

The Freedom of Space

A Short Story

by

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Sometimes I imagine the streets of my city from when I was younger. I trace routes I once frequented, chart territories that were once familiar. I start walking from the corner of my street crossing my neighbours, exchanging smiles and grimaces as the situation demands, to the park or to the shops. I count the tiles on the footpath, jumping over cracks to avoid them like my mother's superstitions dictated. I can almost feel the heavy thump of my braid hitting my back as I walk with heavy shopping bags on either side. I can remember the joyful strides of my sister as she skips beside me on one side and the laboured hurried steps of our old chaperone maid on the other. I can remember how the breeze, that brought respite from the summer heat and made the walk bearable, made me acutely aware of the simple and matchless pleasure of walking to a destination.

'Lahore as a palimpsest' invokes the memory of the Lahore of my childhood. It was a phrase I read in school, that referred to Lahore's history being written and rewritten and constantly being shaped. The image of a manuscript with layers and layers intrigued me, it seemed a beautiful and apt metaphor. That was the Lahore I grew up in, with a historical center and a sprawling character. A Lahore that grew, expanded and changed. I always knew my access to this wide and expansive Lahore was limited, but I was convinced that when I grew older I could navigate through more of it. For now my family was well off enough to be obsessed with issues of propriety. My father wasn't like my best friend Sana's, who insisted she cover her head and stop talking to the boys in class. He was however insistent on imposing some constraints on my mobility. He would make the same little old maid chaperone me where I wanted to go, and several spaces were completely out of bounds to begin with. However I was young and spirited and found my ways. I attended select parties, I learnt how to dodge the diligent but stupid maid and half the fun lay in the deception. So local government elections were of no concern to me, I was wholly preoccupied with what to wear to the school end of year gala. I couldn't care less that the incumbent political party was implementing a new system that would make cities autonomous regions - to be governed by the mayor. I heard my parent's grumble and worry but I was far too caught up in self indulgent adolescence. I remember the first news that shook me arrived the same day my clothes for the gala did from the tailor. The mustard chicken kurta was the outfit of my dreams, but just then it seemed the nature of dreams was about to be altered. The school was notified that the gala was to be cancelled

immediately and a seminar arranged in its stead. The huge outcry was met with stony resistance from the school administration who plastered the mayor's orders on every surface of the school. I remember feeling like this was the end of the world, with no idea of what was to follow. On the day of the Seminar, our students planned a protest in the hall that was originally to house our event. Yet as soon as we reached the school we saw police vehicles with a strange yellow logo on them parked outside. It was unfathomable that the Mayor had sent police to make sure a school event was cancelled. Even more unbelievable was the reaction to us arriving with posters marking our protest. We were immediately made to throw them out, along with handing over our telephones and segregated by gender to form two queues for the seminar. A coeducational school (that had thus far never distinguished on the basis of gender) treating us this way was creating panic and anger. The anger quickly turned to fear when one protesting student, my good friend Ahmed, who was being particularly vocal about his unhappiness, was dragged out of the queue by a blank-faced policeman and kicked to the floor. 'The seminar is beginning, you'll understand soon enough' was all he said as Ahmed lay whimpering at his feet. There was very little to do but wait for the Seminar after this.

The Seminar consisted of a prerecorded message announcing that the Mayor was now the supreme head of Lahore. That this was a newly created designation and meant that he was in complete control of the region. This caused minutes of furious whispers which were only suppressed by pleading teachers with pale faces, forced to take action under the glares of the police force. The seminar now shifted to a message by a policeman who announced that the officers in the school campus were part of an elite force newly created by the Mayor and were called the 'Guardians'. He told us that schools across the city were being delivered this very lecture and parents at their respective workplaces were being told much the same. He went on to present a series of slides that were titled 'A new Lahore'. The slides consisted of a series of rules regarding access to public space. Each slide sent a shiver through my spine. The first said that unmarried women and men were to be separated at all times in public spaces, including siblings over the age of ten. The second said that public parks and attractions would henceforth be sealed and educational sites of recreational with 'gender appropriate attractions' were to be constructed. The third said that co-educational institutes were henceforth abolished, and the fourth that all young adults

were to be ascribed a new syllabus. I don't remember what the other slides said because with each passing rule the world seemed to be titling out of view . Lahore as a palimpsest I remember thinking, what would be the new metaphor for this new Lahore?

Life took upon a new meaning after that day. Our parents were equally helpless; my mother and her female colleagues had been terminated and provided a manual titled 'house work as a vocation'. I will never forget the look on my mother's face when she was made to go home from her law office, her hands clutching the manual on housework and her eyes filled with anguish. People immediately talked of leaving the city but there was no question of it. New papers had to be prepared to travel even within the country, and there was talk of other cities undergoing even bigger transformations. Development and progress became the most used words in local media, and modes of dissent seemed limited. I couldn't believe that I couldn't leave my house the way I once had but instead had to wait until the women only timings in segregated spaces began. The mayor had weekly televised broadcasts, and each address was dominated with the theme of gender segregation. He emphasized that the way forward was strict consignment to gender roles, roles that delegated women to the private sphere. I knew there was much talk about his ideological underpinning; his troubled childhood, but I couldn't make much sense of it. I could barely wrap my head around Lahore becoming an autonomous region, with the idea that my primary identity was as a citizen of it. My father began to teach my sisters and I each day at home after school from books he feared would soon be blacklisted and confiscated. These books introduced me to ideas of citizenship and gender equality - ideas that increasingly troubled me and made me critical of the status quo. I remember wanting to burn the mustard outfit I was once meant to wear to the year end Gala the day the dress code notification was issued. The passage from adolescence to adulthood was meant to be an opening up of space, for me it was a narrowing down of the already little space I occupied. I was so constricted I felt as if I was being choked. This marked the beginning of my preoccupation with space, a preoccupation that led to me writing and also drawing little boxes all over my notebooks. There was so much to chronicle, as the city took on a shape we couldn't have imagined in our widest dreams. I was never as acutely aware of my gender as I was under the governance of the Mayor. My woman hood governed my being, and that too under the guidance of a man and his

notions of gender. The city changed and we changed with it, until we became unrecognizable to one another. It wasn't long before an alternate life seemed a distant reality, spaces became more policed and every day I felt myself shrinking. I drew more boxes and the Mayor issued more notifications. Every night I fell asleep each night with a line I had read from Viktor Frankl's heart wrenching book 'Man's Search for Meaning' replaying itself over and over in my mind:

'I called to the Lord from my Narrow Prison and He answered me in the freedom of Space'