



## Lahore Explored through the Lens of History and Fiction

**Muhammad Karim Akhtar**

Lecturer in English

Riphah Institute of Language & Literature (RILL)

Riphah International University, Lahore, Pakistan

karim.akhtar@riphah.edu.pk

Lahore has been a subject of fascination for writers and historians through the ages. They have penned down its history, architectural design and cultural activities throughout its different stages of development as a city of international fame and repute. The rule of various Emperors, Kings and Rajas over Lahore, the Rajputs, the Muslims, the Sikhs and last but not least the British have also been chronicled by the historians and researchers. Recently a new book on Lahore by Shahid Imtiaz has appeared to capture the attention of the students and scholars of both history and literature.

The book *Amorphous Lahore Colonial and Postcolonial: A Journey through History and Fiction* by Shahid Imtiaz is remarkable in many ways. One of its distinctive features is that the writer has focused on a new aspect of Lahore, its amorphous nature. For this purpose Mr. Imtiaz has combined history with fiction, an attempt that has not been made before. In this book the writer has discussed those factors and forces, historical, cultural, social, religious and political that have gone a long way to make Lahore amorphous, both, in the colonial and postcolonial times. The book under review, therefore, is neither a chronological history of Lahore nor a sequential narration of fiction written in English on and about the city of Lahore. The book has two parts and four chapters. In the 'Introduction: Part One', the writer has explained his own concept of the idea of amorphous and used it with reference to history, culture and literature. He claims that 'to me amorphousness is a combination and amalgamation of the similar and dissimilar, fixity and fluidity,

different entities coming together to merge as a floating structure, possibly with a physical shape of its own kind, which is neither permanent nor fixed, it is rather transformed into a cultural pattern- apparently, explicitly and at the surface level fixed, yet underneath, volatile, violently active and non-static; ultimately falling apart and collapsing into new images of destruction.’ A cycle of destruction then is followed by a cycle of construction. The things, which remain hidden and invisible under the surface, disturb the existing manifestation of cultural, social and physical pattern and the new pattern of things, which emerges, contains the characteristics of the previous pattern as well. So Lahore has been ‘shaped, de-shaped and re-shaped physically, geographically, culturally and socially.’ This chapter also gives the theoretical frame work where the writer has engaged theorists like Homi K Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Mikhail Bakhtin and Robert Young in order to highlight the difference between their concepts of culture, hybridity, mockery and mimicry and his own concept of the ‘amorphous.’

In ‘Part II: Chapter One’, the writer has explored the legends, folktales, oral traditions and travelogues of those who visited the area now called Lahore. He has given us the etymology of the word ‘Lahore’ and traced its variation throughout its history. This chapter is an excellent study of exploring Lahore’s original location and geography. Mr. Imtiaz claims that ‘the very cloudiness and mist of traditions and legends surrounding Lahore in itself is fascination enough to make the city a subject of historical exploration. That the city of Lahore never had a fixed name and that it had been called by various names throughout its history is indicative of its amorphousness.’ The author engages with diverse sources including a popular Hindu tradition associating Lahore with the name of Lov or Loh, the son of Rama, the king of Ayodha and the hero of the *Ramayana*, who is supposed to have established the city of Lahore on the bank of the River Ravi at the site of Lahore fort; quasi-historic traditions of surrounding localities and various contemporary chronicles and adventures like ‘The Raja Tarangini’, ‘Desh-v-Bhaga’: ‘The Adventures of Raja Rasalu’; the writings of Roman and Greek historians like Gaius Pliny and Ptolemy; travel writings of the Chinese traveler Hwan Twan Thesang; Arab and Muslim historians like Al- Masudi, M. Qasim Shah Ferishta and Al-Beruni, Muslim saints like Hazrat Sheikh Ahmad Zanjani and Sayyid Ali Hajviri; and the writings and diaries of the British historians, administrators and writers, in order to situate Lahore geographically and to unveil it as a city of enduring culture and grand architectural design that is a combination of foreign and indigenous influences and concepts.

Chapters two, three and four are focused on the study of fiction where

Lahore appears as a locale both in the colonial and postcolonial times. In chapter two Dina Nath's novel, *The Two Friends: A Descriptive Story of Lahore Life* (1899) and Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim* (1901) have been analysed to illustrate the amorphous nature of Lahore. Nath's novel is an excellent study of the social and cultural interaction of various communities inhabiting Lahore. Their interaction adds newness to the city and makes it a cosmopolitan city since the colonial times. Kipling's *Kim* (1901) presents a journey from the colonial space of Lahore inhabited by the colonisers to the winding and narrow streets of the walled city and in the process reveals the diversified and contrasting picture of political, cultural, and social *Lahori* life. *Kim*, on the one hand, is about the Lama's (a Tibetan priest's) quest for truth and spiritual knowledge, and on the other hand, it is about the British strategy of spying against Russia to stop it from intervening into the affairs of the Sub-continent. While the 'Great Game' is the backdrop of the novel, yet the novel is an excellent study of an amorphous relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Undoubtedly, it is through Kim, the main character of the novel, that we enter the strange yet captivating world of the novel *Kim*. Kim's interaction with the Indians and British emphasizes the ambivalent relationship between the colonisers and the colonised. The British need the help of the Indians to spy against the Russians' imminent attack on India through Afghanistan.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* forms the pivot of author's research to examine the forces and factors which have played a very significant role to make Lahore an amorphous city. The novel spotlights Lahore just before and after the partition of 1947, a transition from being a colonial city to the postcolonial capital of the province of the Punjab of the newly independent country called Pakistan. It is here that the *Lahori* characters act, interact and ultimately fall apart. As a result of their mutual hatred emanating out of political, cultural and religious divides the city assumes a new kind of amorphousness. The development of Lahore as an amorphous city has also been looked at in Sidhwa's *The Bride, An American Brat*, Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days* and Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke* covering almost five decades of *Lahori* life. A study of these novels and memoirs along with historical sources by the author threads history and non-history together and provides continuity of change and transformation regarding the idea of amorphousness. Like a postmodernist, the writer has played with the idea of 'amorphous' very successfully. He has borrowed the concept of 'amorphousness' from the field of science and has applied it to the field of history and literature. The book presents Lahore as a city in constant flux and nothing seems static. He has also engaged

with different genres such as history and fiction within the structure of the book which leads one to read the city of Lahore as a text where colonial and postcolonial forces act and interact to give the city its present shape. The mosaic of quotations and intertextuality that the author incorporates, on the one hand, unpacks and unveils the basic motif of the book and on the other hand, make the book a unified text. The book is silent on the current socio-political and ethno-religious divides. It does not voice the increasingly widening political divide which has made the Lahoris extremely aggressive and volatile.

The writer does not seem to be oblivious to the very strong tradition of literary, cultural and political activities based in Lahore. Such activities date back to the time when the city was discovered as a space we now call Lahore. This tradition had reached its culminating point in the 1920s when Lahore excelled in comparison with other centres of art and culture in India and was ahead even of some of the centres of literary and cultural activities in the West. The mushroom growth of road-side cafes, and hotels on the Mall Road and *baithaks* (sitting rooms) inside the walled city gave Lahore a cultural and literary face of its own kind. The development of theatre, film, radio and TV in Lahore has also been given an adequate space in the book and sports like the traditional wrestling has also been mentioned emphatically. In the words of Dr. Tahir Kamran, a famous Pakistani historian, 'this work synthesizes the two epistemic strands namely 'historical' and 'literary,' which is usually considered an onerous undertaking, but is performed by the author with dexterity.' While commenting on the book Dr. Fawzia Afzal Khan, a renowned author and Professor at Montclair State University USA, says, 'Mr. Imtiaz has analysed historical fiction and memoir, to present readers with his take on the shifting yet culturally specific contours that have stamped Lahore as a many-splendored city for the ages.'

Lahore Explored through the Lens of History and Fiction

Book Review Author: Muhammad Karim Akhtar

Lecturer in English

Riphah Institute of Language & Literature (RILL)

Riphah International University, Lahore, Pakistan

Mr. Muhammad Karim Akhtar is a Lecturer in English at Riphah Institute of Language & Literature, Riphah International University Lahore, Pakistan.

+92 306 786 7063

karim.akhtar@riphah.edu.pk

About the Book

*Amorphous Lahore Colonial and Postcolonial: A Journey through History and Fiction*

This Book is written by Dr. Shahid Imtiaz

Associate Professor at Riphah Institute of Language & Literature

Riphah International University, Lahore

shahid.imtiaz@riphah.edu.pk

Published by Kitab Trinjan in Pakistan in 2021.

Email: kitab.trinjan@gmail.com

ISBN: 978-969-9141-25-6

Price in Pakistan: Rs. 1250

Outside Pakistan \$ 25

Total Pages 262