

A SEMIOTIC MINEFIELD: PESHAWAR'S TRANSFORMATION FROM A CENTRE OF DIVERSITY TO A MILITARIZED ZONE (CASE STUDY OF CITY'S BUSIEST SQUARE, I.E. FROM AMN CHOWK THE SQUARE OF PEACE TILL GORA QABRISTAN – THE COLONIAL ERA CEMETERY)

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the transformation of Peshawar from center of diversity to militarized zone. A historically important city, located at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, has long been a focal point of various empires and civilizations, thus contributing to its rich cultural and historical tapestry. However, after Afghan War in 1979, the discourse changed from Peshawar as center of diversity to a militarized area. To assess and analyze the militarization of city, a busiest square of Peshawar i.e. from Amn Chowk (square of peace) till Gora Qabristan (the colonial era cemetery) is selected for research. This study through a comprehensive analysis, delves into texts, icons, symbols and architecture built around Amn Chowk. Hence, by highlighting key historical periods since Cold War, and illustrating each era's unique challenges and priorities, discussing different factors that influenced the construction of the Amn Chowk (peace square). Thus, offering insights into how symbolic fortifications can inform that a city of Peshawar is semiotic minefield and provides an understanding of its past, present and future.

Keywords: Militarized, Symbols, Semiotic Minefield and City.

INTRODUCTION

Peshawar/ Paruparaesanna/ Purushapura, one of the oldest living cities situated on the crossroads of Central, South, and West Asia was once an important center of commerce, cultural exchange and Buddhist scholarship. The economic activities in Asia were carried out from east to west and from north to south (The Old Silk Route) through Peshawar by Persians, Indians, Turks, Chinese and Mongols. This beautiful city is cursed by its geography as it has been invaded by Aryans, Persians, Greeks, Muhammadan (classified as Turks, Arabs and Mughals) and in recent past by the British, thus experiencing political, social and economic upheavals. These socio-economic 'adventures' garbed in the form of invasions have

left their mark on the Peshawar city. With every invader, a newer symbiotic relationship evolved, resulting into a montage of religions, cultures, values and languages. A warring conqueror always eyed the strategic importance of the city, its wealth, heritage and culture, thus introduced the concept of walled city to protect the richer parts (Dupree, 1980).

In the last forty-five years, a city that has attracted the imagination of the world for the fantasy associated with it has transformed into a walled/barricaded city or in modern terminology a "militarized zone" bearing the effects of the Cold War and being a forefront city on "War on Terror". Today Peshawar is a city at war with the largest

number of incidents of terrorism in more than two decades of violence (SATP, 2024). While a portion of the city is still called ‘a walled city’ in the times before partition and till some years later (Shah, 2008) but with time the walls not only grew vertically but multiplied horizontally, thus the city expanded into the ‘City of Walls’ (Khattak, 2005) and the barricades. It now is synonymous to a labyrinthine cage.

Peshawar city is divided into three main towns, Peshawar Cantonment, University Town and the Old City - connected by the sclerotic arteries of Jamrud Road, Khyber Road, and Grand Trunk Road (Global Security Organization, 2024). However, there is hardly a road, a town or a village that has not been witness to terrorism inflicted violence, directly or indirectly. Each incident has carved the shape of the conflict in its own idiosyncratic way and yet there is a common pattern in architecture – the paradigm of securitization – weaponized architecture exhibiting control over the space it embodies but at the same time giving birth to opposites (Lambert, 2012) that are irreconcilable. The opposing notions create a pure symbolic challenge against itself, that which is already inherent within the system (Baudrillard, 2013).

Analyzing past two decades (2001- 2024), in Peshawar’s cantonment area (sensitive militarized zone and security apparatus) blockades and barb wires begun appearing on almost all roads and permanently blocking a part of the city (Inter Services Public Relations, 2024). Despite the order of the courts in the subsequent years the blockades have not been removed nor has the violence ended. There have been more bomb attacks targeting the same security apparatus around which the defense line is strengthened, while the sense of deprivation of being beyond those walls has also been the cause of resentment. A war that began during a dictatorial regime like an endless tautology has moved on an even with a transition of power to a civilian government. (Inter Services Public Relations, 2024). The occupations of spaces have become more eloquent with civil militarization. The supremacy of ideological engineering over architecture has grown usually, rationalizing diagrammatizing and optimizing space. Similarly, the oppositions, this architecture produces are also

an endless tautology of oppositions itself, both physically and symbolically as well, which indicates an ending is only possible with a total collapse of the system it creates.

The term semiotics originated at the beginning of the 20th century, however the growth of a general “theory of signs” was also propounded by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), and named the signs, icons, tests, and architect as “sémiologie.”. However, the American philosopher and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) used the term “semiotic” for signs depicting certain notion, attitudes and symbols. Thus, analyzing architecture as linguistic is not a novel phenomenon. In classical architecture, the buildings and squares had autonomous pictorial language determined by an underlying system of rules (Loosen et al, 2020). In this research, an effort is made to discuss a particular area because discussing the gradual militarization of the entire city and its architecture is a mammoth task. Therefore, we have chosen a case study of the sign-play within a kilometer of the city’s busiest square, from the recently renamed “*Amn Chowk*” – The Square of Peace till the *Gora Qabristan* (this particular area represents the transformation of the capital connecting the old and new city). The purpose of the case study of this particular part of Peshawar is also to analyze the discourse pushed by the state’s narrative for peace while further diving into an armed conflict. The city of Peshawar is treated as an “Elastic Entity” a dynamic entity that is both a physical and imaginary construct (Shirazi, 2003 & Weizman, 2007). Ironically, the architectural changes create a confusion within the community it protects.

Research Question

How and why Peshawar’s Amn Chowk (peace square) has transformed from a Centre of Diversity to a Militarized Zone?

Research Methodology

This study has used qualitative methodology; thus, data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. For primary data, using purposive sampling, interviews have been conducted with academic experts, security personals, journalists and the inhabitants of

Peshawar city to record different stories and experiences of the people and experts related to the past and present to answer the research question. The secondary data has been collected from books, journals, official reports and archival documents obtained from Peshawar Archives and Peshawar University Library. The narrative analysis is used for data to investigate and interpret the symbols and people’s perceptions around the transformation of the square (*Amn Chowk*). In research, narrative analysis/research includes autobiographies, biographies, personal experiences, oral histories, ethno-histories, auto ethno-biographies and ethno-psychologies (Creswell, 2019). It is a technique used in many disciplines such as literature, linguistics, sociology and psychology to examine and construe the structure, substance, and meaning of narratives. Therefore, stories and experiences shared by respondents are used to convey past events, experiences, and information in a rational and eloquent style. Thus, for our work, we relied on oral history / narrative inquiry to understand the changes around the peace square and its history.

Total Interviews Conducted

Academics	Security Personals	Journalists	Residents of Peshawar
3	3	3	3

***Amn Chowk* (A Semiotic Discourse)**

Pakistan’s alliance in the ‘War on Terror’ created many international and national problems for the state and its citizens, however, nationally the human cost has been immense. Unfortunately, above all, the narratives of war have seeped into the crevices to the very fabric of what we have come to know in our times as “every-day life”. It is also observed from the field work that the semantic registers and their visual effect have engineered “diagrams of power that use architecture’s intrinsic violence on the bodies to organize them in a space” (Lambart, 2013). The area under scrutiny that is a round-about in *Amn-Chowk* (peace square), which leads further into a cantonment area and connecting the University Town road merges into the Pak-Afghan Highway and at the same time towards the old city, is the blatant example of subtle shades of city militarization. Since all the major routes

remain blocked, the roads continued to be the busiest. The relative importance of the square for it to become the subject of this inquiry is that this kilometer of an area is a semantic register of the city’s architecture that does not only documenting the gradual architectural weaponization of the city but at the same time is a symbol of the semiotic exchange between the residents and the states fluctuating discourse. To analyze data, we have used the theoretical frames of “Kritevian” notion of “Genotext” and “Phenotext” to describe the relationship between the monumentality of the changing architectural symbols and the warnings displayed alongside them (Kristeva, 1984) and Baudrillard’s notion of “Terrorist Space” to explain an over-determined society that takes the notion of “security” to the limit, a kind of oversaturation of security (Lane & Baudrillard, 2000). The Genotext denotes to those essentials in a writing which appeal to the psychological processes from the semiotic manner, be they like, hate, despair, alienation or other drives. The Phenotext, on the other hand, is those components which bond in with the symbolic manner of language, i.e. those dependent on linguistic, demonstration, reason and which try to carry connotation. This distinction has assisted the research somewhat in the problem area. If we assume a connection between Genotext and those hidden values and codes in the culture with which hypo- and hypertext engages, Phenotext would then be those components explicit to the writing around *Amn Chowk*. Hence, this conjunction necessitates an understanding of culture as a form of socially shared psychology and it also represents the extremes of a sliding scale. It is observed that the names and architecture changed around this square and people accepted it without any questioning (Kristeva, 1984).

Initially, on this square, candle was erected and was known as *Shama Chowk* (candle square) as a tribute to Arbab Jehangir who was elected to office as the Chief Minister of then North West Frontier Province in 1985 (S. Shahid, personal communication, January 10, 2024), his election symbol was a Candle/*Shama*. And then in 1998, Pakistan fired the Hatf-5 (Ghauri) missile; an addition was made to the square with a replica of the Hatf-5 missile constructed close to it (S.

Bangash, personal communication, January 15, 2024). In 2005, the road was expanded to cope with the traffic of the city, and former President Pervez Musharraf's Moderate Enlightenment was introduced to the square, thus, the replica was removed and replaced by the statues of horses (F. Jan, personal communication, January 15, 2024). Again, a new narrative is initiated in 2014 and the square is re-declared/renamed as "*Amn Chowk*" (peace square) as a tribute to the armed forces (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2014). In opposite direction to the *Amn Chowk*, a barricaded building guarded by armored personnel carrier and camouflaged by a larger-than-life hoarding was erected to hide the Consulate of the United States of America due to the imminent threat of attacks on its workers and the physical attacks on the building itself (H. Jan, personal communication, March 10, 2024). On the turn towards the University town, a check post has grown, from a single lane identification point after sunset, to twenty-four hours surveillance network (A. Khan, personal communication, March 10, 2024).

While adjacent to *Amn Chowk* lies the "*Gora Qabristan*", although the name of the square kept on changing with time with the various adjustments to its architecture, however in colloquial jargon the area is still referred to as *Gora Qabristan chowk* (S. Khan, personal communication, February 2, 2024). A graveyard, a necropolis of the Colonial Era, whose boundary walls were first destroyed in a suicide bombing, aimed at targeting the police station opposite to it. Later it had to be torn down after hearse carrying more than fifty-three bodies had to enter the graveyard after twin suicide bombing that claimed the lives of more than a hundred people in the All-Saints Church (R. Ahmed, personal communication, January 10, 2024). While the physical "beautification of Peshawar" has been the object of particular interest for the state, the change in architecture is a conjecture towards a change of discourse also pushed by the state. Although, the doves, plastered over a wall as symbol of peace explaining a narrative change from that of war to peace but behind the very same monument of peace, a sign boards written in both Urdu and Pashto says "those who do not stop for identification will be shot dead" (F. Jan, personal

communication, March 5, 2024). It displays the dualism in the discourse as "integral reality" which has created an in-carceral space where the space of punishment transcends into the space of precaution, resulting in an oddity of experience, as Baudrillard argues "we shall never get back beyond that blind spot, that not locatable point where the real ceased to be real". Each individual and the space occupied by him/her is imprisonment, self-imposed, arguably, where a controlling mechanism enters a realm of unrestrained expansion is no longer governed by any rule (Baudrillard, 2013). At Peshawar *Amn Chowk*, every city dweller passing through it is filled with fear and insecurity, thus accepting all these changes related to militarization.

The physical structure and the text that surrounds it is operating on two different level: one is peace is represented by the word "*Amn*" written on three sign boards surrounding the square, a symbolic-Phenotext level. On other hand, Genotext-Semiotic level is represented by the monument itself on with white doves holding olive branches. However, this semiotic exchange is described by Kristeva herself by citing the example of spoken and written Chinese, while the written level denotes the Phenotext, while the Genotext provides the elements necessary for an exchange of meaning between the two subjects. Her work on language offers a valuable framework for understanding the interplay between spoken and written Chinese. By exploring the semiotic and symbolic dimensions of language through this example, we have studied a rich tapestry of language and its profound influence on people lives living in Peshawar (Kristeva, 2004). Hence, it is observed that opposing this structure of 'peace' on both sides are weaponized structure with barrels of guns pointing out from semi-constructed hollow checkpoints, as though they are physically pushing the subjects to interpret the meaning (no other meaning) they want to convey. While the old missile structure might have been substituted for the purpose of "beautification", the opposition in meaning contrived creates a space, which we have come to term as a "Semiotic Minefield": a space where the exchange of meaning is conveyed through modes of violence, which might not be physical but

symbolically very volatile, evanescent and always imposing.

Colonial Structure (*Gora Qabristan*) Near Peace Square (*Amn Chowk*)

The Christian graveyard colloquially referred to as *Gora Qabristan*, literally meaning the cemetery of the white, a reference to the color of the colonizers is now an encroached space too. It is a silent testament to an imperial regime amidst the chaotic environs of its now postcolonial subjects. However, it is now not just dying but being attacked, a double death in the making (Chadha, 2006). In 1979 (militarization era of Cold War), the earliest incident of a physical attack on the graveyard was an attack by a rowdy mob, reacting to a false rumor of a Christian takeover of the holy sites in Mecca, ransacked it and damaged several crosses and graves. Similar scenes were witnessed in the aftermath of the recent attacks on Afghanistan. Later, it was further damaged on the expansion of the main road, the tombstones that dated back to 1849 were salvaged and placed into the boundary wall of the cemetery to reconstruct the boundary wall (where the *Gora Qabristan* Check post is located), however, the 150-year-old Peepal tree/Bo-tree was spared. In what remains of the cemetery “we see the self-image of the imperial subject – even in death, he is not humble” (A. Jan, personal communication, January 12, 2024). Melancholia and mourning gave way to pompous architecture, full of self-pride, exhibiting control over the landscape as Chadha points out in his study of colonial cemeteries (Chadha, 2006), however with the recent bomb attacks and the ever so increasing in-size checkpoints, this heritage site is a vanishing past. While the minorities in the city are being attacked physically and killed, their burial chambers are being encroached as though paving way for a newer power structure to openly state that now controls the landscape. It is pertinent to mention that militarization coupled with urbanization is also damaging some of the heritage sites, thus imposing new structures on the city and on the minds of its dwellers.

Peshawar now is a city at war where peace is simulated. As Baudrillard points out in *Simulacra and Simulation* that in the absence of any “real” it is impossible to stage an “illusion”. The city’s

changing architecture at one hand along with the changing narratives of the state is a reality that is self-referential at one hand but also negates its own self at the next turn (Baudrillard, 1983). The terrorist activities have tested the limits of society, of its institutions of power, and the way in which such institutions are located conceptually. However, by providing an alternate discourse by means of power is equally destructive. It is witnessed that challenging the notion of freedom with the notion of simulated freedom is a temporal flaw, and bringing it out in architecture is like giving it a permanence and changing its meaning at any given time is bound to cause confusion amongst the dwellers of any city. In 2014, an attack on the Army Public School of Peshawar, located few miles away from *Amn Chowk* was the worst terrorist act in Peshawar’s history, killing more than 140 students and teachers, and the next day, people and specifically the parents of slain students in the terror attack congregated to register their protest at *Amn Chowk* (M. Aurangzeb, personal communication February 10, 2024). It shows that the view of peace and freedom changing in architecture is causing a misperception and misunderstanding amongst the people, it is treated as militarized space as well place of protest for peace.

As Baudrillard further elaborates “we speak of terrorist space” such as airports, embassies, fragile zones, and non-territorial zones. The embassy is the infinitesimal space in which a whole country can be taken hostage. The plane, with its passengers, is a parcel of land, a wandering molecule of enemy territory, and therefore almost no longer a territory, therefore almost a hostage already. Since to take something hostage, is to tear it from its territory, and revert it to the equilibrium of terror. The fragile spaces such as busiest squares represented with different symbols can be problematic too and can make these spaces vulnerable to any violent and terror attack. Today this terror is our normal, silent condition everywhere in the world (Baudrillard, 1983).

The peace square and cemetery, located in Peshawar, serves as a metaphor for the fluidity and ambiguity of language too. As per Baudrillard’s argument, which is when we speak of this busiest square, we are not simply referring to a physical

location but rather invoking a multitude of meanings and representations. It challenges our traditional understanding of language as a straightforward means of communication and highlights the inherent complexity and subjectivity of human expression. The symbols, icons and linguistics around *Aman Chowk* (Square of Peace) till *Gora Qabristan* (the Colonial Era cemetery) can be understood as the power dynamics at play in interaction and communication. Baudrillard also draws attention to the ways in which language can be manipulated and distorted for various reasons. In the context of global politics and cultural discourse, the representation of *Aman Chowk* (Square of Peace) till *Gora Qabristan* (the Colonial Era cemetery) serves as a potent symbol of the challenges and complexities inherent in attempting to convey truth and meaning through language. Ultimately, using Baudrillard's discussion of symbolism, Peshawar busiest square challenges us to question our assumptions about language and representation. By highlighting the inherent ambiguity and fluidity of words and concepts, Baudrillard invites us to review our understanding of communication through the square symbolism and the ways in which meaning is conceived and publicised (Baudrillard, 1983).

Conclusion

The city of Peshawar has been a quiet bystander to its turbulent history, cultural evolution, political transformations and militarization. For centuries, this strategic city stood tall while bearing every type of violence and militarization. In this research work, we have selected a particular square that connects the Peshawar to inside and outside world. We have tried to explore the *Amn Chowk's* significance, its impact on the city, and its role in shaping the mode of the city's dwellers. It is found out from the interviews and different scholarships that city of Peshawar has a long history of being a strategic military outpost due to its location and unfortunately state using this city as a spring board for its international policies allowed militarization, which has had a significant impact on the daily life of Peshawar residents, thus shaping the city's infrastructure, economy, and social fabric. The most noticeable display of *Amn Chowk's* militarization is the large presence of police

and military checkpoint. The check- posts is manned by armed police and soldiers who carefully scrutinize all incoming and outgoing traffic, creating a pervasive atmosphere of surveillance and security. Although, the aim of the check-post is intended to prevent acts of terrorism and maintain law and order, however they also contribute to a sense of nervousness and constraint among the resident of Peshawar. Additionally, the language and symbols used around the *Amn Chowk* is not only confusing but also misleading to the city residents.

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