

Looking Out:

Screen, Veils and (non)Façades in the Formulation of Feminine Identity in the Traditional Indian House

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Emma Roberts, one of the many intrepid travelers to colonized India writes,

"The cement drops from the wall in large patches, the bare brickwork is diversified with weather stains, in which lichens and the fungus tribe speedily appear; the iron hinges of the outer venetians rust and break and these gigantic lattices fall down, or hang suspended in the air. . . . the courtyards are allowed to accumulate litter and there is an air of squalor which disgusts the eye."

Her impressions of a house in Benaras are similar,

"The confused masses of stone which crowd upon each other in this closely built city, sometimes present fronts so bare and loft, as to convey the idea of a prison or fortress."

A myriad of such writings comprise the base on which the "mythic" accounts about the zenana, the feminine realm of the traditional Indian house, and the Indian woman inhabiting the zenana, have been produced. Implicit within the writings is the recurring preoccupation of the writers with the visual realm. Themselves products of a society that was undergoing massive changes in the perception of space, these authors set the stage for the creation of a body of knowledge about Indian cities, the Indian house and the people inhabiting them, based on a **logic of visualization**.² A logic that espoused the rational and the cerebral, the supremacy of the sign, the surface, the vertical and the masculine (phallic), in essence, **all that is seen**. This, as distinct from "lived experience", the corporeal, the underground, and the feminine.

Being based on the visual impressions of the travelers, subsequent analysis of Indian spatiality, and the identity of the women constructed within this spatiality, presents us with an erroneous picture in which the Indian woman was rendered "as the helpless other much in need of a savior" and habitually lacking any identity and power.³ In response to this, I alternatively propose that a study of the traditional Indian *havelis* (upper class town house) in the city of Lucknow, India during 1750 to 1850 presents us with an interesting field for interpreting issues of gender, identity and the feminine subject within a socio historical context with respect to the corporal body.

This paper supports its claim by drawing from two sources. Upon the plethora of rich sensual experience that the *haveli* presents to the body inhabiting it; and upon the insights of Henri Lefebvre's explanation of how a sensual and non-retinal experience of space serves towards

the appropriation of the physical body. Taken together, the *haveli* emerges at once the result of, and the site for, a "production" of a unique space where the "world" and "bodily", and lived experience and the vaginal or the so understood feminine realm was given precedence over the "surface, sign-eye" conceived experience and phallic or the so understood masculine realm.

Lucknow presents a distinctly Indian spatiality. The sense of the city arises from many flexible systems of rules that operate at various levels. The city effects mediation between oppositions placing them side by side: the public and the private, natural and man-made, chaos and unity. At the same time, placing these opposing forces together also questions any conception of order.

The houses at Lucknow that I shall discuss further are set right in the heart of an urban space and form a part of a locality or *mohalla*, called the Firangi Mahal Mohalla.



Figure 1 the women going about their daily activities in the courtyard

The diversity of this site, like most sites in traditional urban India, is the surrounding buildings, which house multifarious functions. In this sense one of the major issues facing the builders of the houses was how to optimize use of the little available space.

Both colonial and postcolonial interpretations of the houses, laden with western notion of space, have ranged from the analyses of axial alignments, interlocking volumes, massing, condition of hygiene etc. In doing so, the house and the body that inhabits this space, has been subject to an abstract ordering; one that detaches the corporeal body from the space it inhabits and produces. This stratification of the body performed by such analyses, into the rational mind and the irrational body, falls in compliance with the construction and discipline of the woman, understood as more susceptible to the body, due to her organic structure, than the male. My claim is that space of the haveli cannot be understood stood by such analyses precisely because such analyses of space shifts the focus from the lived body; that the haveli places at its center, to an abstract or conceived understanding of space.

In lieu of the above claim, this paper turns to a description of what the haveli offers the body that inhabits it in terms of the sensory realm. However, I must also point at the irony of using pictures, hence the eye, to depict what is essentially a non-visual space.

First, The aural realm plays a decisive role in the spatial organization of and around the havelis. The first instance of the actuality of sound that comes to bear upon the organization of the haveli comes from the term used to designate a group of haveli: *mohalla*. Etymologically *mohalla* comes from the two word; *mahol*: settings, milieu and from *halla*; noise, not so much as a quiet noise rather a something bothering on a noisy din. In essence, nearness based on the ability to hear from one haveli to the other is what constitutes a *mohalla*. This is exactly the experience one has upon entering a *mohalla*, a noise that seems to qualify space and help the ear locate oneself with respect to the self and with respect to the other bodies in space. Inside, as much as outside, hearing plays an integral role. The ear apprehends space within the haveli before the eye perceives it. In his seminal work, 'Experiencing Architecture,' Rasmussen reminds us of the perceptible acoustical character of built form.⁴ He stresses the spatial reflection or absorption of sound immediately affects our bodily response to a volume. There is a similar experience in turning from the *chowk*, the busy local square, and the main street onto the front of the havelis; there is a perceptible difference in the noise level. The sudden reduction of the intense hustle of the street and the lack of sound reinforces the notion of a closed space; a domain. In the haveli, the notions of inside and outside, open and close, and private and public are layered out through hearing. Mark Wigley, his article, Untitled: the housing of gender claims that in the post Albertian house, the blocking of sounds as one progresses towards the interior of the house signified the creation of a private zone, often the male sanctum, within the already private house. In this regard, the haveli, performs a burlesque by placing the courtyard at the center of the house, it inverts this spatial layout, negating the issue of a constructed privacy that aims to mirror the rational mind withdrawn from body. The courtyard with its unfolding of myriad daily activities there replicates the hustle of the street and forces the body to again negotiate itself and localize itself with respect to the other bodies in that space.

Second is the olfactory realm. The sense of smell invokes intimacy and the body. Therefore any ordering of the space and regulation of the body inhabiting that space has to be anaesthetized. A witness to this probably the proliferation of the detergent and deodorant industry striving to rid the world of smell hence of the body. Here again the space of the haveli confronts this norm and restores the body. Upon entering the haveli courtyard, we encounter a variety of smells, the smell of spices, and the smell of foodstuff drying in the sun. The courtyard in the haveli is also the place where nature enters the house and adds its own distinctive odor.



Figure 2: the courtyard where nature enters the haveli

Taken together the drying of spices, the kitchen that spills onto the courtyard, the plants growing there, with the touch of nature's smell, constitute to the multitude of olfactory sensations that render the nose an extremely potent organ within the havelis. One finds no intention to closet these spaces and turn the space into an aseptic space. These odors of nature, of bodies, are not made to practice deception, they present themselves as what they are and they do so with immediacy. They are each together yet distinct and indicative of a heterogeneous composition of space, each containing within it the conflictual component of contrast between sameness and difference that serves to highlight that space.

Third, touching is integral to the discovery of materiality. Entering the space of the haveli, we remove our footwear, and its concrete materiality becomes vivid. Thereafter continuous interspersals of different surfaces stimulate various parts of the body. The hard and often warm stone floor of the house stands against and heightens the experience of the cool and the soft mud floor of the courtyard. The lack of formalized arrangement for sitting necessitates sitting on the floor.⁵ Not only does this indicate the use of level, which is extremely significant in gestural qualification of the body systems but also, brings the body in constant touch with the earth, each articulating the other in the reciprocal relation between the hardness of the floor and the softness of the body.

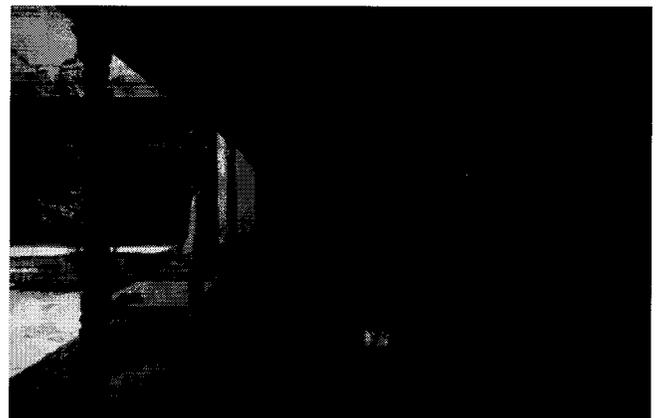


Figure 3: the alternating materiality of the haveli and the courtyard; each articulating the other

Apart from the rituals of everyday, the body in the havelis, particularly in the zenana, was also partaking in a much more specialized form of self-constitution through dance. *Kathak*, which assumed its status as a classical dance form in the space of the havelis of Lucknow, more than any other Indian dance bases itself on gestural and interpretive movements.⁶ It brings into play all segments of the hands and the feet, and invests them with sensual significance. One of the basic moves of the dance consists of tapping on ones feet, heavily laden with bells to the musical beat of the *tabla*.⁷ This performance informs two overlapping notions of space. Firstly, a space that is designated by the resonance of the bells on the feet of the dancer. Secondly, the tremendous energy expelled through the feet of the dancer serve to animate the space of the performance and bind the performer and the audience in a curious unity.

Fourth is the domain of movement. According to Schmarsowour concept of space is determined by the frontalized progression of the body through space in depth.⁸ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the haveli. Movement is central to the haveli. The entire house is organized around movement that assumes a central position in the layout of space. Spaces are felt, their extremities sensed by moving in and by static positioning in them. The movement of each body in the haveli is not a predetermined abstract line, with a definite beginning and an end. It is akin to a zone extending from the body outwards through which the body comes in contact with haveli; articulating the haveli as we move along. Spaces unfold as one progresses, paths open up to be either traversed or forbidden. The courtyard, situated in-between the house does not confine either. The sky above and the earth below complete the natural circle and add to the sense of freedom of movement. The opening of the staircase onto the courtyard adds to the further dynamism of the courtyard, linking the different levels of the house together.

Final, is the realm of the visual. The façade, or rather the importance of it, is probably the greatest contribution of the human eye to architecture. The facade acts as a powerful divide, projecting that, which is to be seen, and behind which, it conceals that which, is not to be shown. It is in this careful selection concealment and presentation that the facade comes in to construct the woman. It works to present a veil: one that is seen to control the "other" explicitly through political structures (architecture) and implicitly through social codes by a formulation of the subject as a pure exteriority, as the product of the inscriptions of power. In other words, it attempts to redefine sexuality by cloaking the house and containing within it the threat of the sexuality of the woman inside it. The eye also functions as a panopticon within the house, i.e. the house itself looks, it acts as a surveillance device monitoring the possessions of the house, one of which is the woman. And therefore comes in to stand for the eye of the father.

However, what of a space that negates the eye? A curious feature of the Lucknowi havelis is the ability to elude identification and hence subvert the eye. Walking down the street one happens suddenly upon a schism that leads into the house. The private rooms of the residents are well set back from the public thoroughfare. The people inside the house are neither concerned with being seen or seeing, save on special occasions. They "are" per se. The entrance does its part too, a dark confining space often with a low ceiling. Entry into this space from the brightly lit street results in the immediate negation of the eye, which takes time to adjust to the extreme difference. In fact moving through the haveli one sees a pattern emerging of alternating spaces that are lit intensely and others that are intensely dark. It is as if the builders had a sense of the inability of the eye to quickly adjust to such stark play of light and dark and have used it purposefully to negate the eye.

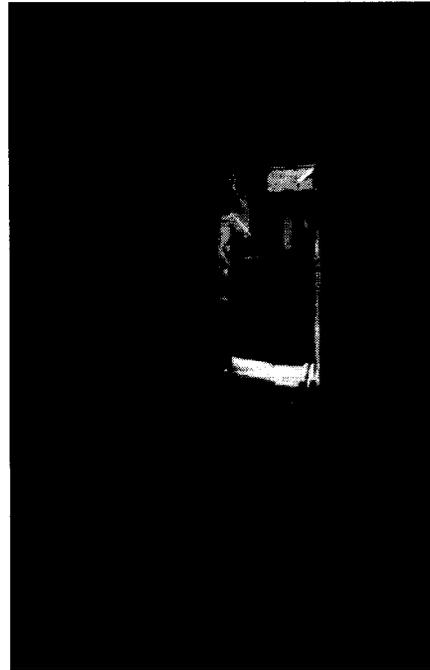


Figure 4: The interplay between light and darkness; the conscious negation of the eye

Another space inside the haveli that promotes a conscious negation of the eye is the courtyard. Initially one may assume the courtyard to be a sculptured space, in the sense that it presents at once all there is to see and there are interpretations of the courtyard as presenting an internal façade, however the question then arises for whom. The spatiality of the courtyard prevents the eye from making a broad sweep around it and hence reducing it to mere abstraction performed by the eye. What the courtyard does, surrounded by the stereotomic mass of the building, is to present a mystery of spaces that eludes visual inspection and lie beyond the visually perceptible. The understanding of this mystery emerges only at the end of the route, at which point the perception of the route as a line disappears. The memory of the house is not as a carefully orchestrated sequence of events but more as a total lived and bodily experience.

Yet, what is the significance of the stereotomic mass of the haveli, which reinforces its materiality, the localization of space and body through sound, the extreme distinctions between light and dark, and the negation of the eye, and the absence of façade that negate the eye in terms of feminine identity and the position of the women. To understand this significance and thus the distinction highlighted by this significance, it becomes imperative to outline the broad precepts hitherto followed by feminist criticism. Feminist criticism in its essence has followed two streams of thought. One that approaches the relevant issues from without and the other from within. In the former stream, critics have maintained that criticism of institution such as architecture, a variant of the signifying economy, must come from outside the closed signifying institution. Moreover, the woman already banished from this institution, is therefore in the best position to conduct and formulate such a criticism. Powerful as this line of enquiry might be, this formulation strengthens the notion of the woman being inherently different (read: other) and reverts itself back to the transcendental humanist interpretations of women, (women; hence different, hence irrational) much responsible for the oppression of women. The second line of enquiry aligns itself with the idea of femininity being a form of cultural indoctrination. In this case, the mode of argument has moved away

from a grounding in sexual difference by reiterating that doing so fails to accept *difference* per se; difference in terms caste, class and kinship. The outcome has been a growing body of knowledge that stresses on the differential construction of gender, resulting in the loss of the body itself. Although the constructivist mode of criticism enjoys immense popularity, there have been certain reaching negative impacts. Firstly, the idea that femininity is some arbitrary form of behavior and the body is unable/incapable of being able to comprehend its own manifestations. Secondly, this argument further strengthens the semantic- semiological realm and further widens the already too great a chasm between mental space and social space, theory and practice and time and space. Thus taken to their extreme, certain words like inscribing and imposing, render the body an empty form waiting to be filled by a certain alien content. Consequently, how different this idea is from the notion of "essential feminism" propagated by the former group of critics is therefore a contested matter.

Yet in the everyday realm, the social space/ the space of our day-to-day existence the body is definitely more than just a receptacle. It is on the contrary the very medium through which meanings are produced here and now. Thus, any foray into understanding the notion of identity, subversion or oppression of women has to appropriate a body. As Diana Agrest points out that to subvert the notion of the master body image of the white western male a field of bodies has to be posited.⁹ Here the spatiality of the haveli emerges singular, in light of its appropriation of the corporal body.

The lucknowi haveli presents a space whose constitution contains **opacities**, i.e. both bodies; centers of effervescent energies and **areas of viscosity**; hidden places that are often impenetrable to the eye. It is a space where the bodies firstly sense, touch, smell, and hear each other. Contemplation of the bodies through the eye and the gaze, a cold and distanced experience and therefore an abstraction, happens only when there is a move facilitating their movement from these covert and dark places onto the realm of the overt and the lit.¹⁰

The haveli hinders this movement of the physical/opaque body from opacity to the realm of the lit where all is made visible to the eye and hence intelligible. The space of the haveli together with its concrete representation of space, (the stereotomic nature of the building, the courtyard etc), the spatial practices prevalent works to maintain the body as a united whole and not subject it to the abstraction of the body performed by the eye.

It becomes pertinent however to clarify the exact modality of this body at this point. Is this body the sexed body? Or is it the gendered body And how can one assume the sexed body to be a precursor, hence more important than the gendered body? More so is this body the one that sustains the intellectus or the one that sustains the habitus? Is it the body as an object or as a subject? The answer to these questions is that the body sustained and produced by the haveli is all/and also these. It is what Lefebvre calls a spatio-temporal body; a body qualified neither in terms of the sexual body nor the gendered body but in terms of the dialectics of space and time. A body that is at once the generator of space as well as being immediately subject to the determinants of that space: symmetries, interactions and reciprocal actions, axes and planes centers and peripheries and spatio-temporal oppositions.¹¹

The materiality of this body, which all the practico-sensory realms outlined earlier addresses, is attributable neither to the consolidation of parts into space nor from nature. It derives its materiality from space and from the energy that is deployed in space and put to use there.

But, what of the space produced by this body and how does that give pre-dominance to the feminine realm? The answer lies in the nature of the space produced. As mentioned earlier, space and body form a dialectic in which one is immediately subject to the determinants of

each other. Thus, the space of the haveli as produced by the spatio-temporal body, which is itself produced within the space of the haveli, is first a heterogeneous and non-simultaneous space. This space mirrors the conflictual component symmetry and asymmetry, massive and non-massive energy deployment of the body, in short the constitutive duality of the spatial body. This architectural and urbanistic space does not tend towards the geometric and the visual, which inspires a fragmentation of the body. In this space localization and laterilization is integral and the schism between signifier and signified in not achieved, marks and markers of space are a part of the lived experience and are not added as an afterthought.

The space of the Haveli has nothing to do with the Cartesian tradition; it is not the space of blank sheets of paper, drawing boards, sections, elevations and the like. Experience of this space is not mediated by the semantic and semiological realm, which only serves to delineate space. The emphasis here is on the core foundation of space, the total body, the brain, gesture and so forth. It reiterates that space does not consist in the projection of an intellectual representation and does not arise from the visible readable realm, but that space is first of all heard (listened to) and then enacted (through physical gestures and movements). The body within this space is not reduced to an apparatus for receiving messages that makes the error of separating the mind and the body. This space serves to unite the body, it tells us that the body is much more than either a decoding machine or a desiring machine and that the total body constitutes and produces space in which messages codes and the coded and the decoded will subsequently emerge.

In sum, the space of the haveli so understood, paves the way for physical space, for the practico-sensory realm to constitute itself by struggling against the projections of the cogito. It works to overturn notions of a dominant visuality, or absolute truth and the realms of the phallic, and attempts to rehabilitate the field of feminine possibilities.

NOTES

¹Emma Roberts (1794-1840) accompanied her married sister to India in 1828. After the death of her sister, she moved to Calcutta where she edited the *Oriental Observer*. As quoted by Ghose Indira Ed. **Memsahibs Abroad: writings by Women Travellers in Nineteenth Century India**. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

²For a detailed discussion of the logic of visualization, see Panofsky, Erwin. **Gothic Architecture and scholasticism**. New York: New American Library, 1951.

³Indira Ghose undertakes a detailed examination of the influence of such travel writings on the identity of the Indian woman in her book **Women Travellers in Colonial India- The Power of The Female Gaze**. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

⁴For more on the etiquette prevalent in Lucknow see Sharar, Abdul Halim. Lucknow: the last phase of an Oriental Culture. Trans. E. vi. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975. pp 189-195.

⁵Wandering minstrels who chanted *kathas* (myths), while making appropriate bodily movements. Later the kathak school of dance changed its modality from strictly devotional to the erotic.

⁶A set of two small spherical drums with skin stretched across the flattened top surface a range of about one octave. The tabla is the most widespread accompanying instrument.

⁷Grosz, E. A. **Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism**. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994.

⁸Lefebvre, Henri. **The Production of Space**. Trans David Nicholson-Smith. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1991. p.183

⁹*ibid.* p. 195.