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Echoes of the Margin: Negotiating Life and Identity in Heeramandi Lahore

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Abstract

This paper will examine place-based identity and symbolic marginalization of people residing in Heeramandi of Lahore, a place traditionally stigmatized with prostitution. The study focuses on territorial stigma and how this stigma remains a frame of organizing societal perceptions that influence the everyday life of people, even in the face of major shifts in the area on a socio-economic level. It is found that the geographical tag of Heeramandi carries a lot of impact as an indication of social exclusion and thus puts its dwellers in disadvantageous position of prejudice, moral values and reputation against them irrespective of their proficiency in their jobs or their personal conducts. An orientation left over by place based stereotypical thinking, identity formation and social mobility, was seen in many of the participants who related that they changed the identification of their residence or business location to avoid discrimination. The study also illustrates how the narratives in the public domain are the cause of dismantling the multifaceted cultural and historical nature of Heeramandi into one that is solely of moral deviance which helps create a symbolic marginalization of the locals. Based on the theory of territorial stigma and symbolic violence, the paper emphasizes voices from the local community to map local fears, perceptions, and experiences, and thus opens up discussions on urban stigma, identity and the ambiguous social processes of historically stigmatized space.

Keywords: Territorial Stigmatization, Marginalized Communities, Red-Light District, Social Identity, Cultural Resilience, Place-Based Identity, Symbolic Marginalization, Spatial Stigma, Social Exclusion, Heeramandi.

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Introduction

Urban areas are not natural or physical environments but rather socially produced, historical, power and cultural memory and symbolic environments. In the fields of urban sociology and human geography, there has been growing interest in the role that space plays in a moral, cultural and class discourse which constructs and dissects a place and its people. These spatial meanings are inextricably entangled in colonial histories, moral economies of genders and other historical socio-cultural hierarchies, which are pervasive in many cities in South Asia and are continuing to influence urban experiences and subjectivities today.

This article deals with a socially and historically contested local locality of the city of Lahore, *Heeramandi* or *Shahi Mohalla*. *Heeramandi* is traditionally linked to courtesan culture, music and performance traditions, and is paradoxically a very rich source of cultural production to be placed concurrently in a heavily stigmatized position as an urban quarter. Dominant stories in society have omitted its identity over time in terms of the moral code, and it has become a simplified stereotype, which now appears to be more important in terms of art and history. These illustrate the concept of territorial stigma outlined by urban theoreticians, in which the entire area gets a bad reputation and is discredited, even though it may consist of several different and diverse entities, each of which represents a lived area of complexity (Wacquant 2007, Tyler and Slater 2018).

This project aims at analyzing the production, reproduction and negotiation of such stigma in real-life contexts and focuses on the implications of not only on identity construction context but also of social belonging. It examines the multiple layers of 'identities' that residents and related groups live with both in terms of internal attachments to place and the external labelling and exclusion. Doing this, the paper refers to the theories of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), spatial theories (Lefebvre, 1991), and theories about urban stigma each of which can be used to understand how space might become a material and symbolic means to producing inequality.

Significantly, the study does not romanticize or moralize about *Heeramandi* anymore, but the lived realities of people associated with the space are brought to the fore. It suggests that the stigma is not only a discursive thing, but it is a social force which has an impact on access to opportunities, mobility and social recognition. This dovetails into the ongoing discussion of urban inequality, and fits into Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities in focusing on the symbolic and spatial exclusion in relation to broader structures of marginalization (UNDP, 2015).

Literature Review

The questions of location and identity have been areas of investigation which have gained great significance both in sociology and urban studies especially in terms of stigma/exclusion/marginalization. Stigma is a characteristic that is originally thought to be fixed and or belong to an individual but today it is viewed as being placed on geographical locations and neighborhoods. Some territories, however, come to be stigmatized, or socially discredited, and are slated for degradation in ways that involve 'territorial stigmatization', different kinds of being on the wrong side of the tracks respond in varied ways to broader ruptures in social relationships.

Territorial stigma is the stigmatization of places itself by the association of immoral practices, or cultural stereotypes and historical associations with a locality (Wacquant et al., 2014). This kind of stigma is not just symbolic – it has real social implications for the residents, as it restricts access to social opportunities, serves to perpetuate exclusion and create the reproduction of inequalities. Meade et al. (2021) argued that its territorial stigmatization both normalizes the negative construction of communities and also helps to label stigmatized populations from the larger

population. Likewise, Kornberg (2016) believes a territorial stigma usually leads to the breakdown of social cohesion and social support within the community.

Not only is territorial stigma a social problem within the stigmatized neighborhood, it is also a social problem outside of the stigmatized neighborhood. In the stigmatized neighborhoods, Wacquant et al. (2014) explain that it is very common for the residents of these neighborhoods to face the “address discrimination,” a phenomenon that consists of the restriction of employment, social mobility or access to a community because of the reputation or the stigma associated to the neighborhood. Employers, neighbors and institutions avoid such communities, adding to the marginalization of these communities. Place can become a means of establishing identity: Whether someone is perceived and treated as part of a certain group is determined by their presence or absence in a place.

The theory of symbolic marginalization offers more in-depth understanding of the processes at work. Symbolic marginalization is when the dominant social discourses stereotype and often demean complex communities. Following Keene and Padilla (2014) spatial stigma is a symbolic violence which can foster the sense of pollution and disorder and moral failure on particular locations. Hence, people are often judged as a result of the neighborhood's reputation. These can be stamped on to people's perception of the world and remain long after the actual situations were altered.

The negative perceptions of the stigmatized territories can lead to strategies that are developed to negotiate or manage these perceptions by the residents. Based on Goffman's theory of stigma, researchers have posited that people may seek to hide their residential identity, stay away from stigmatized places, or seek to have alternate place or identities as a means of avoiding stigma (Link & Phelan, 2014). In doing so, it shows the intimately situated nature of place-based stigma, of its relationship to self-perception, to daily identity negotiations.

Red-light areas are a good illustration of the phenomenon: social assessments with regard to prostitution are often made and propagated at the overall neighborhood level. In Gent's (2020) article, it is pointed out that geographies marked as sex work tend to be defined as immoral, dangerous and excluded which can validate exclusionist practices and attitudes towards area residents. Additionally, research indicates that the ‘stigma’ associated with these areas impacts not just the sex workers but ordinary families, shopkeepers, workers and community members that share their time with them (Sanders, 2007).

Heeramandi is an important case study of a territorialized stigmatized locality in Pakistan. Although the historic *Shahi Mohalla* contains a rich cultural heritage of music, dancing, poetry and traditional art (Saeed, 2002), it has long been associated with prostitution due to its location in *Shahi Mohalla*, Lahore. Literature of this period has revealed that even artists and dwellers from this area suffered from discrimination merely on the grounds of association with *Heeramandi* even if they had accomplished something different themselves or were of a respectable class. Saeed (2002) draws to attention that many of the area's musicians and families are likely to hide their identity because of fear of social exclusion and prejudice.

Heeramandi, despite the changes in the social and economic landscape of the locality, is still seen largely in terms of its link with sex work. The enduring nature of this persistence is due to the territorial stigma and the fact that some dominant narratives can suppress others. It is therefore important to explore these experiences to uncover the processes of place construction, negotiation and contestation of place-related identity in stigmatized urban settings.

Limited research has examined how the process of territorial stigma, symbolic violence and place-based identity work in the present-day context of *Heeramandi*; however, there is a great deal of important theoretical work available. This research aims at contributing to filling this gap by analyzing everyday life experiences of residents who still have to live through the social implications of having inhabited in a historically stigmatized neighborhood.

Research Methodology

In the current study, the ethnographic approach of qualitative research has been used in which aim of the study has been to explore understanding of territorial stigma and its effects on the place-based identities and experiences of symbolic marginalization of *Heeramandi*, Lahore. Due to the sensitive and socially-laden nature of the topic, qualitative research was thought to be the most appropriate in order to gain an understanding of how people make sense of their everyday experiences and social interactions.

The study was carried out in the locality *Heeramandi*, *Taxali Gate* in Lahore. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were the primary method used to gather data, which included residents, shopkeepers, small business owners and those who had had close social and/or economic ties with the area. Purposive and snowball sampling was used to select individuals, who had firsthand experience of living and working within a stigmatized environment. Twenty-two participants were interviewed and data collection was stopped once data thematic saturation was reached, where no new features of data occurred in the last interviews.

Local community gatekeepers helped to gain access to the field and to introduce the researchers and to build trust with potential participants. Multiple contacts were made with the area and community members before the formal contacts were interviewed, to build rapport before an interview was made. This process was critical in view of the sensitivities about *Heeramandi's* public image, as well as some participants' loathing of the topic of stigma and discrimination.

The participants were interviewed on how *Heeramandi* was perceived as a socially undesirable neighborhood, their experiences of place-based discrimination, negotiating identities and how stigmatization of the geographical area affected their day-to-day life. Informed consent was obtained for all interviews, and anonymity and confidentiality expected. Interviews were audio taped with consent, and transcribed for analysis.

Thematic analysis was done for the data analysis. This process involved the repeated re-reading of interview transcripts which helped to uncover common patterns, meaning, and experiences regarding territorial stigma and related issues of symbolic marginalization, social exclusion, and identity management. In an iterative Coding process, the themes were created that showed how residents cope with the social effects of residing in a historically stigmatized locality and how they defy, negotiate or internalize the implication of the name *Heeramandi*.

Results and Discussion

The results show that territorial stigma is a one of the most longstanding issues which continue to be a problem for residents and business owners in *Heeramandi*. Although there were numerous changes of social and economic life inside the locality, the interviewees indicated that it is still often a topic of discussion and touching the daily life of the inhabitants, because of its historical relation with prostitution. The name "*Heeramandi*" as such was a strong social signifier, which often led to inferences of immorality, deviance, and social inferiority irrespective of what one did for a living, who one is, as well as his or her social position.

One of the themes that arose in Interviews was being discriminated against in a locality. The participants reported that even when asked where they are from, sometimes they found it difficult to get a good response from the people and even when they told them that they were from *Heeramandi*, there were negative judgments. Some of the respondents remarked that they may have to hide their address, or use another geographic identification from others. Encouraged by the generosity of one long standing property dealer who has done a fair bit of business in town for years, but who wouldn't disclose where his office was because “people immediately think of prostitution when they hear the area”. These experiences also highlight the way territorial stigma permeates beyond physical space, and is appropriated to the identity of persons geographically associated with the stigmatized space.

These results corroborate Wacquant's (2014) claim that territorial stigma has a negative impact on all the inhabitants of neighborhoods, independently from their personal situation. The stigma of *Heeramandi* is not an observation of people's behavior, its is a socially constructed narrative, which perpetuates the locality. Consequently, one can say that the participants suffered from “address discrimination”, which refers to social opportunities being denied due to geographical affiliation, rather than on merit (Wacquant et al., 2014).

One major implication is related to stigma affecting identity development. A number of participants reported feeling uncomfortable when asked about their home/inhabiting area with people outside of their community. Families found that younger members of the generations were more inclined towards the localities nearby than *Heeramandi*. Such a tendency is a sign for rejection of other identification to efface one's own socially discredited identity and to avert the danger of being labelled as a "territorial. The responses exhibited, tell something about how stigma is negotiated while living in everyday life.

The results show that symbolic marginalization is further facilitated in the process of representation by reducing *Heeramandi's* intricate history into a nonlinguistic one focused on prostitution. The richness of culture, with the historical heritage of music and dance, and its contribution to the life, culture and performing arts in the area, received little attention in people's discourse was repeatedly an area of frustration to participants. On the contrary, it is still written that the locality "simply" embodies a red-light district, which is its most dominant image. This “selective remembering” was perceived as unfair and a threat by residents who felt it unfortunately muted the social and cultural diversity that exists in the community.

This is similar to the notion of symbolic marginalization, which is defined as community that is socially cut off by dominant stories and images not just by economically being cut off. The results indicate that *Heeramandi's* image amongst the general public tends to be more related to the attitude and traditional stereotypes transmitted through the social order rather than the realities today. Thus, today's dwellers still are responsible for a reputation build-up through the ages.

The effects of living in a stigmatized territory also on the emotional levels are also pointed out. Repeated experiences of being judged and not similarly recognized led to responses and emotions of frustration, embarrassment, helplessness. While there was a lot of pride in the history and attitude of those in the community, there were also local challenges created by negative external perceptions, many of the respondents expressed. The ambivalent relationship between place, identity and belonging in stigmatized urban places is clearly depicted by these experiences.

On the whole, the research shows that territorial stigma is perpetrated in the social imagination on *Heeramandi*. Place-based stereotypes are still being used to make judgments, and attach explicit

and implicit negative sanctions about residents, and thus symbolic marginalization is ongoing. Although the locality has gone through a lot of social and economic evolution, its legacy of the past is still evident in daily life in the area. The example of *Heeramandi*, then, exemplifies how forms of territorial stigma can persist beyond their original causes, and become a persistent mode of identity negotiation and social exclusion.

Research Gap – Significance – Contribution

There have been a number of studies on urban stigma, spatial inequalities and identity formation, however, only very few empirical context-specific research on city layers focusing on South Asian cities. The majority of studies in the world have focused on the western urban setting and little is understood about the role of stigma in a culturally and historically diverse area such as *Heeramandi*.

Additionally, little is discussed about how the stigmatized identities are actively negotiated, resisted and reinterpreted by the residents in daily life. In most of the existing studies, communities in a marginalized status are not seen as actors but as passive objects of exclusion and its results.

The aim of the current study is to fill this gap by contributing in an ethnographic and grounded understanding of *Heeramandi*, both the lived and the structural marginalization and resilience. It is an aid towards urban sociology, by connecting symbolic stigma and daily life spatial practices and to development studies by correlating findings with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

The value of this work is that it challenges the stigmatization of *Heeramandi* as a place and adds onto it being a site of cultural memory, place of identity negotiation, and a space of social resilience. It offers insights and information for policy purposes regarding urban planning, sociologists and development practitioners seeking to design inclusive urban spaces to contest the practice of labelling spaces and to promote for social integration.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to study *Heeramandi* in Lahore as an urban space of negotiation of identities and contested by cultural memory, as generated out of long term stigma related to territory. The conclusions reveal that *Heeramandi* can never be understood simply because of its geographical or historical features, but should be interpreted as a social space which is always in a process of becoming with meaning always produced through interaction, representation and heritage narratives.

An important finding of the study is that 'territorial stigma' is a long-lasting and entrenched mechanism of urban inequality. Although the area has a rich and significant past in music, performance and cultural life, the dominant social discourses persist in defining the area in moralized and reductive terms. This supports the theoretical argument outlined earlier that place-stigma is extremely resistant and tends to transcend the material circumstances, because of its existence in collective memory, discourse and media (Wacquant, 2007; Slater, 2015).

The study also indicates that those who are found in stigma related places are under a double burden for their identity constructions. On the one side there's an internal sense of belongingness captured in the lived experiences each day and a sense of community where it's taking place, and on the other side there's an externally imposed identity as part of social judgement and place labelling. The double side can have an impact on social mobility, on interpersonal dynamics and the access to institutional places, adding to subtle and significant modes of exclusion.

Concurrently the study reminds us that stigma is not taken on board silently. Residents participate in a series of continually ongoing negotiations, resistances and redefinitions of identity. Reinterpreting the meaning of place, proactively highlighting cultural heritage and disassociating from prevailing stereotypes are all these strategies. These behaviors illustrate the construction of identity rather than its fixation in space, in which identity is actively created in the context of space and power (Lefebvre, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Theoretically, the results indicate that using the spatial and identity / stigma approach in conjunction is relevant to the explication of urban inequality. In the case of *Heeramandi*, the space itself embodies a symbolic power and the perception of individuals and the perception of themselves. It also provides further insights into the framework of existing literature by positioning territorial stigma in a South Asian urban space where layering and cultural memory have a specific significance within territorial configurations and spatial meanings, as seen in the generation of these meanings.

On a larger development debate the study brings a symbolic and cultural as well as economical and spatial dimension in debate on SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities. So, to tackle inequality, there is a need for radical re-imagining of places and communities in the social imagination as well as material interventions (UNDP, 2015).

To conclude, *Heeramandi* can be understood as an urban space that emerges as a result of conflicting narratives about its value that bestow cultural value and social exclusion. It is important to understand such dynamics in order to create more inclusive urban imaginaries, to break stigma and accept historically layering spaces in today's cities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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