

Recensão a *Disrupted City. Walking the Pathways of Memory and History in Lahore, de* Manan Ahmed Asif

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Manan Ahmed Asif, *Disrupted City: Walking the Pathways of Memory and History in Lahore*. New York: The New Press, 2024, 373 pp.

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The past decade has seen a renewed interest in Lahore. The city has been the subject of diverse research spanning the disciplines of literature, history, cinema studies, and urban studies.[1] Manan Ahmed Asif's *Disrupted City* adds to this varied corpus. Written for the general reader, it blends scholarly curiosity with a searching personal narrative. The book's strength lies in its excavation of Lahore's multiplicity, which it

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1 See, for example: Chris Moffat, *Lahore after Modernism: Architecture and Its Histories in Pakistan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2026); Ammara Maqsood, Chris Moffat and Fizzah Sajjad, eds., *Lahore in Motion: Infrastructure, History, and Belonging in Urban Pakistan* (London: UCL Press, 2025); Nasir Abbas Nayyar, ed., *Lāhaur kī kahānī, shā'irī kī zubānī* (Lahore: Gurmani Centre for Languages and Literature, 2025); Iftikhar Dadi, *Lahore Cinema: Between Realism and Fable* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022); Salma Siddique, *Evacuee Cinema: Bombay and Lahore in Partition Transit (1940-1960)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Ahmed Saeed, ed., *Lāhaur: ek shahr-e be-misāl misāl* (Lahore: Sho'bah-e tārīḳh o muṭāli'ah-e pākistān jāmi'ah panjāb, 2021); Ian Talbot and Tahir Kamran, *Lahore in the Time of the Raj* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2016); Anna Suvorova, *Lahore: Topophilia of Space and Place* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011); William J. Glover, *Making Lahore Modern: Constructing and Imagining a Colonial City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

synthesizes through its use of the vignette form. Asif's *Disrupted City* centers perspectives and histories that are marginal to contemporary Lahore. It asks how suppressed memory might operate within and against the Muslim nationalist imagining of the city since Partition.

The book's structure rests on six chapters bookended by an Introduction and Afterword. Entitled "City," the first chapter introduces readers to important touchstones of Lahore's precolonial architecture. Asif offers glimpses of the Tomb of Anarkali and the shrines of Mian Mir and Data Darbar, among other locations, to invoke a near millennium of Lahori history and the intersecting sacral landscapes that link contemporary Lahore to its deep past. The second chapter on "History" considers how Lahore has been narrated across historical eras. It moves from significant histories, such as *Tahqīqāt-e Chishtī*, to other genres such as news reports and Post-Partition memoirs. Asif shows how various writers produced views of Lahore indicative of their historical moment, and which reflected their visions for the city. He thus sets up his third chapter on "Nation," which explores the new imagination and material development of Lahore under the Pakistani state. Asif suggests it was during this period that Lahore was severed from its many pasts, a process that entailed removing public statues, writing new histories, and imposing Urdu to the detriment of other languages. The following chapter on "Memory" then considers how new origins were crafted for Pakistani citizens. Asif shows how the Two Nation Theory shaped a variety of practices in the new country. These include the linking of modern monuments to medieval conquerors and the growing fascination with the warrior figure as a national hero in historical novels. The fifth chapter on "People" surveys important figures who created or challenged the new Pakistani self in Lahore. It is followed by a final chapter, entitled "Place," in which Asif narrates fragments from his own contemporary explorations of Lahore.

Disrupted City considers how Lahore as a postcolonial, Islamic city requires a distinct theoretical approach compared to traditional scholarship on the city as such. The book's structure reflects Asif's methodological investment in walking, a practice he figures as critical

to both imagining and depicting cities. Asif frames his book as a response to "the colonial inheritance of walking in the colony."[2] He writes not as "an outsider prying open the city," but as one intent on exploring how Lahore has both formed and occluded its margins as it has been made and remade over time. Asif's stress on walking gives the book its structure. Each chapter is divided into many brief sections, all of which are numbered, with none being more than some six pages long. More than the chapters that contain them, these sections are the basic units of *Disrupted City*. Each takes a limited subject for its point of departure, often a book, statue, monument, or person. Asif creates vignettes that mix impressionistic and historical treatment. Though brief, they allow for a general overview of their subject and its role in shaping Lahore. Reading these sections resembles meditating before one historic site before proceeding to the next. As each familiarizes the reader with a single subject, the book itself walks across Lahore from one section to the next. These sections bear out Asif's commitment to breadth. He uses them to view the city capaciously. Rather than visualize Lahore through a few deeply analyzed parts, he seeks to bring its whole structure into view.

Disrupted City links the textual and material construction of Lahore. It positions, for example, the exclusion of Lahore's Hindu and Sikh past from books and magazines as the discursive corollary of the "physical erasure of temples, Devanagari and Gurmukhi scripts, and street and neighborhood names."[3] Asif argues that Lahore is partitioned from its own past. Understood in this context, *Disrupted City* attempts to write Lahore out from calcified ways of thinking about its past and present. An important example of this is Section V in the chapter entitled "History," in which Asif presents news excerpts that trace Partition violence from February 2nd to September 22nd 1947.[4] In contrast to a dominant historical lens that reckons Partition in terms of religious-political communities,

2 Manan Ahmed Asif, *Disrupted City: Walking the Pathways of Memory and History in Lahore* (New York: The New Press, 2024), 273.

3 Asif, *Disrupted City*, 107.

4 Asif, *Disrupted City*, 96-97.

what is remarkable about many of these excerpts (and especially those published prior to August) is their tendency to frame those arrested or killed not as Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs, but simply as persons. Though Asif's aim here is to evoke "the encroaching drumbeat of disaster" that would have then resounded in Lahore, his excerpts also complement the book's overarching thrust in that they suggest the importance of thinking beyond the communal logic of Partition in both the immediate and long term.[5] *Disrupted City* asks how Lahore might remember its past differently if it saw the victims of violence not as members of religious communities who could then be valorized or forgotten, but rather as its own citizens, as Lahoris. The book attempts to not only rethink the city but to craft a new way of being. It thus aspires to create "new Lahoris, inside and elsewhere."[6]

Asif's inclusive Lahori identity contrasts against the Pakistani state's ideal national subject, one whose affective bonds to the nation would entail forgetting Lahore's many non-Muslim pasts.[7] Asif explores the role of figures such as I.H. Qureshi and S.M. Ikram, members of Pakistan's early intelligentsia who sought to lay the cultural and intellectual foundations of the new state. He rather successfully captures the broad intellectual context in which they operated and were challenged by non-statist historians such as K.K. Aziz and Mubarak Ali.

A key undercurrent to the creation of the Pakistani national imagination was Urdu, whose imposition Asif traces in gestures across sections. Asif recognizes that Urdu's institutional importance to Pakistan is the long-term outcome of colonial language policy in Lahore and Punjab.[8] He also notes that the language was later appropriated by "the religious elite" and intellectuals such as Qureshi after Partition.[9] These two moments in the late 19th and mid-20th century are, however,

5 Asif, *Disrupted City*, 99.

6 Asif, *Disrupted City*, 19.

7 I here rely on Qasmi's distinction between the citizen and national subject. See Ali Usman Qasmi, *Qaum, Mulk, Sultanat: Citizenship and National Belonging in Pakistan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), 15.

8 Asif, *Disrupted City*, 137-138.

9 Asif, *Disrupted City*, 118, 143.

connected by a significant history that merited inclusion in the book, namely that of the conscious appropriation of Urdu by notable Punjabi figures such as Sheikh Abdul Qadir, Mohammad Iqbal, and Salahuddin Ahmad. Central to Lahore's literary, political, and intellectual landscape in the first half of the 20th century, they formed part of the "Urdu-first" stratum to which Asif gestures, and were integral to the promotion of Urdu as a language of education and aspiration.[10] If the links between Urdu and Muslim nationalism were first forged under the colonial state, they were stabilized and strengthened by local notables who actively denigrated Punjabi while developing Urdu as the national lingua franca. The absence of this Lahori history of Urdu nationalism from *Disrupted City* risks oversimplifying the language's place in the city and Pakistan more broadly. A section threading the above figures could have served as an important link between the moments Asif traces. It would have encouraged a more complex understanding of how Urdu's widespread institutionalization in Punjab and Pakistan erupted from Lahore, and with the complicity of its middle and upper classes.

Overall, *Disrupted City* is an important complement to recent scholarship on Lahore. Whereas academic work on the city typically positions it as the object of either spatial, historical, or literary inquiry, Asif shows how we might read Lahore as an interdisciplinary object. His book synthesizes and so renders Lahore's many pasts legible to the non-specialist reader. Insistent on reading the city's past and present together across disciplines, it thus also offers methodological insights for a scholarly audience.

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10 Asif, *Disrupted City*, 137.

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