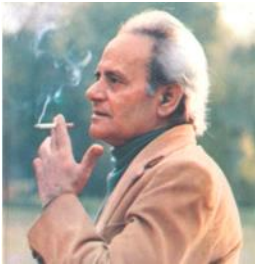


Early Memories of Lahore



Abdul Hameed

Hameed was born in 1928 in Amritsar. He migrated to Pakistan after the partition of India. After working at Radio Pakistan for several years, he joined the Voice of America. He wrote novels, short stories, columns for national newspapers, and programmes for radio and television. He passed away in Lahore in 2011.

Editor's note: This story originally appeared at <http://www.apnaorg.com/columns/ahameed/column-1.html>

Lahore — the very name is magic to me. There is something inscrutable about this name. It is like a spell that casts itself even on those who do not believe in spells. I do not see Lahore as just a city: it is more like a feeling. As you walk through its dimly lit streets and its ancient gardens, this mysterious feeling that is Lahore grips your heart. You feel that your relationship with this city and its spirit has been there forever, and nothing will ever break it.

I recall once sipping a cup of coffee with a European diplomat on the lawns of a five-star Lahore hotel. It was late March or early April, the time of the year when flowers begin to bloom in the city's parks. My friend raised his eyes, looked at the magnificent trees of The Mall and began to talk. He said he had begun his career in an African country where he was lonely most of the time. He began to make efforts to get transferred to Paris so that he could enjoy the fabled pleasures of life in that great city. Then one day, while leafing through a magazine, he saw pictures of old Lahore streets and he immediately felt drawn to them. They reminded him of the streets where he had spent his childhood. When he shared this with his friends, they laughed at him. Soon afterwards he was told that he had been transferred to Paris. His friends, who were congratulating him on his good fortune, were taken aback when he told them that he did not want to go to Paris: he wanted to go to Lahore. And that was where, he said, he had finally come, and never for a moment had he regretted his decision.

I do know that if Lahore takes hold of you, it is a relationship that would know no separation, even if you were to leave. Lahore, be it the new or the old Lahore, is Lahore, in every way, in each one of its facets. This is Data Gunj Buksh country and the gentle presence of the saint is like a canopy that keeps the city in its care.

The fragrance of the red roses and the incense that perfumes the saint's mausoleum also touch this city's soul. There is much praying in Lahore. It has numerous places of worship. I have seen people at prayer in mosques in the middle of cold winter nights, reading the Quran and supplicating themselves before their Maker. The city has a poignant soul because of the men of God who once lived here and the pious ones who now live here.

I remember the Lahore of my childhood and the Lahore of my boyhood. I also remember Lahore of the day when Pakistan's green flag first fluttered in its breeze, a time when thousands of Muslims from East Punjab had begun to pour into it. The people of Lahore had taken them to their bosom. Lahore, they say, has a long history, and its present modernity notwithstanding, that old history still lives in its streets. Sometimes, while walking through its cool, half-lit back alleys, I feel as if I would come face to face with Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi at the next corner.

My first memory of Lahore is detailed and distinct. I find myself on a vast ground, in the middle of which there is a man beating a drum, next to a green flag. I am being carried in the lap of someone. Then I hear a whisper: this is the last resting place of Ghazi Ilm Din Shaheed.

My next memory of Lahore is a little boy in shorts running along a railway track. I am that boy and this is Farooq Ganj. Another boy is with me. There is a train approaching from the direction of Badami Bagh, its enormous engine emitting steam and sparks. I feel the earth shaking under my feet. The engine is pulling a long, red train. We run down a slope and sit on a rock.

We hear the wheels clattering rhythmically, as they rush past us on the metallic track. And then it is gone.

My next memory of Lahore is sitting at a saint's mausoleum with my mother. There are red rose petals all over the floor and I can hear the sacred voices of devotees praying.

I run out and go stand in the courtyard of a mosque next door. There, people are praying; others are busy with their ablutions. The sky is bright and blue. I go stand in the mosque door when I see an old man in green walking up, followed by many people, I run back to my mother.

The scene changes and there I am walking with Lala Ghulam Hussain. We have just come out through Masti Gate and are now in front of a police station, which faces a huge banyan tree. A police constable sits with his back to the wall, smoking a *hooka*. We are on our way to the Ravi River. Lala Ghulam Hussain is our close relative and he is crazy about angling. He holds a bag in one hand and a fishing rod in the other. It is a lovely day. On way to the Badami Bagh railway station, we pass in front of Hakim Nayyar Wasti's clinic.

We go past the station, walk along the railway tracks towards the river. I love those railway tracks and the trains that move over them. When one passes, I stand and keep looking at it till it disappears into the distance.

We are now at the river. I put a foot forward over a muddy spot and I feel that I am being dragged in. I go into what are quicksands up to my knee. I scream. Lala Ghulam Hussain turns back, moves in close, and lays himself flat on the ground. He is not nervous. He asks me to try to do the same. Then he begins to move his arms as if he were swimming. He grabs hold of one of my arms and gradually pulls me out.

We turn back. We have caught no fish. We are now in our Masti Gate house and Lala Ghulam Hussain's wife is browning onions in a pot in the kitchen, while he prepares minced meat. When he is done, he takes a drag on his *hooka* and says to her, "Mumtaz, add a little saffron to the spices. I want the entire neighbourhood to smell the fragrance of your koftas."

So distinct and evocative are these memories that I can return to my childhood whenever I want.

Editor's note: This story originally appeared at <http://www.apnaorg.com/columns/ahameed/column-2.html>

My earliest memories of Lahore, it seems to me, date back not to another lifetime and a vanished world, but to a world that I can reach out and touch. It is like it all happened only yesterday. Time is like a river and I can flow back and forth in it at will, and quicker than a flash of lightning. There is no dividing line between my present and my past.

Here I am, sitting at a window in one of the inner rooms of an old house in the city. There are many women in the sitting room that we called a *baithak*. I can smell the powerful and mystic aroma of burning incense. There are large serving dishes in the middle of the floor and on them lie great quantities of cut fruit. The atmosphere is heavy with the perfume of henna. Some women are singing a devotional Punjabi song, keeping time on a pair of drums. In the middle sits a fair and corpulent woman whose hair cascades over her shoulders as she shakes her head violently from left to right and right to left. Her eyes are shut and she is dressed all in white. The rhythm quickens as do the woman's movements. She is in a trance. The voices of the singers rise in chorus. Other women with white dupattas on their heads are also now moving in rhythm and singing along. I am scared.

Suddenly, the woman in the middle raises her arms and everyone falls silent. She is perspiring heavily. Someone wipes her forehead reverentially. She opens her eyes, which are bloodshot. In a heavy voice she says, "I am Shah Pari, why have you summoned me?" "May your coming be auspicious," the woman who has wiped her forehead says. "Where is Guddu?" Shah Pari asks in an even deeper voice. A little boy is brought to her. She runs her hand over his head and says, "Make a doctor of him". Other women are now asking her questions, but they are told sternly not to burden Shah Pari, who does not seem to mind. To one woman she says, "Your child will get well." Another is told that her husband will return safely home, someone is told of the birth of a child.

Next I recall standing in the street, watching a performing monkey, my hands full of cut fruit.

My next memory is sitting in a "box" with some relatives in the Rivoli cinema close to the Lahore Railway Station. I

am very young and I am sitting in someone's lap. On the screen I see a man riding a horse. I learn years later that the movie was called Lail-au-Nihar. But that is all I remember of the movie: this man riding a horse at breakneck speed.

I also remember being in another house inside the old city where one of our relations lives. A woman walks into a small room whose walls and roof are studded with tiny mirror pieces. She is holding a tray on which there is a mound of dough which serves as the base for many smoking incense sticks. This room is called Shish Mahal and it is supposed to be the dwelling place of *jinn*s. Our aunt Sughra swears that the *jinn*s too have their family weddings and recently she herself saw a young she-jinn dressed up as a bride.

I remember being in the house of my eldest sister in Lahore. Out on the street, there are men working on metal utensils that they fashion out of copper sheets, which they knock into shape with hammers and chisels. I am about seven or eight years old and there is another boy with me. We are both very giddy because we have smoked a cigarette each some minutes earlier. We drink water, then lie on the floor but our giddiness doesn't go away. A big man stands over us and asks harshly, "What have you been up to?" When he finds out, he shouts in a worried voice, "Razia, come down here." I do not recall what happens next.

Another of my memories of my Lahore childhood is a tiny house inside Ratti Darwaza, which is perhaps inside Dabbi Bazaar. It is a four-storey house and the ventilators have green, red and blue glass. There are also a large number of light grey pigeons on a perch on the roof. The house has a tiled floor and if you look up, you see the sky. It is all very quiet and very cool.

Lala Ghulam Hassan has asked me to run an errand for him. I have to go to the house of a friend of his and leave a message. I stand outside that house and call for attention. A latticed window opens and a girl's face, which is like the moon, appears in it. A lock of her hair hangs down as she bends her head to speak to me. I give the message I have brought and she answers, then she shuts the window close. I never see her again but her memory stays with me. The man who sent me to that house where she lived, is dead and those grey pigeons are dead too and where is that girl with the moon-like face? Lost along with so many lovely faces that were once in this city of Lahore. Were I to run into her today, would I know her?

I am now seventeen or eighteen but I have taken a job. Every day, I board the Babu Train from Amritsar and come to Lahore. I am a clerk at Railway Headquarters. Zahoorul Hassan Dar also takes the same train to Lahore with me every day, as do Nafis Khalili and Iqbal Kausar. The monthly railway pass costs three rupees and eight annas. I travel without a ticket; the money that I get from home for buying one, I spend on other things. Off and on, there are ticket checkers on the train. Once when the train is passing through Mughalpura, two checkers walk into our compartment. I have no ticket and when one of them walks up to me and asks me for it, I get up and jump out of the slow moving train. I fall into bushes and I am laughing as people stick their heads out of the windows, looking at me with astonishment.

And then I leave Lahore and I even leave Amritsar and run off to Colombo where I have relatives.

But wherever I go, Lahore goes with me.

© Abdul Hameed 2006