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The Coffee House as a Portrait of The City

CASS

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A coffee house serves as a place for an assembly of the customers for the experience of leisure and the consumption of the coffee. The nature of the coffeehouses has been changing ever since the days of the inception of the Coffee Houses contributing to the transformation of the urban spaces. Though, a Coffee House serves as a hub for the exchange of ideas, many Coffee houses have disappeared from the cultural maps of the cities. Hence, exploring the linkages between the Coffee House and the philosophy of the city, the paper aims to illumine the portrait of the city through the significance of the Coffee House as a public space. The paper focuses on K.K.Aziz's *The Coffee House of Lahore: A Memoir 1942-57* (2013) to examine the coffee House as a public space for discussion and dissent which reflects on the changing portraits and philosophies of the city.

Keywords: The Coffee House and the Urban Spaces.**Evolution of the Coffee House:**

The consumption of the coffee began as an act of curiosity for the bitter taste of the beans but the desire for caffeine soon developed into an addiction. The coffee houses provide a platform to gossip, learn and gather the news and discuss the issues affecting the world. The coffee houses began to attract the people from different walks of the life. Hence, gathering at the coffee houses became an everyday social phenomenon.

The coffee houses were established in different cities. Many coffee houses invented their own blending and brewing skills, resulting in the uniqueness of an each brand of the coffee served. The coffee houses in each city had its own customers for its unique blend of the coffee served. With the spread of the global transportation networks and the movement of the people, the coffee houses became part of the global culinary culture. The public coffee houses attract customers from different fields of activities that include the artists, musicians, literati, craftsmen, business men apart from the men who loiter in the city. This results in the emergence of the public coffee houses in the cities that make a unique portrait of the city. The customers are largely the men of the city and the women of the city rarely visited the coffee houses. Hence, the coffee houses attained the character of being a masculine public space where the men in the city congregated to discuss the immediate issues. Newer ideologies influenced Art, Literature, Music and the Politics, facilitating a greater

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interaction among the visionaries who shaped the spirit of the city. Thus, many Coffee Houses became the centers of dissent and Revolutions. Evidently, the Coffee houses were part of the stories of historical Revolutions in France, Russia and Spain.

Located in the business district in the city, the coffee houses emerged as a public space. The Coffee Houses gradually became radical in thought and urban in character. The coffee houses became the icons of the elite and the popular cultures in the city. This encouraged the flow of newer ideas across the classes and facilitated the varied minds to interact, corroborate and to innovate. The people in the coffee houses meditated on the possibilities for achieving the political freedom attracting the wrath of the reigning dynasties and regimes. The coffee houses attracted the attention of the regimes leading to the closure of the coffee house. However, many private coffee houses became operative to serve the customers in private. Many essayists like Francis Bacon, Addison and Steele have written about the coffee houses in Europe where many gin houses were converted into the coffee houses and the customers were provided with journals and newspapers which kindled the spirit to act as a catalyst for the social change. However, with the emergence of the Capitalism, many a chains of the Coffee Houses were established.

The Coffee House of Lahore:

The Coffee House of Lahore served as a hub for the political activities in the city during the 1940s. The paper focuses on K.K.Aziz's *The Coffee House of Lahore: A Memoir 1942-1957* (2013) as a portrait of the city that is lost and forgotten but mourned by the author. The recollection of the years that were spent by the author with many other literati who visited the coffee house has shaped the memoir of the coffee house. The memoir contributes to the making of the urban cultural spaces of Lahore. The Roll of Honor in the memoir includes the names of the personalities who shaped the temperaments of the people in the region. Thus, the memoir consists of the narratives of association of the author with the several others in the city.

Structured into Ten Chapters, the first chapter inaugurates the setting of the coffee house and the remaining seven chapters deal with the profile of Two hundred and Four personalities who contributed to the making of the Modern history of Lahore. The Ninth chapter, titled as the 'The Moving Feast' serves as a conclusion to the previous chapters followed by an Appendix.

Established by the Indian Coffee Board in the 1930s, the Indian coffee house on the Mall Road served as a hub for the political events in the city. While narrating the memorable situations in the Coffee House, the readers are informed about the Mayo School of Art, Dayal Singh College, Islamia College, Oriental College, The High Court, Young Men Christian Association, and the Government College which were located at the close proximity of the coffee house. The habitués to the coffee house included many great poets in Punjabi and Urdu like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Intizar Hussain and the others who pioneered the political battle against the Imperialists and the others who led the Nationalist Movement towards the creation of Pakistan.

Buzzing with the political activities of the day, the Coffee House served as the common meeting point for the students, teachers, and the journalists. The coffee house was easily accessible to the professors and students of the University, the Mayo School of Arts, the Public Library and the Government College. Aziz K.K. remarks that "The absence of tutorials and seminars in the college and university was redeemed by the coffee House" (276). The historian adds that the coffee house served as a nerve Centre for the activities of the Communist Party in Lahore until the coffee house was shut down by the supporters of the Zia-Ul-Haq's regime.

The historian K.K. Aziz notes that the establishment of the earliest coffee house was the result of the Islamic Imperialism by the Ottoman Turks in the Central Europe followed by the imperialist influences of the British, the French and the Germans (01). Baba Budan a Sufi saint is respectfully remembered for introducing the cultivation of the coffee in

South India. The First coffee House was established in Istanbul in 1550. The Turks opened the first coffee house in Vienna after the occupation of Austria. The Coffee House of Vienna has retained its global popularity for its excellence in brewing and blending. The dynamics of the coffee industry have acquired the global attention, though the industry is challenged by the low yield per acre due to the climate change and soil erosion.

The Portrait of the City:

A coffee house facilitates the creation of the public space for the association of the people paving an edifice for a dynamic society. A coffee house serves as a place of an assembly for the experience of leisure and the consumption of the coffee. The Coffee House serves as a hub for business and the exchange of ideas. The coffee house provides a 'larger' space, for political discourses. The presence of the Coffee Houses across the continents marks not only the popular reception for the beverage but also underlines the cultural significance of the Coffee Houses. Ever since the setting up of the first coffee house in Istanbul in the mid-16th Century, the coffee houses are the agents of modernity and icons of Culture. The origin of the Modern coffee houses is traced to the emergence of the capitalist-consumerist societies.

The habitués of the coffee house included the poets, artists, scholars, journalists, politicians, civil servants and the legal luminaries in the city. The historian notes that a stranger walking into the Coffee House at any time of the day would have easily construed that the coffee house is an English Restaurant. Though the individuals exhibited the refined manners of the West, they spoke and wrote in Punjabi or in Urdu. The habitués followed a rigid dress code. The visitors always dressed in the formal Western attire irrespective of the hour of the visit. The members of the Congress, the Muslim League or the Communist Party dressed alike. Since the habitués were largely either the students or the teachers in the colleges and the university, the coffeehouse was a dynamic urban space. The author notes that the coffee house served as a magnet for many intellectuals. However, the historian mourns the disappearance of the coffee house bringing out the factors responsible for the disappearance of the coffee House. Some of the profiles are very brief and sketchy, while the portrait of the city is very much detailed. Aziz notes,

“Lahore was a small place in the 1940s and the 1950s. The total population was 300000 compared to today's nearly 10 Million. It also occupied much less space. The Centre of the city extended from the District Courts to the Lawrence Gardens, and most of the restaurant goers lived nearby, on the roads leading off the Mall or a bit farther, in Gowalandi, Abbot Road, Davis Road, and the Chowburjee area all within 10-15 minutes of cycling” (288).

Raja Rumi notes “Aziz paints rather an intimate portrait; unafraid of the authority and uneducated public opinion, he spoke his mind freely and persuasively.”(01) The Coffee House was, one of the modest eateries where the intellect of the city stayed for a very long time with friends with comrades. The memoir is a profile of the coffee house and portrays the city based exclusively on the memory of the author. The author becomes nostalgic about the years that were spent at the coffee house as a student at the Government College. The author tries to recover the story of the demise of the coffee house, but no one among his friends and associates remembered the cause and the time of the demise of the coffee house. The loss of the memory marks the loss of the space for free thought. The disappearance of the coffee house in the city of Lahore marks the loss of the vital histories of the coffee house from 1942-1957. The author lists two hundred and four names as the Role of Honor of the people who frequented the coffee house. The names include the versatile personalities of the day like, Abdul Ghafar Khan, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Saadat Hasan Manto, Ustad Daman, Ahmad Faraz and Intizar Husain. The men include the literati from Kashmir, Sindh, and Baluch apart from Punjab and Northern Western frontiers as well. With the detailed description of the profile of the individuals, the portrait of the city emerges in the memoir.

Interestingly, the city is seen in transition from its exclusive 'English' character into a post-colonial city. The

markers of the Punjabi culture and the colonial names of the public places were removed by the Government and given the names of the nationalists to create an Islamic character of the city. Many statues and temples which marked the Hindu past, and the Colonial influences were removed from the public spaces. The Hindu houses were either modified or transformed into the residential buildings to accommodate the refugees from India. The demographic character of the city changed with the emigration of the Hindu and the Sikh communities and the increased population of the refugees in the city. Raja Rumi reiterates the four objectives that the author mentions in his memoir,

“It is perhaps the only serious work on this important institution... First, that such a remembrance proves the 'age of talent' as it existed in Lahore. Second, a faithful picture of Lahore in the 1940s and 1950s emerges from the text. Third, that it provides the cultural historians of the future with a primary testament; and finally at a personal level, it shows how Aziz the historian and the thinker were influenced by this exciting and the vibrant milieu.”(01)

Conclusion:

Though the memoir is about the Coffee House of Lahore, the memoir does not limit itself to the discussion on the coffee house of Lahore alone. The memoir provides linkages to the contemporary culinary culture with specific details about the Hotels and restaurants on the Mall Road. In addition, the author comments on the political, literary and journalistic trends in the city. The disappearance of the Coffee House is an indicator of the loss of public space where the habitués engaged in discussion and dissent. In addition, the author discusses about the Pak Tea House which was also one of the popular public spaces in the city. The meetings of the public intellectuals in the Indian Coffee House and the Pak Tea House were a witness to the discussions among the doyens in the fields of Journalism, Politics and literature. The author comments on the Pakistan Tea House in Lahore which was an epicenter of the Communist Party of Pakistan. In fact, the author reveals, that the first coffee house was opened at the site where the Pak Tea House began to operate. Moreover, the memoir documents the presence of the other popular restaurants, Chaikhana as well. K.K.Aziz points out that,

“The coffee house was for over 30 years the single most important and influential mental powerhouses which molded the lives and minds of a whole generation, and its legacy affected the careers of the succeeding generations ... the rich list of important persons, the rich pool of the talent of the city, portrays a realistic and faithful image of the city, the milieu that encouraged the intellectual growth of the many in the academic institutions around the city and the memoir contributes to the cultural history of the city.”(292)

The author considers the coffee House as a university which served the intellectual appetite of the literati of the city without expecting anything in return except the enthusiasm of the life. The consumers were the teachers and the students of the colleges and the university in the city. The all-inclusive public spaces were allowed to decay and disappear, as the Modern Pakistan had no need for these multicultural public spaces. The coffee house served as a key setting for the rise of popular discourse and a crucial transitional and transformational space. Ellis aptly notes “Attending the coffee house, in short, was an important tool of experimental research, akin to a peer review system, a research Centre and a symposium.(01)” Attending the coffee house provided a greater variety of thought necessary for creative writing in Urdu. Aziz K.K. claims that the Coffee House was never engaged with the communal preoccupations.

The coffee House provided a space for pleasure, social interaction and the intellectual gossip for many in the city. After realizing the disappearance of coffee house, one is easily convinced that the loss of the coffee house means the loss of the public space for discourse and dissent, which takes away the vibrancy of the democratic spirit of the city. The city acquires a dystopian existence unless the urban space is revived by the gain of the public spaces.

The memoir brings the city alive before the eyes of the readers, inhabits the city with the great personalities who shaped the future of the Indian subcontinent. However, the coffee houses were not only the intellectual hub but also the cradle of the subversive notions about politics, science and capitalism. The evolution and the presence of the coffee houses have marked the culinary and political culture of the city.

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