

## *The City as Archive: Women and Space in 16<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> c. Mughal India*

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How to cite: Hasan, Zoya Gul (2024). City as Archive: Women and Space in 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century Mughal India. In proceedings book: *VI International Conference on Architecture and Gender*. Valencia, 3-6 October 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4995/ICAG2023.2023.16756>

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### **Abstract**

*A majority of historical perspectives on women and space in Mughal India are limited to the zenana (harem), a space oft represented as insular and quintessentially 'feminine'. Coupled with the paucity of Mughal women's voices in the archive, this stereotype has not only created a reductive narrative of their spatial experiences but has also pushed their architectural contributions to the margins. This paper briefly unpacks the conditions and limits of archival research in a context where colonial and patriarchal forces (amongst others) have made it difficult to weave a coherent narrative of their lives through conventional forms of archival evidence. It further frames the contemporary city of Lahore, Pakistan, as an 'archive', and explores it in a twofold manner: firstly, by identifying architectural traces that are associated with Mughal women's patronage and are simultaneously marginalised within historical records, the built fabric and public consciousness; secondly, by rereading two such sites which reveal stories of women's agency, mobility and inhabitation. Articulated as 'corporeal presences' of their patrons in the city, I argue that these sites harbour the capacity to tell the story otherwise. Ultimately, this paper suggests fresh ways of reading historic urban environments such that unheard voices, characters and stories may be brought to the fore, and women's narratives invisibilized by the male, orientalist gaze may be unearthed.*

**Keywords:** *Women, Gender, Gendered Space, Mobility, Agency, Self-representation, Subjectivity, Archive, Architecture, Lahore*

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## 1. Introduction

The multifaceted history of the Mughal Empire (1526–1858) is closely intertwined with its architectural legacy. Spaces and buildings from this era in present-day northern India and Pakistan have been widely documented and interpreted through varied lenses over the years, building up a collection often labelled as ‘Islamic’ or ‘Mughal’ architecture. What is particularly striking is how architectural works are invariably associated with the names of prominent men in power, resulting in a lack of engagement with women’s perspectives, experiences, and architectural contributions. This begs a question, which several scholars have repeatedly asked in varied contexts in the past few decades: Where are the women?

One of the reasons for this absence is the pervasive image of a stereotypical ‘feminine’ space: the royal harem. Allegedly spatially fixed, heavily guarded, and inaccessible to the public, the women’s quarters or *zenana* piqued the interest of inquisitive European travellers as early as the 16th century.<sup>1</sup> However, it was only after the advent of British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent that its exotic image was popularized through various mediums. Along with the practice of *Sati*<sup>2</sup> and the veil, the harem came to signify a barbaric Orient, and the West’s uncivilized ‘Other’.<sup>3</sup> When colonial accounts mentioned Mughal women, it was either in relation to this seemingly impenetrable domestic domain or with reference to certain ‘exceptional’ individuals from the royal family, the consequences of which are aptly discussed by Ruby Lal:

“Mughal women, with the honourable exception of Nur Jahan (who turns out to be no exception at all because she is an honorary male), now appear as the hundreds of wives and mistresses of various Mughal monarchs – faceless, submissive, licentious and intriguing, all at the same time.”<sup>4</sup>

This recurrence of stereotypes relegated women to an imaginary realm of confinement, servitude and languor, and reinforced problematic binaries such as public/private, male/female, active/passive and mind/body. Subsequently, it erased their cultural, political, economic and architectural contributions, thereby aiding in the production and dissemination of reductive narratives of their lives.

### 1.1. A Fragmented Archive

For histories that deal with race, class, gender or caste, there are always gaps and silences in the archive. In the context discussed above, the fragmented nature of the archive is complex and multi-layered, formed through a combination of religious, cultural, patriarchal and political

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<sup>1</sup> Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 39-49.

<sup>2</sup> Widow self-immolation.

<sup>3</sup> Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 25-27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

forces. In existing archival sources such as state-sponsored chronicles, women appear fleetingly, with descriptions often limited to influential women of the royal household. Written by male court historians, these texts also veiled women through language by using certain titles, such as “pious ones”, “veiled ones” or “the cupola of chastity”.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this textual practice of veiling coincided with the emergence of the harem as a spatial institution and with the introduction of new laws regarding *purdah* in the 16th century.<sup>6</sup> Some historians also highlight instances where names were deliberately erased; Princess Zeb-un-nissa, for example, allegedly “incurred the wrath of her stern father, and no court chronicler dared to speak of her”.<sup>7</sup> As for women-authored records, only one female-authored memoir is known to exist<sup>8</sup> whereas some left behind literary works and Sufi treatises.<sup>9</sup>

However, while certain silences were deliberate, others occurred through the gradual accretion and distortion of narratives over time, or materials damaged, lost, and left undocumented. In the context of the Indian Subcontinent, the archive is doubly fragmented due to the colonial legacy of this region; historical materials lie scattered across several public and private collections in the Global North, while the rest are divided between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and (ironically) mostly inaccessible to researchers based in South Asia.

In a similar manner, Mughal women’s built works were also physically altered by various intervening agents after Mughal rule subsided, and were eventually impacted by urban growth over time. However, particularly in the case of female patronage of buildings, D. Fairchild Ruggles notes another possible reason behind the absence of women’s names in the record: the gesture of charity or patronage was generally considered more important than the patron’s identity or gender, and so, while the act itself was recorded, the name was often omitted from historical records.<sup>10</sup>

Thus faced with such gaps and fissures, the researcher navigating the archive in search of women’s voices only gleams patchy fragments of information, thin descriptions and cursory glimpses which make it difficult to weave a coherent story of their lives and works. The point,

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<sup>5</sup> These words are found in the official chronicles of Mughal rulers e.g., Akbarnama and Jehangirnama. Interestingly, a similar veiling of names adheres to architectural works associated with female patrons: the use of generic names on epigraphs veils their real names.

<sup>6</sup> Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 176.

<sup>7</sup> Magan Lal and Jessie Duncan Westbrook, *The Diwan of Zeb-un-nissa: The First Fifty Ghazals Rendered from the Persian*, (London: J. Murray, 1913), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Although authored by a woman, and providing an insider’s glimpse into the harem’s workings, Gulbadan Begum’s ‘Humayunama’ (Humayun’s chronicle) was written upon her nephew Emperor Akbar’s request. It was subsequently used to construct the official history of the empire, which was written by a male court chronicler in high-flown language venerating the king and his achievements. Interestingly, her memoir has been ignored by historians for very long, deemed unimportant and peripheral to ‘history-proper’.

<sup>9</sup> Princess Jehanara, for example, wrote a Sufi treatise, whereas Princess Zeb-un-nissa wrote poetry.

<sup>10</sup> D. Fairchild Ruggles, ‘Vision and Power: An Introduction’, in D. Fairchild Ruggles (ed.), *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 5.

however, is not to lament these silences and stereotypes, but rather, read them as probes to reconstitute methods of thinking, researching, and writing – to partake in, what Adrienne Rich calls “[...] seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction [...]”.<sup>11</sup>

Situating this study within the emerging area of feminist perspectives on Mughal-era India, I ask the following questions: Is it possible to reconstitute existing historical material to articulate other kinds of feminine subjectivities and experiences? Which spaces – both built and used – are meaningful for broadening the discussion on Mughal women’s lives, apart from the harem? What kinds of narratives emerge when one looks elsewhere?

I propose that one way to identify and map sites that reveal stories beyond the harem is to read the city as an archive where physical traces linked to women’s architectural patronage, experience and inhabitation exist. In the context of textual/visual archival absences mentioned earlier, these physical traces “[...] denote a representational “presence”. That is, the buildings stand in the sense of synecdoche, in place of their donors, and enjoy a public profile denied to the woman herself.”<sup>12</sup> Taking Lahore, Pakistan, as my site of study, I employ Brigid McLeer’s notion of “stepping on stray sods”<sup>13</sup> as a research method, and explore two such sites (or ‘sods’) in the city. I further conceptualise these as metaphorical ‘bodies’ or ‘corporeal presences’ of women in the city – bodies that have been fragmented and ‘othered’ in various ways, but also house narratives of alternate spaces. The metaphor of the body thus runs as a common thread throughout the paper, working at various levels: to articulate and study the physical transformation of the metaphorical ‘corporeal presences’ of women over time, the possible relation of the architectural envelope with its inhabitant’s body, and the bodily experience of women in the spaces explored.

## 1.2. Situating Lahore

The city of Lahore is a palimpsest with traces of several successive empires and regimes. It gained prominence in 1584, when the Mughal court was moved to Lahore, after which the city was expanded outwards from the old walled city. As Mughal rule weakened by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Sikhs gained control, the city shrank considerably with most of its

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<sup>11</sup> Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Reawaken: Writing as Re-vision,” *College English*, Vol. 34, No. 1, (Oct 1972), 18, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/375215>.

<sup>12</sup> Ruggles, *Women, Patronage and Self-representation*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> McLeer reflects on a series of stories narrated by her grand-aunt which follow a similar storyline: a man on his way home at night takes a short cut, steps on a ‘stray sod’ and is suddenly transported into a fantastical realm where he sees an alternative reality. These ‘stray sods’, she proposes, are “unreasonable places; sites of land, of mind and of narrative”. To step on them is to stumble upon an-other space, a place from which one gains an alternate perspective. In this paper, I apply this method to three aspects: the experience of researching Mughal women’s histories, the experience of having found these sites (sods), and the method of reading and narrating them i.e. by chancing upon stray historical details and harnessing an ‘other’ perspective. See Brigid McLeer, ‘Stray Sodds: eight dispositions on ‘the feminine’, space and writing’, in Doina Petrescu (ed.), *Altering Practices: Feminist Poetics and Politics of Space* (London: Routledge, 2007).

population seeking protection inside the walls, its environs crumbling into ruins. During this time, several Mughal-era monuments were desecrated, mosques turned into gunpowder factories, and ornaments ripped off to build the Sikh leader Ranjit Singh's famed Hazuri Bagh. Eventually, after Punjab was annexed in 1849, the British forged a new relationship with the built environment. While they did build anew, they also actively re-appropriated existing Mughal monuments. Parallel to this, they also initiated a wave of documentation and preservation through the setting up of the Archaeological Survey of India.<sup>14</sup>

The city today is a bricolage of both old and new fragments borne out of these changing regimes and continually affected by present-day development. It is within this landscape, and having been used or altered in these contexts that the two sites – Dai Anga Mosque and the Sarwala Maqbarah – stand today. Mere traces compared to larger, popular Mughal monuments in the city, they mostly lie enclosed within residential neighbourhoods.

While Mughal women's places of burial are well known, spaces particularly patronised by women are not well-recognized. With reference to their building activities in Lahore, James Wescoat also notes that select royal women are recognized for architectural patronage of gardens, but "every site has a greater tradition of folklore than historical documentation."<sup>15</sup> A cursory glance over the city's current map also reveals place-names that have continued to linger, such as 'Begumpura' (roughly meaning 'Woman's Town') and Anarkali to name a few. But while place-names and material objects conjure their presence in relatively subtle ways, far more intriguing is their integral place in the city's spatial imagination in its myths and stories. Here, they appeared in multiple guises and settings, with some characters coinciding with actual characters from the city's past: women walled-in, buried alive, swallowed by the earth, passive women, mysterious women, defiant women, "galaxies of women, there/doing penance for impetuosity/ribs chilled/in those spaces of the mind."<sup>16</sup>

Lahore is the city where the revered Nur Jehan lived after her alleged fall from fame, the quasi-fictional Anarkali was buried between two walls, and the Bibian Pak Daman fell through the earth and vanished, whilst several other women navigated the city through underground tunnels.<sup>17</sup> Rife with multiple, bewildering tales on one hand, and architectural or cartographic traces on the other, the city offers fertile ground for exploration.

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<sup>14</sup> William J. Glover, *Making Lahore Modern: Constructing and Imagining a Colonial City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 6-25.

<sup>15</sup> James L. Wescoat Jr., 'Gardens, Urbanization and Urbanism in Mughal Lahore: 1526 – 1657', in James L. Wescoat Jr. and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (eds), *Mughal Gardens: Sources, Places, Representations and Prospects* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996), 168.

<sup>16</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Planetarium," Poetry Foundation, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46568/planetarium-56d2267df376c>.

<sup>17</sup> James L. Wescoat, Michael Brand and Naeem Mir, 'Gardens, Roads and Legendary Tunnels: The Underground Memory of Mughal Lahore', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 17, no. 1 (1991), 3.

## 2. Two Sites, Two Stories

This section maps and analyses two sites in Lahore, Pakistan, through the metaphor of the ‘body’, and traces their gradual dismemberment over time. Amongst multiple canonical Mughal sites in Lahore, the chosen spaces are ‘minor architectures’, in that they are lesser known, greatly fragmented, and are fully enveloped by the surrounding built fabric. Moreover, both sites are associated with non-iconic female patrons, and unlike other such buildings, their histories are greatly contested. Yet, both serve as portals or ‘stray sods’ to interesting narratives that allow one to imagine and connect various kinds of adventures, journeys, and subjectivities of women at the time.

### 2.1. A Mosque by the Train Track: Dai Anga Masjid



**Fig. 1** *Dai Anga Masjid adjacent to the Lahore Railway Complex.* Source © Salman Alam Khan

#### 2.1.1. *A Body Hybridised*

At the far end of a dead-end street terminating right before a wide stretch of railway tracks, three chalky domes and two odd minarets rise from a colourful building abutting a jumble of smaller structures. Known as the Dai Anga Masjid, it is named after a woman named Dai Anga<sup>18</sup>, who is said to have patronised it in 1635. Her real name was allegedly Zeb-un-nissa, and she held an esteemed position in Emperor Jehangir’s household, having served as wet-nurse for his son, Shahjahan.<sup>19</sup> The 384 year-old site is a curious mix of new and old materials and forms that have accrued over time: cheap, ceramic tiles alongside elaborate tile-work, electric fans dangling from green, iron scaffolding in the courtyard, flimsy glass doors fitted into old

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<sup>18</sup> The word ‘Dai Anga’ means wet-nurse.

<sup>19</sup> Muhammad Tufail, Naqoosh, Lahore, Vol 92 (Lahore, Idara-e-Farogh, 1962), 562. In Mughal harems, wet-nurses were highly respected, and equally – if not more – important than the figure of the mother or the matriarch. In turn, this enabled them and their families to gain distinction in the political realm, and allowed for economic gain. For full discussion, see Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 193.

archways, a digital clock blinking high up inside a tiled alcove. The interior, too, is garish: ordinary ceramic tiles plastered over frescoes long gone, swathes of exposed cement, and golden buntings and vinyl posters stretched across the walls.

On the map, the words ‘Dai Anga’ mark a looped street and the building itself. These two are the residues of a larger neighbourhood, ‘Mohallah Dai Anga’, that once shared the same name, and is described by Lal as a highly developed area, home to many grand edifices at the time. The decline of Mughal rule and repeated attacks after it led its residents to first fortify it, and eventually abandoning it altogether.<sup>20</sup> Thus it shrank, till the symbolic body of Dai Anga stood alone.<sup>21</sup>

Much like the collage-like character of its skin and form, the history of the mosque’s use is a story of successive, often startlingly contrasting appropriations. After the neighbourhood’s desertion and dismantling, the mosque was seized by the Sikhs and converted into a gunpowder magazine, remaining “chockfull of explosives and ammunition” for several years.<sup>22</sup> As Glover notes, physical appropriation and, at times, destruction, of a previous regime’s buildings were ways of asserting authority and power.<sup>23</sup> In this case, the appropriation was both politically and religiously charged, gripping several other mosques in Lahore.<sup>24</sup>

Subsequently, a similar but more elaborate pattern of reuse was adopted by the British, wherein retrofitting and inhabiting existing monuments became commonplace. As Glover notes, during the initial years, this gesture was borne out of a mixture of pragmatism, and the desperate desire to establish a tangible connection with a newly occupied land and its people.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the occupation of these ‘ruins’, was, for them, a legitimate way of ‘saving’ them.<sup>26</sup> Therefore,, the second intervening agent who would play a role in the mosque’s history was Henry Cope, a colonial official and editor of the Lahore Chronicle<sup>27</sup> who converted it into his private residence in the early 1850s. It was the mosque’s remarkable tile-work which drew Cope towards it, compelling him to build around it a set of rooms that included a kitchen, horse stables and

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<sup>20</sup> Kanhaiya Lal, *Taareekh-e-Lahore* (Lahore: Majlis-I Taraqqi-yi Adab, 1977), 111.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed account of this tumultuous phase in Lahore wherein Mughal residential areas within the city were dismantled by the Sikh regime, and various tombs and mosques dotted the deserted suburbs, see Glover, *Making Lahore Modern*, 11-17.

<sup>22</sup> Lal, *Taareekh-e-Lahore*, 273.

<sup>23</sup> Glover, *Making Lahore Modern*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> See Glover, *Making Lahore Modern*, 19; and Latif, *Lahore: Its History* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2005), 125, 131, 222.

<sup>25</sup> Glover, *Making Lahore Modern*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Sylvia Shorto, ‘A Tomb of One’s Own: The Governor’s House, Lahore’, in Peter Scriver and Vikramaditya Prakash (eds.), *Colonial Modernities: Building, Dwelling and Architecture in British India and Ceylon* (London: Routledge, 2007), 159.

<sup>27</sup> The first English newspaper established in Lahore.

servants' quarters.<sup>28</sup> It is also suggested that this may have been the building out of which the Lahore Chronicle Press operated till about 1858<sup>29</sup> and that it possibly also functioned as a small public library at the time.<sup>30</sup>

However, a darker shadow was soon to be cast across the Indian subcontinent after the 1857 uprising, one that would, amongst other things, considerably alter the relationship of the British with cities and architecture. In Lahore, this came first in the shape of the Lahore Railway Station, which was built to function as a fortress in times of future revolt, and was a decisive stamp of colonial power on the land.<sup>31</sup> The vast site where it was built, described as being "till lately marked only by memorials of Muhammadan bigotry and Sikh fanaticism"<sup>32</sup> was the very same site where the Dai Anga Mohallah existed. Changing hands once again, the mosque-house hybrid was subsumed into the railway complex, bought by the authorities for 12, 000 Rupees and converted into an office for a railway traffic manager.<sup>33</sup> In photographs from 1904, one sees more appendages like staircases, awnings, verandah, a fence and hedges around the hybrid body.

The building soon became the subject of scrutiny in 1901 by the Muslim community who first voiced discontent in a local newspaper against its misuse, after which, through the intervention of Viceroy Lord Curzon, it was 'saved' and restored to the community.<sup>34</sup> Declared a 'Protected Monument' by then, it was converted once again into a mosque, around which the city continued to grow.<sup>35</sup>

"Colonial adaptations", as Shorto writes, "[...] are the hybrids of material culture, occupying a continuum of time and space that falls between societies."<sup>36</sup> From a lively mosque to a battered gunpowder magazine, to a private residence, a press and a small public library, an office, and a mosque, the hybrid body flits between functions, voices and narratives, morphing from the sacred to commonplace, domestic to utilitarian, and eventually exclusive and sacred again. Perhaps, this hybridity has partially contributed to its absence in public memory today, as it melts into the surrounding urban fabric.<sup>37</sup> Historical narratives on the other hand are plagued

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<sup>28</sup> Noor Ahmad Chishti, *Tahqiqat Chishti: Tarikh-e-Lahor ka Encyclopaedia* (Lahore: Al-Faisal Nashraan, 2006), 811.

<sup>29</sup> Henry Raynor Goulding, "*Old Lahore*": *Reminiscences of a Resident* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette, 1924), 16.

<sup>30</sup> See IOR/E/4/818, India Office Records, British Library; IOR/E/4/820, India Office Records, British Library.

<sup>31</sup> Glover, *Making Lahore Modern*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Tufail, *Naqoosh*, 562.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>35</sup> Archaeological Survey of India Annual Report, 1913-14, India Office Records, British Library.

<sup>36</sup> Shorto, 'A Tomb of One's Own', 151.

<sup>37</sup> Dai Anga's name itself is well known due to her tomb behind a grand gateway on the Grand Trunk Road. Scattered mentions of her mosque sometimes feature within the tomb's accounts. The woman's final resting place eclipses the one associated with patronage, thrusting her back into the role of the silent character of the revered wet-nurse and respected wife.

with uncertainty regarding the original patron of the mosque and mention a man ‘Maqbul’ as the founder.<sup>38</sup> However, what is interesting is how these contradictory stories distract from a telling detail, which weaves in and out of historical accounts:<sup>39</sup>

“Anga in her old age expressed a wish to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, and the Emperor Shah Jahan provided her with suitable means to perform the holy pilgrimage. Before leaving India, she built this mosque in 1045 A.H. (1635 A.D.)”<sup>40</sup>

This indicates that the mosque was built prior to a long journey undertaken by its patron. Though a fixed object in the city, and associated with a definite function, it conjures images of transit, fleeting encounters and indeterminate geographies. It is thus not only her bodily presence in the city, or a symbol of her philanthropy and agency, but also a portal to stories of mobility – of other spaces that may have been seen, traversed and experienced far beyond Lahore. One is tempted to ask and imagine, what, then, were her experiences? How did the journey unfold? What landscapes and terrains did she traverse? From the harem where the wet-nurse tends to the new-born, I reimagine her as a traveller treading towards a place far away.

### 2.1.2. *Spaces of Transit, Fluidity and Flow*

For Mughal women associated with the harem and royalty, travelling was in fact “a way of life”.<sup>41</sup> In chronicles, one finds them departing for hunting grounds, pleasure gardens, melon beds and waterfalls, buildings under construction and other cities.<sup>42</sup> From leisurely trips to political missions, these were journeys where they were mostly accompanied and provided protection, either by the emperor’s men or by an all-women’s army. Similarly, Misra notes women’s interest in “long journeys” for visits to Mecca, Medina and the shrines of saints,<sup>43</sup> while other scholars have collected similar details through European travellers’ accounts.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, like the patronage of religious buildings, pilgrimage as a “public expression of

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<sup>38</sup> To quote one example, Catherine Asher refers to it as “The mosque of Maqbul, or Dai Anga as this building is still called [...]”. For full excerpt, see Catherine Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 226.

<sup>39</sup> Both Tufail and Lal, for instance, do not mention this detail in their accounts of the mosque. Both focus on the afterlives of the building. See Lal, *Taareekh-e-Lahore*, 272-4; Tufail, *Naqoosh*, 562.

<sup>40</sup> Latif, *Lahore: Its Architectural History*, 163. Unsurprisingly, the narrative leans towards the benevolent king, who provided her with the means to travel. Ruby Lal notices a similar “troubling” tendency in the treatment of an earlier women-led pilgrimage mentioned in studies of the Mughal Empire by present-day historians. See Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 211.

<sup>41</sup> Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jehan: Empress of Mughal India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 106.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>43</sup> Rekha Misra, *Women in Mughal India*, 104.

<sup>44</sup> See Findly, *Nur Jehan*, 120-21; Gregory C. Kozlowski, ‘Private Lives and Public Piety: Women and the Practice of Islam in Mughal India’, in Gavin Hambly, ed., *Women in the Medieval Islamic World* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 470-488; Lal, *Domesticity and Power*, 208-13.

piety”<sup>45</sup> was largely the domain of women. In fact, it is also noted that since none of the emperors were able to undertake pilgrimages to Mecca themselves, they depended on the “vicarious impact of the spiritual attainments of their female kin.”<sup>46</sup>

Unlike the shorter, everyday journeys that were far more intertwined with the empire’s workings and family matters, the journey undertaken for pilgrimage, or *Hajj*, is distinctly different: firstly, it is a voluntary gesture often springing from a deeply personal desire.<sup>47</sup> Secondly, it is a long-duration journey exposing the pilgrim to an open landscape for a sustained period, thus allowing an alternate bodily experience. Signalling a break from everyday routine, norms and the enclosure of the harem, the journey propels the woman into an unfamiliar, precarious terrain, allowing for new sights and experiences as she occupies a ‘liminal’ space between home and elsewhere. The territory thus traversed and inhabited – this in-between zone of transit itself – becomes an ‘other’ space.

One of the most remarkable examples discussed so far in the Mughal context is the band of women pilgrims led by Gulbadan Begum during 1575-82. While no subjective accounts of the women exist, we can infer from details found in writings by court chroniclers who may have seen them depart or arrive, or men who encountered them during the journey. These provide a glimpse of some events, routes and spaces.<sup>48</sup>

The entire journey took more than three years, out of which it took one year to reach the port of Surat from where they sailed.<sup>49</sup> One imagines the pilgrim collective moving beyond the spatial boundary of the harem to the outdoors, which in turn changes continuously as they move across land for months. Bloomer and Moore describe bodily experience in relation to architecture thusly: “If the landmarks in the external environment are very close to us, like a nearby wall, we perceive our body as having shrunk, while if we are oriented toward an opening in a great space by a doorway, window, vista or park, we perceive our body as having expanded.”<sup>50</sup> Analysed through this lens, the move from the harem to the outdoors simultaneously tightens and expands the body-boundary: veils are donned, palanquins are inhabited, but the fixed boundary of a building is left behind. The gaze of the traveller wanders as far as it can reach in an expansive landscape, thereby evoking a sense of openness.

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<sup>45</sup> Kozłowski, ‘Private Lives and Public Piety’, in Hambly, ed., *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, 478.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>47</sup> It may be argued that pilgrimage in the context of the Mughal Empire fed into a larger circuit of philanthropy and charity, and was closely tied to the state in the sense that the emperor to support his empire’s reputation sanctioned it. While this is true, one certainly cannot ignore the agentive dimension of religious trips – the fact that the initiative came from women themselves, and was carried out with great zeal despite all odds.

<sup>48</sup> See translator’s preface to Gulbadan’s incomplete memoir.

<sup>49</sup> Annette. S. Beveridge, *Humayyunama*, 72.

<sup>50</sup> Bloomer and Moore, *Body, Memory and Architecture*, 43.

As a group travelling together, the pilgrims also acquire collective visibility, but while this may confer a sense of togetherness and autonomy, it also renders them more susceptible to the dangers of travelling. Writing about medieval Muslim pilgrims, Tolmacheva notes that women were particularly vulnerable to robbery, rape, captures and killings as the lunar dates for *Hajj* were known beforehand, making it easier for Bedouins to plan and ambush.<sup>51</sup> In the case of Gulbadan's party, one learns, for instance, of how "[...] a set of ignorant persons had vexed the pilgrims by frightening them about the officers of the Feringhi ports."<sup>52</sup> The space of transit and wandering thus held the promise of both liberty and danger.

Across land and through the rivers, the pilgrims finally reach the coast to set sail across the Indian Ocean. A footnote in the labyrinthine *Akbarnama* mentions 'Selimi', a ship that carried the "pure highnesses" to Mecca in 1576. As no names and identities of pilgrims are mentioned, the translator conjectures that this may have been the group led by Gulbadan travelling around the same time: "The secluded ladies of the court of chastity sailed in the ship Selimi, and Sultan Khwaja and the other officers made the voyage in the ship Ilahi."<sup>53</sup>

At a functional level, the ship is simply a transport vessel, but when analysed as an all-women's space "only for the ladies", the meaning expands. The body-boundary shifts again, this time, containing not one woman individually, but enclosing them as a collective body. The ship's watertight architecture becomes the skin that affords enclosure and privacy, providing safety and refuge from the volatility of the voluminous ocean. Moreover, much like the form of a group may have inculcated a sense of togetherness while walking, being together in a ship perhaps worked the same way. Similarly, being afloat on a ship with limited space may heighten one's sense of enclosure, yet the eye is free to roam, to take in the seemingly boundless space around. They rush through the waters towards a much-desired 'elsewhere' – in this case, Mecca – while simultaneously inhabiting a temporary mobile home between two lands.

Nevertheless, if one were to begin rewriting the history of this large water body – the Indian Ocean – through a feminine lens, Mughal women would not feature simply as avid travellers. In the broader context of their everyday lives, practices and activities, several ships were also owned and actively controlled by noblewomen.<sup>54</sup> The ship of Miriam Zamani for example, known as 'Rahimi' (often distorted to 'Great Reme', 'Reheme', or 'Remy' in Western accounts) was described as being "153 feet long by 42 feet broad and of at least 1200 tons burden"<sup>55</sup> – allegedly, as Findly

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<sup>51</sup> Marina Tolmacheva, 'Female Piety and Patronage in the Medieval Hajj', in Gavin Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, 166-167.

<sup>52</sup> *Akbarnama*, Vol. 3, Chapter XXXIV, 275.

<sup>53</sup> *Akbarnama*, Vol. 1, Chapter XXXIV, 276-7.

<sup>54</sup> See Ellison B. Findly, "The Capture of Maryam-uz-Zamani's Ship: Mughal Women and European Traders," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 108, No.2 (Apr-Jun., 1988): 227-238. Also see, Shireen Moosvi, "Mughal Shipping at Surat in the First Half of Seventeenth Century," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 51 (1990): 308-320.

<sup>55</sup> William Foster, ed., *The Journal of John Jourdain*, 186-7.

notes, the largest vessel of its kind in the Indian seas at the time.<sup>56</sup> As mobile nodes in religious and economic networks, these ships carried goods for overseas trade and transported thousands of people to Mecca for pilgrimage. Through these, women exercised a definite claim over ocean space, hiring and commanding captains, ordering and arranging trade supplies, representing themselves in fluid territories, connecting and enabling economic and religious processes, and to some extent shaping and negotiating political relations with the West. Arguably far more powerful than buildings on land, these ships etched their public profiles in a watery world.

In addition, much like the dangers on land, the ocean was equally charged with risk, intrigue and danger, for both travellers and traders alike. Portuguese pirates, storms, rains and shipwrecks often disrupted their schedules. We learn for instance, that Gulbadan's arrival to India was delayed because of a shipwreck: "On her return, she remained another whole year at Aden through shipwreck, and arrived in Hindustan in the year nineteen hundred and ninety (990)."<sup>57</sup>

From land to water, past Surat, the Persian Gulf, Aden, Mecca, and back, one may imagine the pilgrim returning after years of a life of constant change, movement and adventure. Whilst the Dai Anga Masjid in Lahore survives as part of the legacy of public patronage of religious buildings that women were particularly associated with, reading it through the notion of a journey – as a fixed anchor at one end of a mobile trajectory – reconstitutes it as a symbol of the woman traveller. It speaks of paths trodden, routes taken or avoided, and nomadic trajectories, networks of relations, and spaces that are both frightening and captivating at the same time.

## 2.2. The Solitary Tomb: Sarvwala Maqbara



**Fig. 1.** *View of the maqbarah from within the garden.* Source © Author

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<sup>56</sup> Findly, *The Capture*, 227.

<sup>57</sup> Abd al-Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tavarikh*, Vol. II, 217.

### 2.2.1. *A Body Desecrated*

In the middle of a bare garden in an unassuming neighbourhood called Begumpura, a peculiar tower-like structure hides behind a scraggly clump of trees and sagging electric wires. Hemmed in by houses from all sides, it blends into its surroundings, almost unnoticeable when one enters the street. A bright, blue plaque near it indicates that its name is ‘Saruwala Maqbarah’, or The Cypress Tomb, briefly explaining that the tomb contains the body of a woman named Sharf-un-nissa, and that it once stood in an expansive garden with a water tank, both of which have long since disappeared. The author of the text also brings attention to the odd entrance to the tomb: an arched doorway located at a height of sixteen feet without any staircase leading to it. He conjectures that it may have been intentionally placed at this height so that the grave of this “pious lady” would remain veiled and out of reach.

Historically, the years during which it is thought to have been built are treated as the tail end of the grand narrative of Mughal rule – a time of riots and ruin, or the time of the weakened ‘later Mughals’. Nevertheless, who exactly was this woman? Historians hinge her identity to her brother’s name, repeatedly describing her as the sister of Nawab Zakaria Khan, who served as the viceroy of Lahore from 1726-1745. In a poem penned by poet Muhammad Iqbal, she is “all ecstasy and yearning, anguish and burning/eyes and lamp to the governor of Panjab/radiance of the family of Abd al-Samad”<sup>58</sup>, a ‘pious one’ who now rests peacefully in her grave. In a string of short news reports from recent years, she is hoisted on a pedestal, the tomb’s tile-work praised, the site’s neglect by archaeological authorities lamented, and a plea for its repair expressed. But a close reading of some written accounts point to other details: the tower is not simply an inert receptacle built to commemorate a ‘pure’, ‘pious’ woman, but a structure that she herself built during her lifetime, and used as a “meditation chamber”<sup>59</sup> before finally wishing to be buried in it.<sup>60</sup> It is both a house for the body, and the symbolic bodily presence of the woman who created and inhabited it.

The locality of Begumpura<sup>61</sup>, which is now an entirely altered landscape was in fact, founded by Begum Jan, Sharf-un-nissa’s mother.<sup>62</sup> Latif describes it as a settlement with “sumptuous palaces, elegant gardens, mosques, tanks, aqueducts, baths and taverns.”<sup>63</sup> During the years of tumult and changing regimes, it was crushed to the ground by the Sikhs. Sharf-un-nissa’s sealed tomb was particularly sought out, broken into, plundered for treasure, and its tiles torn out.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Muhammad Iqbal “Javidnama,” accessed June 14, 2019, <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/works/poetry/persian/javidnama/translation/index.htm>

<sup>59</sup> Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 316.

<sup>60</sup> Lal, *Taareekh-e-Lahore*, 270.

<sup>61</sup> As noted earlier, ‘Begumpura’ roughly translates to ‘woman’s town’. In Urdu, ‘begum’ means ‘lady’, and ‘pura’ means ‘area’, ‘neighbourhood’, or ‘town’.

<sup>62</sup> Latif, *Lahore: Its History*, 137. Begum Jan is described as the mother of Nawab Zakaria Khan.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

Having damaged and exposed the very space she had purportedly wished to be sealed off from the world, the ruined tower was left standing in a dismembered town. Interestingly, Latif narrates that Begumpura subsequently functioned as a “mine for the supply of bricks of the best quality for public and private buildings in Lahore and its suburbs” until the colonial times – a physical dispersal of the woman’s symbolic body across the city.

While some tiles looted from her tomb were fated to be incorporated into Sikh-era architecture, a lone fragment was transported across the seas to London alongside several other ‘curios’ from nearby tombs by a certain Colonel Richard Poyser. Cleaned, documented, labelled and encased in a large glass cupboard, it now sits amidst thousands of ceramic pieces amassed by the Victoria and Albert Museum from around the world. The story of how the colonial official collected and doggedly pursued the (then South Kensington) museum for its purchase for six years unfolds in a series of letters dated 1892-1898. Writing from Meerut in April 1892, he offered “50 pieces for 250 guineas” describing in detail their sizes, colours and patterns.<sup>65</sup> By June 20, 1898, having presented them for close inspection, and managing to pique the curator’s interest, he packed them into two boxes and despatched them with a detailed inventory plus a letter narrating the story of their collection,

“Some I secured from a Mohamedan priest within the precincts of an important tomb & just within its outer boundary wall where they had been set up edgeways to form square holes for pigeons to breed in [...] money would not get these out of him, but he sold me some loose ones. Another lot I purchased from a native shopkeeper who lived near a celebrated tomb & he fished them up out of a deep cellar under his shop.”<sup>66</sup>

Inescapably, around the same time, the tomb was also under scrutiny by archaeological authorities. In the scant photographs in ASI records from 1884, the tomb stands tall on a grassless mound of mud. To get a glimpse of its surroundings, one has to rummage through records of another larger monument: the nearby Dai Anga Tomb, which was perhaps part of the same complex as a photograph from 1905 suggests. Much like it features as a hazy body in the background of this photograph, in a city guidebook from the early 1900s, it is woven into the description of the “handsome tiled mausoleum of Dai Anga”: “Nearby is a curious tower, its walls adorned with paintings of Cypress trees.”<sup>67</sup>

Not much is known of interventions that took place later. Possibly considered a ‘minor’ monument, it was perhaps handed over to the Public Works Department for repair, after which

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<sup>65</sup> Richard Poyser, letter to the curator, *File of Poyser (Col.) Richard & Mrs.*, Victoria and Albert Museum Archives, MA/1/P1948.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Poyser, letter to the South Kensington Museum, *File of Poyser (Col.) Richard & Mrs.*, Victoria and Albert Museum Archives, MA/1/P1948.

<sup>67</sup> H. A. Newell, *Lahore: A Guide to Places of Interest, with History and Map*, (Bombay), 67.

it was finally labelled a protected site in 1913.<sup>68</sup> Two bodies, both literal and symbolic, previously in proximity within the larger vicinity of ‘woman’s town’ now lie completely separated – each an island within an ever-burgeoning city.

### 2.2.2. *Space of Solitude, Reflection and Refuge*

That Sharf-un-nissa was the creator of the tomb is not a striking detail in itself. Amongst the various building types associated with women patrons – gardens, mosques, wells, reservoirs, travellers’ inns, poorhouses – were tombs that they built for themselves, their husbands or relatives, and even revered mentors.<sup>69</sup> What transforms the meaning of the Sarvwala Maqbarah far beyond what any tomb would arguably stand for is the ‘embodied’ and ‘lived’ dimension of this space, its assimilation into Sharf-un-nissa’s everyday routine, and its intimate connection with her very corporeality. As the popular, recurring story relays, Sharf-un-nissa visited her tower every day. Using a wooden ladder to climb up, she would spend an hour praying and reading the Quran, with a “jewelled sword”<sup>70</sup> by her side. Once the ritual was completed, she would descend and return to the palace, leaving her book and sword behind. After what may have been months or years of use, she expressed a wish to be laid to rest in the same space, along with her two prized belongings.<sup>71</sup>

One imagines a veiled Sharf-un-nissa withdrawing from the zenana, seeking a chamber outside, assiduously partaking in a rhythmic routine every day. This conscious move – from palace to an ‘other’ space – suggests a desire for a space that contrasts with the one she leaves behind, even if temporarily. The first layer of separation – from harem to tower – ensures privacy and solitude. She carves out a home away from home: not a tomb, but quite literally, “a room of her own”.<sup>72</sup>

Her climb up the wooden ladder enables another degree of separation from what lies on ground. As Bachelard writes, “[...] we always go up the attic stairs, which are steeper and more primitive.”<sup>73</sup> Like the steep steps of the attic stairs, the ladder’s rungs “bear the mark of ascension to a more tranquil solitude.”<sup>74</sup> Vertical movement enables her to ascend from the mundane to sacred, collective to individual, everyday clamour to silence and introspection. She

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<sup>68</sup> Archaeological Survey of India ‘Annual Progress Report of the Superintendent Muhammadan and British Monuments, Northern Circle, for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 1913’, India Office Records, British Library.

<sup>69</sup> Abdul Rehman and Munazzah Akhtar, *The Mughal Gardens along the Grand Trunk Road in Pakistan and Afghanistan*, (Unpublished Paper), 11. In Lahore, the obvious example is Nur Jehan’s patronage of her husband Jehangir’s tomb complex as well as her own.

<sup>70</sup> Latif, *Lahore: Its History*, 135.

<sup>71</sup> Latif, *Lahore: Its History*, 135-6; Lal, *Taareekh-e-Lahore*, 270.

<sup>72</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 109.

<sup>73</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 26.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*,

first travels to another plane by physically climbing up, and once inside, perhaps even mentally as she immerses herself in reading and meditation.

The size of the room – a small square, about fifteen feet on either side – is only large enough to house a single body. Enclosed from three sides at a fair height from the ground, it limits visibility for those outside; one may imagine her veil having transformed into the architectural envelope itself wherein the walls of the building function in a similar manner – they conceal and enclose, whilst clearly demarcating her territory or personal space, a square-shaped nest for the body. The doorway that permits entry is also a window – an eye – that opens a vista towards the garden; she is able to see without being seen, gazing out whilst ensconced comfortably inside an architecture that holds the promise of both “prospect” and “refuge”.<sup>75</sup>

Whilst it is a safe space where she freely meditates, it is also precarious to a certain degree. The portable wooden ladder connects and enables, and once removed after the ritual, also protects the book and sword left in the chamber upon her departure for the palace. But it also renders her slightly vulnerable in the face of a removed ladder which could leave her trapped. Or worse – trespassing and attack. Is that why Sharf-un-nissa preferred the sword by her side? Was she aware of her state between safety and precarity? A local historian has conjectured that she built this tower and became a “recluse” because she desired to withdraw from “the politics of the rulers of Lahore.”<sup>76</sup> Considering that she was closely connected to the ruling family, and to a man notorious for launching a violent campaign against the warring Sikhs, perhaps she did foresee a threat.

Sharf-un-nissa’s desire to be buried in this room with her book and sword further suggest that for her, this was indeed a territory marked as ‘home’, one that was used intermittently during her life, and one that she planned to reside in permanently. Much like it functions as a bodily appendage that protects and accommodates her while she uses it; it becomes one with her physical body when she dies. Cradled in the heart of the structure, her flesh and bones seep into bricks and lime. In this light, the plunder of the tomb by the Sikhs suddenly acquires a fierce shade of violence, almost like the desecration of her very body. The lone tile in the museum’s cold, glass cupboard becomes a shred of skin, part of the coloniser’s ‘oriental’ collection, now merely a display. In addition, the fading photographs in the archive read as forensic snapshots of an architecture which is no longer a metaphorical bodily presence, but is in fact, half-woman, half-building.

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<sup>75</sup> See Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (John Wiley: London, 1975). Appleton advanced the theory of prospect-refuge, which explains that humans have the tendency to drift towards places that offer a chance to see (prospect) without being seen (refuge).

<sup>76</sup> Majid Sheikh, “Harking Back: Abiding mystery of pious and the Cypress Tomb,” *Dawn*, January 01, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1305655>.

## Conclusion

In order to broaden and reconstitute Mughal women's histories, their built work and their spatial experiences, it is crucial to think through alternate routes, methods and historical materials. Instead of relying primarily on snippets found in the official archive, I have connected them to physical traces of women's built works, experiences and agency in the city as a way to imagine diverse types of spatial practices and female subjectivities. I have further contended that these physical traces – however fragmented and non-monumental – stand as metaphorical bodily presences of their patrons, and are sites of immense potential for architectural researchers and feminist scholars. Far from inert ruins that speak only of women's patronage, these sites spark crucial conversations around experienced and embodied space, and also serve to reinscribe women into broader networks and histories of the Mughal empire, as well as histories of the early modern world. Moreover, they allow a disruption of linear readings of history, as well as teleological or geographical binds, and effectively bring together female voices and characters, which seem to cut across class boundaries, generations, reigns, and professions.

The implicit aim of this study was to examine the constructed and multivocal nature of history itself. As Joan Scott writes, simply collecting "evidence" to broaden the canon does not solve the problem. Studying and revealing the mechanisms and sites that reinstate biases is also key.<sup>77</sup> In a similar vein (albeit different context), Jyoti Hosagrahar maintains that rather than simply recovering silenced voices, one must "[...] question the very master narrative."<sup>78</sup> Hence, the two buildings have been employed as both subject and tool in this study: I not only write about them, but have attempted to write through them to reflect on the broader practice of history-making.

A close study of their contested narratives and juxtaposition of various historical materials has firstly revealed how the organisation of the archive and the writing of history speaks of various kinds of power. Secondly, it has shown how 'minor' texts like plaques, epigraphs, and news clippings, literary and oral accounts shape the dominant public imagination, thus allowing particular types of historical narratives to endure and be passed on. We can also conclude that the gendering and othering of architecture happens as much through history books, scholarly writings and institutions, as through our own assumptions, the stories we listen to and pass on, and the news we circulate. Collectively, these are sites where stereotypes may be regurgitated, and architectural history is continually shaped and reshaped.

By rereading the Dai Anga Mosque and the Sarvwala Maqbarah through the method outlined earlier, and by turning our gaze towards the city, the historical material is effectively reconstituted. The spaces thus conjured through this research and method range from the fixed

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<sup>77</sup> Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Summer, 1991), 773-797.

<sup>78</sup> Jyoti Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

and mobile, material and fluid, collective and solitary, to spaces that conjure sound and those that evoke silence, the space of everyday use and occasional events, as well as spaces of planned rituals and chance encounters. To borrow Edward Soja's words, the mosque and the tomb are "[...] not just 'other spaces' to be added on to the geographical imagination, they are also 'other than' the established ways of thinking."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 113.

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