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A Gendered Response to a Watchful Gaze

a response by Samira Fathi

We are constantly under the rays of the spectator's eyes, an inevitable consequence of modern urban life with high demand for the rhetoric of safety and security under the disguise of omnipresent surveillance systems. Expanding from contributing author Sophia-Rose Diodati's spatial analysis of "affect arrays" and surveillance of racialized bodies, this response aims to situate Diodati's analysis alongside nineteenth-century Iranian palatial towers in order to highlight the intersection of gender politics and power relations in the surveilled body. In "All Along the Bell Tower: An Analysis of Surveillance and Affect on the Johns Hopkins University Homewood Campus," Diodati explores the material manifestation of the surveillance system on the JHU campus. Inspired by Diodati's concept of "affect arrays" which emanate from the bell towers across the JHU campus, I bring to light the connections between the gendered gaze and its impact on architectural configuration of space through the examination of Qajar palatial towers in Tehran, Iran.

Like the bell towers investigated in Diodati's paper, my response explores the panoptic perspective created for the Qajar king Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–96) in the palatial tower of Eshratbad Palace (literally, abode of indulgence). I propose that the prevalence of multistoried palatial towers of this sort during the Naseri era can be read as the architectural manifestation of Naser al-Din Shah's absolute and patrimonial monarchy and the gender hierarchy in late nineteenth-century Iran. As stated by Gülru Necipoğlu, gender "played an important role in the zoning and social organization of the gaze in Islamic palaces where royal women were generally kept away from public

view.”¹ The politics of gaze, she maintains, was crucial for exerting power in different strategies of rule in early modern Muslim empires (Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal). For instance, during the Safavid period (1501–1722) in Isfahan, *talar* (a pillared porch)—and particularly the one at the Ali Qapu Palace—functioned as a theater box at the edge of the grand public square (Maidan-e Naqsh-e Jahan) where the king would appear on specific occasions, and his gaze was framed in a particular way. The function of the Tower of Justice at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul was administrative where the Ottoman Sultan observed and oversaw his subjects through gridded windows. The *Jharokha* (window of appearance) in the Red Fort at Delhi was an octagonal tower, topped with a dome, and a window for the public appearance of the Mughal emperor at specific times. This tower also functioned as the emperor’s sleeping chamber.² While the Mughal palatial towers with their placement in the private sections of the palace show more affinity with the Qajar examples, their function in the larger representation of power and visibility of the ruler is different. In this regard, Necipoğlu asserts:

The ways in which the three palaces framed the gaze in staging the public appearances of the monarch articulated the nature of his relationships to the extended royal household, his subjects, and the world at large, a relationship that was rooted in a different concept of absolute monarchy in each case.³

The shift from a corporate system of rule in the Safavid period to a familial state in the Qajar period led to the retreat of the king from the public view to the confines of the walled royal citadel (Arg) in Tehran.⁴ The reciprocal gaze between the ruler and his subjects was gradually replaced by a one-way act of watching by the mid-nineteenth century.

Rather than appearing in the public view, Naser al-Din Shah preferred gazing at his subjects for his pleasure through the balconies and windows of the multistoried palatial pavilions. His newly erected Shams al-Emareh (Sun of Palaces) in the royal citadel, built in 1865, was the first multistoried palace in Tehran providing such gazing opportunity for the king (fig.1). Naser al-Din Shah’s interest in overseeing the surrounding landscape through the windows and *iwans* (porches) of this structure is

¹ Gülru Necipoğlu, “Framing the Gaze in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Palaces.” *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993), 303.

² See Necipoğlu, “Framing the Gaze.”

³ Gülru Necipoğlu, “Framing the Gaze,” 303. She has focused on the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, the Safavid Palace in Isfahan, and the Red Fort in Delhi.

⁴ Sussan Babaie, “In the Eye of the Storm: Visualizing the Qajar Axis of Kingship.” *Artibus Asiae* 66, no. 2 (2006): 35-54.

evident in the photographs that he captured from this elevated viewing stance.⁵ Moreover, the king's habit and hobby of watching people in the city led to the addition of a new gateway with an iwan to the eastern wall of the Shams al-Emareh Palace. The balcony of this portal faced Naseriyeh Street and residential neighborhoods (fig.2). This new street had recently turned into one of the modern avenues of Tehran, after the city's expansion in 1868, featuring new shops and buildings that attracted people from different social strata to promenade there.⁶ Providing the views of this crowded street and adjacent shops, the portal of the Shams al-Emareh became a place of leisure for Naser al-Din Shah as a curious spectator.⁷



Figure 1. Shams al-Emareh, located in the Golestan Palace, Tehran. Indeed, this palace consists of two multistoried towers attached together. This image shows the considerable elevation of the palace and its imposing structure that provided vistas of the city for Naser al-Din Shah. Photograph courtesy of the author, 2021.

At Eshratābad, or commonly referred to as *jardin d'amour*, the design and spatial arrangement of the king's palatial tower clearly demonstrated the gendered structure of power between the king and his subjects. In this summer palace, the tower was a multistoried building that functioned as the sleeping quarters of Naser al-Din Shah. It featured spacious and lavishly decorated spaces with wider windows and balconies at

⁵ Photography was introduced to the Qajar court in this period. The king was an amateur photographer who took photographs of his harem and women, hunting campaigns, and views of the capital city, Tehran. A group of photos taken from the Shams al-Emareh by the king indicates his passion for recording vistas of the city from this elevated location.

⁶ For the expansion of Tehran during this period see Samira Fathi, "From Vision to Reality: Tehran's Urban Expansion Under Naser al-Din Shah (1848–96)," *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 12, no. 1 (January 2023): 71–99.

⁷ Mohammad Hasan Khan E'temad al-Saltaneh, "Rouznameh-ye Sharaf," [Sharaf Gazette], no. 68, 1888.

higher levels. The top floor indeed was reserved for the king and provided a panoramic view of the surroundings.⁸



Figure 2. The eastern portal and façade of the Shams al-Emareh palace at the edge of Naseriyeh Street. Note the abundance of openings toward the street, especially the pillared porch. (Open access via Wikimedia Commons).

The king's male body and his role as the preserver of the royal progeny and head of Qajar state was accentuated in the innermost spaces of his *haram* (women's quarter) in terms of gender hierarchy. Not only was the king the absolute ruler of the state and Qajar court, he was also the shadow of the God on earth and the sole patriarch of the Qajar household. Naser al-Din Shah possessed 84 wives and concubines and all of them lived inside the haram. The placement of the king's tower in relation to the mansions designated for the haram women indicates the male-centered conception of space in this complex. The tower stood independently among a series of individually designed mansions designated for the king's wives and concubines (fig.3). These two-storied pavilions were arranged around a circular pool at the foot of the king's tower (fig.4). The imposing tower with pillared porches on four sides, overlooking the women's

⁸ Kaveh Bakhtiar, "Palatial Towers of Nasir Al-Din Shah," *Muqarnas* 21, no. 1 (2004): 33–43.

apartments, provided the king with a panoptic gaze. Emanating from this tower to the haram buildings and extending outwards to the city, the royal gaze found an architectural manifestation in these multistoried towers favored during Naser al-Din Shah's reign. Whether a haram woman or a commoner, all subjects were under the gaze of the omnipotent king.



(left) Figure 3. The palatial tower at Eshratabad Palace. Note the placement and scale of the palatial tower in relation to the adjacent women's apartments by the pool. (Open access via Wikimedia Commons). (right) Figure 4. Women's apartments are individually placed along the pool with a repetitive design. (Open access via Wikimedia Commons).

Through the windows and balconies, as in the JHU bell towers, these towers produced a space for observing and remaining unseen. Although the king was physically absent from the view, the tower replaced his presence and provided the king with an opportunity to indulge himself in being a voyeur, as Michel de Certeau puts it:

His elevation transforms him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.⁹

Although in a different context than Manhattan high-rises discussed by de Certeau, the palatial tower at Eshratabad did provide such a pleasure for the king, standing at a distance and representing superiority and domination. In either case, the voyeur possesses the power of ordering and conceiving the space where his subjects move and live. However, the tower at Eshratabad, surrounded by women's apartments, establishes the physical and visual dominance of the king gazing at his female subjects for the sake of sexual and erotic pleasures. In contrast to tower structures associated with religious authority such as bell towers of Christian churches and *minars* of Muslim

⁹ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the city," *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92.

mosques, which present a sonic community-gathering quality, these palatial towers bespeak the individuality of the king's presence and his ever-watching eye as the landmark of the city. Like the bell towers of JHU that present the power dynamic in a racialized landscape, the Naseri towers visually and spatially manifest the gender and power politics of the Qajar court in Iran. The Eshratabad tower with its function and unique arrangement of architectural spaces around it casts light on the gendered gaze of the king evident in this complex.

Reading this example along with Diodati's piece complicates our understanding of the mechanisms of surveillance and affect experienced by the watched body. While Diodati's bell towers facilitate the surveilling of the racialized body, the Eshratabad tower demonstrates another layer of watchful gaze associated with gender and body politics of the Qajar king. Unfortunately, we do not hear from histories how the women living in these apartments experienced this spatial hierarchy, and the affect arrays of this tower are lost to us today. However, the very function, scale, and placement of the spaces in this palatial complex present the hierarchy of power and gaze which ought to be clear and legible to the subjects in order to be effective.

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