

## **Strangers, Lovers, and Kin: Gender Roles and Their Interplay with the Architecture of Awadh**

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In our histories of the art and architecture of the Islamic world, there is barely a trace of the feminist critique of historiography, which has been steadily transforming our historical imagination of the Anglo-European past over the last three decades. The critique can be divided into two broad streams: first, there is a critique of women's absence from the historical gaze, and second, the practice of historiography itself is questioned. The latter critique is highly nuanced. It not only challenges historians to bring the pasts of women into the historical gaze, but in its most incisive form, asks that the very way history is imagined be reconsidered.<sup>1</sup> Simply making women the subject of historical study does not escape a model of history that is inherently androcentric, in which the roles of women and their relations with men are inevitably rendered as peripheral, obscuring their presence in the unfolding of history. The questions that historians are used to asking tend to produce male-centered histories; therefore, a re-examination of the types of questions that are asked and their underlying assumptions is necessary. Gender relations and roles are not to be understood as separate topics of historical inquiry but as areas central to historical inquiry itself, given the universality of gender relations in human

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie Z. Davis, "Women's History in Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies* (1976) 3: 90. See also Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

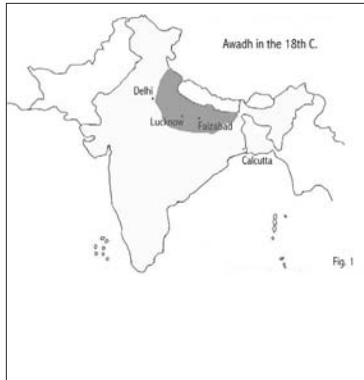


Fig. 1 Map of Awadh.

societies. This formulation of the feminist critique does not see itself as part of a quest to impose a twenty-first-century ideal of gender equality onto the past, but as part of an increasingly successful effort to advance the discipline of historiography in the Anglo-European tradition.

The few attempts in the field of Islamic art and architecture to address the feminist critique so far are arguably rooted in a gynocentric approach.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach has been described as a women's history approach, or more critically as a recovery project, and does not fully engage the feminist historiographical critique. This paper attempts to address the feminist critique of historiography in relation to the study of Islamic architecture, using the case of architecture in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Awadh<sup>3</sup>, India, one of the most vibrant centers of architectural activity in the Islamic world at the time<sup>4</sup>. (*Fig. 1*) The period offers a good supply of historical evidence that exposes women's history more directly. Instead of simply asking which women were active in the process of architectural development and in what ways, we can ask what types of relationships between the sexes had an important bearing on architectural development and vice-versa. In doing so, the roles of women in the formation of the built environment are closely integrated into the historical gaze. The initial results show that gender relations and regimes are indeed deeply related to the unfolding of architectural development in Awadh.

Located in northern India and west of the Bengal, Awadh was an affluent, semi-independent province in the decentralizing Mughal imperium and a focus of Anglo-European colonial intrigue. Unlike the Mughal court, which generally patronized Hanafi Sunni Islam, Awadh's elite patronized Twelver Shi'i Islam, and the annual ritual mourning of the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Husayn, a seminal event in Twelver Shi'i history, became a hallmark of public life, exceeding what was permissible in Mughal centers. In the mid-eighteenth century, Awadh was led by the Persian soldier-aristocrat Nawwab-Wazir Shuja al-Dawla (1753–75)

2 D. Fairchild Ruggles, ed., *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Heghnar Watenpaugh, "Sources and Methods for Studying Women and Islamic Cultures in the Disciplinary Field of Art and Architecture," *The Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, Suad Joseph, ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003), vol. 1: 315–320. For a set of useful historical studies of Muslim women in history, see Gavin Hambly, ed. *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

3 Awadh is also spelled as Oudh or Oude.

4 For the most comprehensive survey of Awadh architecture to date, see Banmali Tandan, *The Architecture of Lucknow and Its Dependencies, 1722-1856* (New Delhi, 2001).

with the aid of his strong-willed, wealthy wife Amat al-Zahra, who was affectionately known as Bahu Begam and had close ties to the imperial Mughal court.<sup>5</sup> The two were responsible for continuing to ease Awadh away from direct Mughal rule and help it evade the full brunt of British colonial expansion.<sup>6</sup> They based themselves in Faizabad, which began to emulate the architectural splendor of the Mughal capital Shahjahanabad (Delhi). Faizabad was destined to rival Shahjahanabad until a succession crisis erupted with the untimely death of Shuja al-Dawla in 1775, allegedly from a dagger wound inflicted by an Afghan princess he raped.

The succession crisis of 1775 was a turning point not only in Awadh politics but in its architectural history as well, for soon after the capital of Awadh was transferred from Faizabad to Lucknow, Faizabad wilted away into obscurity while Lucknow played host to the subcontinent's last flowering of monumental architecture in the Mughal tradition. At the heart of this crisis was the collapse in relations between Bahu Begam and Mir Amani (later Asaf al-Dawla), her eldest son with Shuja al-Dawla and rightful heir to Awadh's seat of power. This breakdown of the mother-son political compact lay behind the most significant event in Awadh's architectural history, the transfer of the capital to Lucknow.

In South Asian Islamic court culture, as elsewhere, reproduction and politics were closely entwined since dynastic and political continuity depended on the production of a male heir.<sup>7</sup> Because polygamous marriage practices partnered older men with multiple younger women, wives frequently competed within a female household hierarchy to become the principal wife by being the first to bear a male heir. A wife's financial security was not entirely linked to her husband's wealth, for Islamic law gave her rights to hold revenue-generating property and inherited wealth separate from her husband, a crucial point since wives routinely outlived their husbands. Following the death of the patriarch, the principal wife generally became the bearer of her husband's will and an agent of political succession. The royal mother of the eldest son was expected to assert her son's rights for succession at the time of the royal father's death but cede to his authority once the transition took effect. She in turn expected that having an eldest son who became a ruler would elevate and secure her social status, ensure her personal security and safety, grant her greater degrees of autonomy and power particularly over household bureaucracies, endorse her rights to

5 Amat al-Zahra literally means handmaiden of Fatima al-Zahra, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad.

6 Ashirbadi Lal Srivastava, *Shuja-ud-daulah*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: S.N. Sarkar, 1939–45).

7 For a detailed treatment of the politics of reproductivity in the Ottoman courts, see: Leslie P. Peirce, *Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).



*Fig. 2* Enclosure 3 of the Great Imambara complex with Friday mosque and Great Imambara.

oversee marriages of sons, daughters, grandsons, and granddaughters to create political alliances, and give her a continued voice in political affairs with her son and the right to demand that her son use the resources of the “kingdom” to meet her needs and wants. In brief, she expected that the influence and status she had accrued with her husband would be sustained and enlarged through her son. Soon after Shuja al-Dawla died and before his funeral ceremonies were concluded, Asaf al-Dawla (r. 1775–97) impatiently seized authority. He sat on the throne, assumed military leadership, and appointed officials, much to the disgust of Faizabad’s noblemen and his own grandmother. His mother, Bahu Begam, pointedly challenged Asaf al-Dawla’s appointments, which included an individual who had offended her in the past. Faizabad’s noblemen turned to Bahu Begam to regulate her son’s behavior and perhaps disapprove of his succession but she did not. Seeking to expand their influence, British representatives at the court lobbied for the succession of Saadat Ali, a son of Shuja al-Dawla by another wife and someone who was indebted to the British. Bahu Begam initially played her prescribed role by endorsing her own son over Saadat Ali and writing letters to the British requesting that they support Asaf al-Dawla’s accession. But Bahu Begam did not fully trust that her son would ensure her future welfare. She retained control over the Awadh treasury and Asaf al-Dawla’s inheritance. In addition, she was blessed with her own vast personal wealth and extensive income-generating land holdings. As the cash-poor Asaf al-Dawla demanded more and more money from her, she laid plans to abandon Faizabad for the Shi’i pilgrimage center Karbala in Iraq and to take what she could with her, including her husband’s body. After she saw the futility in escaping to Iraq, she entrenched herself in Faizabad and continued to resist her son’s increasingly aggressive claims to power and wealth.

It was these circumstances that prompted Asaf al-Dawla to abandon Faizabad and rebuild the Awadh court in Lucknow, without a role for his mother. Had mother and son played their prescribed roles, Faizabad would have likely remained Awadh’s capital. Over the next two decades, Lucknow and not Faizabad became the focus of extraordinary monumental architectural patronage by Asaf al-Dawla. The anchor of this redevelopment of Lucknow was the enormous Great Imambara complex, which consisted of three vast urban enclosures, several monumental gateways, a large Friday mosque and a monumental Twelver Shi’i ritual center known as the Great Imambara (*Fig. 2*). The Imambara boasted one of the largest masonry vaults ever built on the Indian subcontinent. The shift of the Awadh court from Faizabad to Lucknow after 1775 was not due to strategic military concerns, economic incentives, water issues, overdevelopment

or excessive crowding in Faizabad, or personal whims. The overarching reason for the change in capitals and corresponding building activity was the collapse of the political compact between mother and son.

While the breakdown in relations between mother and son was a turning point in Awadh's architectural history, it had little to do with the actual structuring of architectural space. However, gender roles and relations were important to the way that urban and architectural space were conceptualized, largely because the cultural practice of segregating unmarried men and women who had reached the age of sexual maturity was widely practiced, especially among the elite. One of the key functions of architecture in Awadh was to facilitate the regulation of access and visibility based on social rank and gender interaction privileges.

Considerable attention has been given to the social practice of segregating men and women in various Islamic societies, but the relationship between this practice and architecture is often limited to a study of women's quarters within households, typically the *zananna* (women's) spaces within palace complexes. The elasticity of the actual practice of segregation is sometimes lost. Like many other Islamic societies, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Lucknow saw segregation implemented at various spatial scales, with a variety of corresponding tools used to regulate visibility and gender interaction privileges when circumstances required. Within the household, these tools included a basic curtain or tapestry to section off space, interlaced wooden screens to cover windows, the division of the household into women's quarters (*zananna*) and men's quarters (*mar-danna*), and high walls for the *zananna*. For mobility between segregated spaces, there was the infamous cloak for women (the *burqa*), the covered palanquins carried by male or female servants, and the covered elephant carriers (*howdahs*), all of which were applied primarily to the female body rather than the male body. Affluence determined the level of comfort and ease of mobility, as well as the capacity to implement segregation. Desexualized male eunuch guards and female soldiers, servants, and slaves, whose visibility could be compromised because of their inferior status, were essential to regulating gender interactions and securing spaces exclusively for female use. Male relatives also had similar responsibilities, privileges, and mobility. Architecture in Awadh was merely one element in a suite of tools used to structure gender relations and visibility. As a result of the emphasis placed on gender segregation by Islamic Awadh's social elite, architectural spaces in general were required to be adaptable enough to lend themselves to creating segregated spaces.

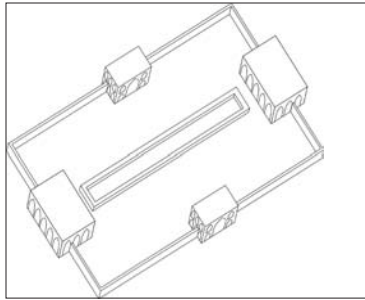


Fig. 3 Hypothetical reconstruction of Farhad Baksh zananna.

A good example that demonstrates the elasticity in gender and spatial relations is the visit of George Annesley (1770–1844), the Viscount Valentia, to the quarters of Asaf al-Dawla’s widow in 1803. The Viscount was an English nobleman with strong ties to the English East India Company, who toured and wrote about the Indian subcontinent. In the company of the widow’s nephew, the Viscount was permitted into her decaying courtyard garden enclosure, located within Lucknow’s Dawlat Khana, a new palace complex that Asaf al-Dawla built to replace the old Panj Mahal complex. Viscount Valentia wrote, “Our suwarrys [horsemen] were not admitted into the garden; it was a high compliment that I was permitted to approach so near, for Colonel Scott informs me that a miserable room on the outside is the usual place of audience.”<sup>8</sup> The Viscount also described the encounter itself: “We were at a very small distance from her, but the thick purdahs gave us no hopes of a peep. The usual messages were carried across by the eunuchs. . . .”<sup>9</sup> The “purdahs” mentioned by the Viscount were the curtains that were generally used to cover arched openings for privacy and warmth; they could have peepholes for gazing outwards as well.

The Viscount also met with the mother of the reigning Nawwab-Wazir Saadat Ali Khan (r. 1798–1814), who was enthroned by the British after Asaf al-Dawla’s death in 1797. The encounter took place in a large garden enclosure within Saadat Ali’s new palace complex apart from the Dawlat Khana, the Farhad Baksh.<sup>10</sup> At two opposite ends of the enclosure stood a garden house and a women’s residence that he called a “zenana.” A long rectangular basin of water with fountains stretched between the two structures. (Fig. 3) Valentia wrote: “His Highness [Saadat Ali], with his usual court, was waiting to receive us at a garden-house situated opposite to the zenana itself. . . . We were seated in a verandah, and the eunuchs passed to and fro, bringing polite messages from the old lady, with thanks for the compliment of the visit. The zenana was a handsome building, but had a most melancholy appearance from the wooden lattice-work on the outside of the windows.” As the Viscount left, he approached the zananna: “We then walked close to the zenana, (probably that its inmates might have an opportunity of more closely examining the Lord Saheb).”<sup>11</sup> In both cases,

8 George Annesley [Viscount Valentia], *Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, The Red Sea, Abyssinia, and Egypt in the years 1803, 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806 in three volumes* (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1809), vol. 1, p. 145.

9 Annesley, *Voyages and Travels*, pp. 144-145.

10 For a discussion of the Farhad Baksh, see Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *A Fatal Friendship: The Nawabs, the British and the City of Lucknow* (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 182-187. It is not known whether the garden enclosure still exists.

11 Annesley, *Voyages and Travels*, p. 143

a male stranger was permitted into close spatial proximity with a secluded, elderly woman. This was acceptable because both women held considerable status and were past their reproductive years. Viscount Valentia was also of comparable social rank and had ties with the powerful English East India Company. In addition, male relatives of the women concerned also accompanied him on his visits. Social etiquette permitted closer spatial proximity as long as visual segregation was rigorously preserved and the potential for sexual relations to take place was low. It should be noted in these instances that the women were entitled to see the stranger while he was not permitted to see them, showing that visual segregation was a one-way affair. The architectural scheme of the women's courtyard enclosures was not particularly unique, but they were easily adaptable for the purposes of providing visual segregation once the degree of spatial segregation had been relaxed.

In addition to the implications that segregation practices had for architecture, the cultural practice of polygamy was also significant for the design of household architecture for the elite. The resulting female hierarchy imprinted itself on household architectural planning. Status hierarchies based on women's kinship and their sexual relationships to the central male of the household permeated women's quarters in social and architectural dimensions. At the peak of the female hierarchy was the mother and grandmother of the male. Next was the class of official wives, married in accordance with Islamic legal custom using the *nikah* ceremony in which a formal Islamic marriage contract between the bride and groom was approved. Beneath the official wives, there were the concubines, who had entered the household outside of *nikah* marriage. Within this female hierarchy, giving birth to a potential male heir was the surest means of ascent. In elaborate households, separate architectural spaces were designated for each class of women. The case of Lucknow's Panj Mahal palace complex illustrates how this was particularly true for the concubines.

Thanks to the British male scholar Frances Gladwin, we have an informative textual description from 1785 of Asaf al-Dawla's first administrative palace complex in Lucknow known as the Panj Mahal, including the women's quarters.<sup>12</sup> The Panj Mahal was destroyed after the Great Rebellion of 1857 but it was documented with photographs by the British army (*Fig. 4*). Gladwin apparently did not enter the *zananna* enclosure, but he was able to discern that the women's quarters were planned as a rectangular enclosure with high walls, three inward-protruding buildings and one gate at the midpoint of each side. In other words, it followed a very generic



*Fig. 4* View of the *zananna* of the Panj Mahal taken from the Friday mosque's minaret. Source: Panorama of Great Imambara complex, British Army, c. 1857, Picture Library, courtesy of the National Army Museum, London, 25249.

<sup>12</sup> Frances Gladwin, "Account of Lucknow," *Asiatic Annual Register* (London: 1800), pp. 97-101.



architectural idiom common to Mughal and late-Mughal era architecture. Gladwin explained that each of the buildings of the enclosure bore a different name—Sheesh Mahal (the glass house), Khurd Mahal (the lesser house), and Rang Mahal (the color/pleasure house).

The Khurd Mahal specifically referred to the structure designated for the concubines. The term “Khurd,” meaning lesser, referred to the fact that concubines were considered as lesser wives in relation to wives who had entered the household through *nikah* marriage. Senior wives were apparently entitled to their own enclosures apart from the other women of the household. In Shuja al-Dawla’s palace complex at Faizabad, his wife Bahu Begam occupied her own enclosure adjacent to a building also called Khurd Mahal, indicating that the palace complexes of Faizabad and Lucknow were similarly planned. In the households of later Nawwabs of Awadh, women who joined through temporary marriages but gave birth were given separate apartments and larger allowances.<sup>13</sup> Through their reproductivity, women transformed their spatial circumstances. The practice of polygamy, with its categories of official and unofficial wives, was reflected in the spatial layout and architectural nomenclature of the household complex.

Not only were portions of the palace complex named according to marriage and sex roles, women were titled according to the structures they dwelled in. In the household of the last Nawwab-Wazir of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah (r. 1847–56), the building a woman belonged to became a part of her name and title particularly if she gave birth to a child. Social and spatial status was thus imprinted onto the identity of women.

If architecture could reinforce gender relationships, it could violate them too. For example, when Asaf al-Dawla initiated the addition of the monumental Great Imambara complex to his pre-existing Panj Mahal palace complex in Lucknow around 1786, he compromised the visual segregation of the women’s quarters of the palace complex. The Great Imambara complex addition, the second pivotal moment in Awadh’s architectural history, included a Friday mosque for the Twelver Shi’i male community with towering minarets (*Fig. 2*) that provided a distant but clear view into

13 Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow, the Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, ed. and trans E.S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1976), p. 71



the zananna enclosure, bringing androcentric and gynocentric space into conflict (*Fig. 4*). Not surprisingly, Asaf al-Dawla completed another palace complex called the Dawlat Khana far from the minarets and relocated his household there before the Great Imambara complex was finished in 1791. The reasons for the relocation, an important episode in the urban development of Lucknow, still require a detailed explanation, but the lack of visual privacy for women at the old palace complex would have to be considered as a key factor.

The preceding examples illustrate how gender relations were important for architectural development in Awadh, more than a first glance would suggest. The two pivotal moments in Awadh's architectural history—the relocation of the capital and the Great Imambara complex development—have issues of gender relations at their core. In the first instance, the reconfiguration of the relations between mother and son led to the relocation of Awadh's capital, significantly redirecting architectural development. In the second instance, an architectural intervention into the urban landscape of Lucknow destabilized the existing architectural regulation of visibility, contributing to the relocation of Asaf al-Dawla's palace complex. In addition to these two pivotal moments, the social practices of gender segregation and polygamy shaped the functional requirements of architecture in Awadh and underlay the very conceptualization of architectural space, as evidenced in the idiom of palace architecture.

Since the interplay between architecture and gender relations in Awadh builds upon similar relationships in Mughal South Asia and other Islamic societies, there is good reason to revise our current approach to the study of Islamic architectural history to be more sensitive to the ways that gendered social practices interact with the unfolding of the architectural landscape. As the case of Awadh shows, the stories of how men and women were conditioned and chose to relate to each other is an integral part of the stories of these architectural manipulations of the built landscape.