some room for artistic endeavours, as Toni Morrison (1931-2019) writes in her essay, "*The Habit of Art*", "The impulse to do and revere art is an ancient need. We hunger for a way to articulate who we are and what we mean."⁴⁰

37 Professor Shaista Sonnu Sirajuddin of Lahore, interview by Muhammad Umair Shahid Dogar, Lahore, May 27, 2024.

38 Khan, "Community-Led Initiatives for Cultural Revival in Lahore,"¹²³.

39 Professor Saleema Hashmi of Lahore, interview by Muhammad Umair Shahid Dogar, Lahore, May 20, 2024.

40 Toni Morrison, *Mouth Full of Blood* (London: Vintage Publications, 2019), 54.

And Justice Nasira puts it, "Lahore will certainly change to an inexplicable extent and it has to change since every era creates a specific environment for itself."⁴¹

Conclusion

Lahore's cultural imagination has been recontextualized by reorienting emphasis from a static commemoration of monuments to a rigorous understanding of how the city's cultural identity is perpetually reshaped and reimagined through the lived experiences, narratives, and creative expressions of its people. By giving voices to diverse communities, engaging with the processes of cultural propagation, and critically examining how public memory and social identity interact with heritage, Lahore's cultural imagination has undergone recontextualization.

For Lahore, cultural imagination has historically been sprightly and multifarious, deeply embedded in its rich history and the influential individuals who have called it home, no matter what. Lahore's cultural imagination has been historically shaped by these illustrious artistic figures. These individuals, through their artistic contributions to literature and music, positively contributed to the city's spirit of intellectual rigour and creative excellence.

Currently, Lahore's cultural outlook faces challenges, but the future holds something solid for the regeneration of its cultural imagination. Looking ahead, the future of Lahore's cultural imagination will likely be a blend of preservation and innovation but certainly, it won't be the same, it will experience large-scale change yet again. As the city continues to grow and modernize, there will be an extensive need to balance material development with cultural conservation, allowing Lahore to be a beacon of cultural richness and creativity.

41 Justice Rt Nasira Javed Iqbal of Lahore, interview by Muhammad Umair Shahid Dogar, Lahore, May 14, 2024.