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**BEHIND BARS**
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*Quddus Mirza talks to Sadia Shirazi, an art educator who is studying the "security" architecture of Lahore and its distorting effects on the urban imagination*

There is a passage in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which Gabriel Garcia Marquez describes the epidemic of insomnia in the "invented" village of Macondo. This disease has caused the inhabitants the slow loss of their memory, so in order not to forget the names of things and their functions, they have placed labels on everything, such as: 'This is a cow', 'it needs to be milked twice a day'. This practice continues to the extent that they are on the verge of losing meanings and the use of language itself. Until, that is, a wise man visits the place and forces people to recognize their folly and illogical behaviour.

A similar thing happens in Lahore. A visitor from outside arrives, sees the security barriers installed on the roadsides, investigates their utility, examines their locations and discerns the futilities of these devices. A fact when discovered becomes obvious... yet no one has noticed it before.

Sadia Shirazi not only documents and studies these barriers of different designs and types placed in public spaces, but explores the city as a symbol and manifestation of power through its medieval history as well as in current times. Her interest in this aspect of urbanity is not surprising, because she is a curator, architect, and educator working at the intersection of art, architecture and spatial politics. Over the past five years, she has been engaged in a trans-disciplinary practice investigating the relationship of art, architecture and urbanism to socio-political issues, cultural and historical memory, and exhibition practices.

Trained as an architect at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she received her M. Arch degree, Sadia Shirazi is currently teaching as H.E.C Professor at the National College of Arts in Lahore. Her course at NCA deals with the theme of the city being a site of artistic and architectural interventions and how the institutions of power change the fabric of the city, hence altering the lives of its population. Recently Professor Shirazi gave a lecture titled "City, Space, Power - Lahore's Architecture of In/security" at LUMS, where she spoke about the growing architecture of security, in the form of fences, perpetually rising heights of boundary walls, and barricades at different junctures in the city, and how these forge an illusion of safety but eventually make citizens accept the decline in their rights to move freely and reduce their access to civic spaces. In her opinion, this psychology of fear is so powerful and effective because it drives the public towards agreeing upon limitations while assuming these will protect them.

But does all that alarm and angst created through barricades, barriers and other devices of surveillance really protect people? Shirazi responds to this in her talk by indicating that with the presence of these objects (security barriers, gates, checkpoints, walls), no method of evaluating and comprehending the public's security and safety has been introduced. What she didn't say is that these security measures are

purely symbolic, because if a terrorist desires to cause havoc, the barriers are not really capable of withstanding his attacks. He can blow up his car while it is waiting to pass the security fence and kill many who are stuck near his vehicle.

Yet we continue with the practice of surveillance, since it symbolizes power, which only the state exercises through its checks on its citizens. This power is visible and we can witness its performance everyday on our streets. Sadia Shirazi speaks about this: "My interest is in reading space through the lens of power; and how power inscribes itself in civic space through architecture and planning measures. In that sense, Lahore today looks like a city at war. Though the check points are movable and temporary, their constant presence gives you a sense of their permanence." After becoming accustomed to these objects, one wonders how life would be without them. Is it possible that the people of Lahore become so accustomed to these devices that they start to demand their presence, coming to view them as extensions of their domestic security gates and high boundary walls?

Power in a society doesn't just imposes itself through physical forms. It often operates at levels that are invisible yet more effective. Take our language, which has been modified to conceal the power of certain entities. In the newspapers or electronic media, one never hears words such as army, police or rangers in connection with riots, killings and other such incidents; instead the vague term 'law enforcing agencies' is preferred, assuming that by replacing the real with this camouflage term one is able to hide the dangerous deeds - or unbearable sharpness - of truth.

This attitude can be seen in our changing urban architecture. Shirazi observes: "There has been a growth in terms of security measures distributed throughout the city. These are found in high-income residential areas, religious spaces, and governmental zones. If we start with walls, walls are interesting because they, at the most basic level, block you from accessing spaces physically. But they also deal with vision and transparency, they keep your eye from seeing through spaces."

On how this 'iron curtain' is constructed by the state, Shirazi says: "After the 2008 bombings the city government issued an ordinance to public institutions recommending that they increase the height of their walls from 6 feet to 8 feet. Residential quarters took note and did the same. The bricks and mortar that are built since 2008 are newer, and if you look closely at brick walls throughout the city, the mortar and brick betray their age and you can read the line at which the additional two-foot increment begins. The result of higher walls and boards that cover what used to be visually permeable gates - for example at Punjab University - has been that, if you are driving or walking along Mall Road, space has become flattened; it has no perspectival depth. This obliteration of visual transparency is a newer strategy of control that is moving from the physicality of the body to that of the gaze."

These measures also affect the psyche of ordinary people, who have to 'face' these obstructions (which connect to class too). On the way these alter the character of a city, Shirazi has this to say: "cities are both physical sites and imaginary constructs. Lahore exists as a site of desire, fantasy, fear and projection. And so our image of the city is also shaped by visual representations of it." She has picked the example of Bani Abidi's work to illustrate these conditions in which "the city itself is invented, produced, performed, reimagined, and articulated, through artwork and mappings of the city. Abidi's series of prints, Security Barriers from 2008, interrogates the architecture of in/security in Karachi, which is also applicable to Lahore. Abidi's digital renderings locate the narrative of fear as a constitutive feature of the city's urban landscape. Security has become a spectacle that enraptures all citizens and becomes the primary narrative through which the city is read. It ultimately silences alternative imaginaries and counter-narratives."

While speaking about the physical changes, representation and multiple narratives of the city, Shirazi elaborates: "I find some parallel between the effort of creating a singular narrative historically with the flattening out and evening-out of difference in Lahore's urban space. It is inconvenient for the state that spaces may not tell the story it requires, hence it transforms urban space so that it tells one story. Lahore's present representation and identity as a Mughal city is a kind of sanitization of the urban imaginary - Lahore was also a Rajput city, a Sikh city, a colonial city - I cannot but help think that the same national attitude towards suppressing difference, and creating sanitized, reductive national narratives is also playing out in other societal phenomena."

What she explains in terms of urban scenario, with its political overtones that lead to the formulation of a single narrative can be sighted in other realms of culture as well. For instance, in the world of the visual arts, we have witnessed the incredible rise of miniature painting. As a phenomenon it speaks of revivalist tendencies, not only in art but in society at large. Responding to the question about the production and perception of contemporary miniature painting in our present epoch, Sadia Shirazi comments: "There is a highly sophisticated dialogue about miniature painting in Pakistan. Actually there is a discourse and critique about history and tradition in the form of miniature painting. But when it is seen out of this context, its perception - and hence the meaning attributed to it - changes. Often it is exoticized as it is coming out of the periphery of the mainstream art world. I find discussions about the nature, function, status and relevance of this genre really important in terms of understanding art from this region, because for various reasons, for outsiders the miniature has become synonymous with artistic production from Pakistan."

Sadia Shirazi is a curator too. She was co-curator of the exhibition *Foreclosed, Between Crisis and Possibility*, held in 2011 at The Kitchen in New York City. She is also a former curatorial fellow of the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. Talking about the structure of art, the system of curation and the roles of galleries in Pakistan, she says: "There is very minimal public support for art, and interestingly - and ironically - it is the private gallery that provides an alternative, non-commercial space for experimental art work. In other countries experimental work is usually exhibited and supported by state-funded venues or not-for-profit alternative spaces. But in Pakistan the boundaries are blurred in this peculiar way, so terms and concepts such as pubic art and alternative practice need to be redefined here. I feel that the private galleries' contribution is commendable but at the same time that support system focuses more on the individual artist. Also, an artist's patron is a single person here, instead of an institution, so when artwork is discussed, viewed and assessed, the artist as the singular producer is often emphasized. But in other parts of world, particularly in the USA, there has been a recent shift in artistic practices. Many artists are working collectively, so what is created is not a singular expression but a collective product, where the work often takes precedence over its maker - or makers. I think no great artist can come out of a vacuum, as strong production is related to a dynamic cultural sphere. The idea of the singular artist or celebrity is changing a great deal. I don't think it is possible that we will have another Picasso!"