



Gendered realms. Species of spaces
in the city of Mazār-i Šarīf,
Northern Afghanistan.

Ayfer Durdu

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L'espace de notre vie n'est ni continu, ni infini, ni homogène, ni isotrope. Mais sait-on précisément où il se brise, où il se courbe, où il se déconnecte et où il se rassemble ? [...] Nous cherchons rarement à en savoir davantage et le plus souvent nous passons d'un endroit à l'autre, d'un espace à l'autre sans songer à mesurer, à prendre en charge, à prendre en compte ces laps d'espace.

Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, 1974.

1. Preamble

Human space is made up of discontinuities: borders, oppositions and realms. Afghanistan is riven by such lines. In a city as prosperous as Mazār-i Šarīf¹, people of different ethnic and confessional affiliation avoid intermarrying and are averse to sharing food. But gaps between people of different social standing leave nowadays even more visible marks in the topography and social tissue of the city: spatial rifts of social and economic inequalities.

Another type of spatial segregation pervades Afghan society. Space divides into gendered realms with regard to all aspects of social life: within the house, on the market, at places of leisure and work, as a medium of power relations as well as of sentimental ones. Gender seclusion, needless to say, cannot be reduced merely to culture. It involves a lot of power-related confrontations.

This paper is an attempt at an inventory — alas, certainly not as poetic as Perec's. A number of distinctive spaces in urban Mazār-i Šarīf are described, each of which is deeply affected by gender divides. The inquiry focuses on the production and uses of spaces designated for women. It attempts to shed light on the kind of agency that permeates secluded spaces. This work bears testimony to a time (where women have room for themselves in public space) that may pass fast — a fear shared by many in Northern Afghanistan today.

Data was collected during three fieldwork expeditions for a period of six months altogether. I carried out fieldwork together with my husband, a requirement in Afghanistan to gain access to gender segregated spaces and family networks.

¹The city grew out of a walled village of two hundred houses surrounded by nomads' tents, as the mercenary and adventurer Ferrier retold from his visit in 1845 [FERRIER 1860: 394], and had at most thirty thousand inhabitants in 1880 [KOSTENKO 1880: 157]. See [MCCHESNEY 1991] for a thorough history of Mazār-i Šarīf. The population stayed nearly stable up to the 1950s, when new agendas reshaped the city, as a consequence of which the number of inhabitants perceptibly grew to reach sixty thousand in the mid-1970s [GRÖTZBACH 1975: 416, 420–421]. Spectacular growth arose in the 1980s with people fleeing from the countryside to cities, in the 1990s with the migration from besieged Kābul, and once again, in the period of post-Taliban Western military presence, due to the city's safety and prosperity: the population amounts nowadays to over half a million and possibly up to one million (officially 607,058 [ŠĀRWĀLĪ-E MAZĀR-E ŠARĪF N.D.]).

2. Spatial segregation and gender seclusion

Afghan society is known for the ubiquity of gendered spatial segregation and female seclusion². As a rule, male and female domains need to be kept distinct, separate. Walls, veils and curtains are the prevalent devices in this regard.

House walls define a basic boundary: the street has always been, in the old urban society as well as in pre-Taliban, Taliban and post-Taliban modern times, the arena of men and a source of danger and anxiety for women, where honour, if not physical integrity, is put at risk.

An older woman recalls as if it were yesterday how, being still a young bride (some forty or fifty years ago), she was terrified at the idea of stepping out in the street as her husband was sick and unable to go to the *bāzār* for a while. She confesses to stepping in and out anxiously before she could overcome her fear of being regarded as a debauched person.

Just as walls protect against glances to the inside, the veil shields from similar offences in the wild outer world — which is to say that the veil is a portable wall (Von Moos called it 'the mobile continuation of spatial segregation', [1996: 26]). Some places require the top-to-bottom veil (*čādarī*, which is best known under its literary name of *burqa*). This is the case, for convenience and safety reasons, for most journeys outside of the city, and, to a lesser extent, for the crowded and somehow rather traditional central food market (*mandāī*, lit. *mandawī*); see chapter 5 'Trade spaces' below. Some places explicitly or implicitly forbid the veil for both security and ideological reasons and require women to withdraw or lift it at the entrance: universities, state offices, NGO desks and the like.

A burden for many young (and elderly) women, the *čādarī* relieves them — they say — of unwelcome gazes, either salacious or accusing. It also conveniently allows women to simply put it over their house dress, without having to make themselves up and face social pressure. What's more, by hiding the identity of its bearer, it allows for flirtation and suggestive jokes without consequences, particularly while bargaining with shopkeepers.

A young girl brings a seller to buy her a phone, suggesting that they will then be able to chat endlessly, as do many young lovers nowadays. She gets the phone but disappears for good, her identity being held secret behind the veil.

Another piece of fabric, generally also either blue or white like the common top-to-bottom veil, the curtain (*parda*) epitomises and enforces gender seclusion (*pardabandī*) more truly than the wall. The *parda* is omnipresent in establishments where strangers share accommodation in the same space, such as eating places and Internet cafés. Access is provided to women in such places at the discretion of the owner or the shopkeeper; see chapter 3 for 'Behind-the-curtain spaces' below.

Gendered spatial divides are governed by a simple yet circular rule: sharing spatial intimacy requires being intimate! The key category here is that of *maḥram*³ (and its opposite, *nāmaḥram*).

²In-depth first-hand studies devoted to women's seclusion are nevertheless few in numbers. For a regional overview, see PAPANÉK 1973, WHITE 1977; on Afghanistan see MOOS 1996, BILLAUD 2009.

Unequivocally *maḥram* to one another are those individuals who are prohibited from marrying with one another. One's parents and siblings (as well as any combination of those: PaPa, PaSb, PaPaSb) qualify as such. So do individuals of the same sex. *Maḥram* are also those who are married, and they shall stay *maḥram* as long as they remain married. The same applies for impotent men (*ḥ^wāja*, *kam quwwat*) and juveniles (*kudak*, *nābāliġ*). According to the circumstances, more distant relatives, as well as foster and fictive relatives, may be counted among the *maḥram*. Yet *maḥram* as an attribution applies equally to places whose access, because of the presence of women, is restricted to those individuals who are *maḥram* to them, therefore making these places forbidden to *nāmaḥram* individuals. Thus, *maḥram* may be glossed as 'intimate, private (individuals, spaces)' and 'forbidden to non-intimates, taboo (persons, spaces)' at the same time.

An unmarried young man in his mid-twenties has access to the *maḥram* part of the house of his paternal uncle. He behaves freely in the kitchen, interacts with women of all age and status and even cooks himself an egg; simply because they got 'close' — he argues — when his sister got married into his uncle's house, thereby abolishing the need to avoid any of the women of the household.

Ties of affinity to his uncle's household made him *maḥram* to them, and their house's *maḥram* space available to him. Interestingly, one can become *nāmaḥram* in one's own house: when women gather for celebrations, male members often have to retreat in another part of the house, or leave the house altogether.

A boy waits outside in the cold under the rain, weeping, hidden under a tree for hours because women are celebrating inside!

Cleavage between open and closed spaces is present everywhere. As the following sections will show, spaces of celebration and leisure, like wedding halls, restaurants and parks, or even markets, all exhibit instruments of spatial segregation — separate rooms, curtains, sequential access policies etc. But the most striking feature lies in the ability of segregated spaces to divide and reshape at will.

The simplest example is given by a typical courtyard house (*ḥawlī*). A wall around the house and courtyard defines a hard limit between the exterior and the interior, which is the realm of women and thus *maḥram* (forbidden to non-intimate men) by definition. Women carry out most of their domestic tasks in the courtyard, secured from unwanted gazes⁴. Still, on the occasion of a circumcision feast or for the ritual sacrifice (*qurbān*) of small livestock, as men are required to gather in the courtyard, the space is freed from women and thus becomes *nāmaḥram*, licit to men and forbidden to women. Every house has at least one buffer space, a guest room or dependency (*mihmānḥāna*), to accommodate men while securing avoidance of contact with the home's women. The same space, or a special one, is used similarly to accommodate female guests out of men's sight. Spacious *ḥawlīs* may shelter family quarters of sons and brides, or even more distant relatives. Each

³On the category of *maḥram* in Islamic law schools and jurisprudence, see Alshech 2007: 282, which provides information on border cases like servants, the mentally impaired etc.

⁴Nowadays, new floors are regularly being built on the top of existing houses, at variance with traditional architectural principles. This allows view on adjacent courtyards and has thus become a matter of dispute between neighbours.

of these quarters is open only to those who are *maḥram* to its occupants. Since the nature of a given space is linked to those occupying it at a given moment, the boundaries between permitted and tabooed spaces are likely to change and are by no means fixed in the house's structure.

This logic organises not merely domestic seclusion but spatial segregation wherever it occurs. In order to enforce the spatial separation of people whose presence in the same place is deemed illicit, two basic courses of action may be undertaken: either people are moved away or a curtain is put up.

3. Behind-the-curtain spaces

In Mazār-i Šarīf, and everywhere in Afghanistan for that matter, premises which may accommodate male and female customers have to provide separate spaces. A restaurant, for instance, typically provides three. The large open space next to the entrance, where the cashier-manager sits and dispatches customers when they come in and receives the money when they leave, is usually men-only (*mardāna*). A substantial separate open space (*baḥš-i ḥānawādagī*, *baḥš-i fāmēlī*), located upstairs or at the rear, is devoted to so-called 'families' — in fact groups of customers of mixed gender who are supposed to be *maḥram* to one another. A smaller space is reserved for women (*baḥš-i zanāna*, *jāy-i zanāna*), typically next to the 'family' section. This scheme has many variants. A few eateries for the working class, for instance, accommodate men only — like that celebrated *kunjūd palaw* (assorted steam-cooked rice prepared with sesame oil) shop where my husband always wanted to take me. Most others have two sections: besides the men-only hall, the separate space is either women-only or open to groups of mixed gender ('families'). So-called 'families' are usually only accommodated in the secluded section when no unaccompanied women are already present.

A couple, upper middle class, enters a famous traditional grill house (*kaḇābī*) for lunch and wishes to be seated in the tiny division where women are allowed. Unfortunately, the place already hosts unaccompanied women. They split with regret in front of the curtain, which cuts in two the small room at the back of the main eating hall. They'll eat alone, separated by a curtain made of vertical bands, between which light and glances hardly pass.

Some other places offer a set of tiny sections — divided by walls or simply curtains — to separately host groups of accompanied or unaccompanied woman customers. Curtaining off a space when necessary is by far the most common practice in small, popular places (like cheap eating houses, Internet cafés, ice cream shops, fruit juice shops etc.).



Women's seclusion space in a cheap eating house. October 2011.



A women's seat ready to be curtained off in an Internet café. October 2011.



A waiter in a fashionable pizza restaurant is drawing the curtain of the seclusion space for women and 'families'. November 2011.

Once closed, the curtain delimits a space thenceforth utterly secluded — inside which no unaccompanied male customer is allowed. Left open, it reminds customers that public space is fundamentally a male domain. Reality is somehow in between.

Buḥārā mantū is a workmen's eating house which serves a single dish: a tasty meat-filled ravioli accompanied with chickpeas and yoghurt. Despite the fact that women would never easily enter such a place, packed at noon time with young labourers and journeymen, the rear of the hall features a two-table corner space, which may be curtained off as soon as required. Every time that we sat at a table for lunch, the workmen crowd would stare at us, not so much in a reprimanding way as to express their unease. In contrast, the staff — waiters, cooks and the cashier-manager — behaved quite naturally, moving people out of the tiny corner if necessary, without any sign of bother. Interestingly, the young Uzbek garçon could draw the curtain half-closed across my back in a manner of respect for both the male customers and me, but nevertheless seated a couple of men to the table next to ours within the cramped seclusion space.

Women alone or, more frequently, in the company of either family, relatives, female friends, colleagues or whatever close acquaintances, do spend time in the centre of the city. The purposes are manifold: shopping for food, medication, utensils, clothes and gifts; strolling around, enjoying the crowd and the buzz of the city; meeting with others; paying a visit to holy places; sorting out administrative issues; doing casual selling; and many others. Behind-the-curtain spaces offer a safe

haven where husbands and wives may freely talk, and women can lift their veil and enjoy a kind of privacy in the public.



A 'family' with children enjoying their ice cream. August 2013.

After the engagement ceremony (*nāmzādī*), young couples may be allowed to meet, even regularly, until the marriage process is fulfilled. Modern types of eating houses and cafés and ice-cream shops, which offer either pizzas, hamburgers or Turkish food but most importantly a relaxed and fashionable ambiance, are very attractive to these couples. Attending these premises represents a form of emancipation and allows them to experience what they feel are their well-deserved sweet moments and first steps into marital life. Cheaper and more traditional eateries with curtains, despite lacking the atmosphere that modern establishments provide, offer nevertheless the possibility of intimate encounters within the public space — a mix of privacy and openness —, which is what these couples seem to need and enjoy the most.

Some time in the early afternoon in the large family hall on the upper floor of the 'King', an Afghan-style fast-food restaurant which proudly serves tasteless pizzas and burgers alongside the standard *kābulī palaw*. Tables are subtly set at great distance from each other. An obviously newly engaged young couple occupies a table right in the middle. Their chaperon is neither an aunt nor an elder sister from the girl's side as usual, but two children, a boy and a girl — siblings or nephews, who knows. For the sake of being left in peace for as long as possible, the groom has carefully seated the two children at distance and ordered them a huge ice-cream each.

Being engaged is not a prerequisite for such encounters. Those not yet engaged, or indeed secret young lovers, also frequent these places. At times, the owner spots illegitimate couples from their behaviour and asks them to leave — or even calls the authorities without prior warning.

In many cases families would rather avoid arranging first meetings in their home because of the obligations and responsibility it entails. Cafés and restaurants conveniently provide a neutral space in this regard.

A particularly open-minded (*rawšanfīkr*) married man in his thirties organizes a first meeting between his unmarried elder sister and her suitor in the courtyard of a nice restaurant. He wishes to make sure that the young man has sincere plans and is not forced by his parents to merely fulfill their vows. After sitting for a while, he leaves them with the responsibility of discussing and seeing for themselves what future they could imagine for themselves, his only wish being her happiness — he said.

4. Ceremonial spaces

A notable shift happened in the post-Taliban era. Spaces of celebration and ritual performance have moved from the home to dedicated premises. The reason for that is manifold: a wish to accommodate more guests than regular city houses can afford, competition for social prestige, convenience, the influence of fashion etc. As a result, wedding ceremonies are nowadays mostly held in ceremonial halls, as would other ritual feasts, if it were possible.

The city's new face owes a lot to ceremonial halls, a prominent kind of highly fashionable gender-segregated public space. Most of these premises, which are known as *tālār-i ǰāšn* (ceremonial hall), *sālun-i ʿarūsī* (wedding hall), or simply *huta*⁵ are giant round buildings of grandiose exterior and kitsch interior design.

The huge central hall accommodates from five hundred to one thousand people for meals and entertainment, while adjoining halls and rooms offer gender-segregated space if necessary. Depending on the ritual, the main hall is reserved for either male or female guests. Ceremonies related to the cycle of matrimonial rituals⁶ happen for instance at dawn for men and in the afternoon for women. In other occasions celebrations are attended by men only: circumcision (*ḥatnasūrī*), pilgrims' return from Mecca (*bāzgašt-i ḥuǰǰā*). Other ceremonies are attended exclusively by women: henna application ritual (*šab-i ḥanā*), childbirth celebration (*šab-i šaš*). In short, gender segregation in ceremonial spaces combines temporal and spatial aspects.

⁵The word *huta* refers to a wide range of catering establishments, from cheap eating houses to luxurious wedding halls, which accommodate customers for food rather than lodging.

⁶Details regarding the ritual process are beyond the scope of this paper. It should suffice to note that the main cycle involves: engagement vows (*nāmzadī*), which are rarely accomplished outside the home; formal engagement (*šīrīnīḥōrī*), whose celebration is the responsibility of the bride's side, in spatial if not economical terms; the wedding (*ʿarūsī*), which represents the conclusive part of the ritual marriage; ceremonial presentation of gifts (*taḥt-i jamʿī*), which happens nowadays mostly at the wedding celebration or not at all. The legal marriage celebration (*nikāḥ*) is performed either as part of the wedding or, more rarely, of the engagement ceremony.



Hutal Āryānā, the second highly praised wedding hall of Mazār-i Šarīf after Ālmās. November 2011.

These gatherings share three common features: festive food distribution, ostentatious expenditure and gendered segregation. What follows focuses on gendered spatial segregation with regard to wedding ceremonies.

Following the ban on celebrations other than weddings in public halls⁷ and owing to the fact that weddings are by far the most central ritual obligation in people's lives, ceremonial halls in Mazār-i Šarīf are now almost exclusively devoted to wedding celebrations. Indeed, although wedding halls have mushroomed during the last decade, the premises are constantly overbooked and ceremonies are packed one after the other on the same day.

⁷The municipality promulgated in 2007 a ban on celebrations other than weddings in public halls in order to limit showy displays of wealth and, allegedly, the escalation of ceremonial costs for average families [NAJAFIZĀDA 2007]. Restrictive state policies against rituals of competition for social prestige through ostentatious expenses are not new: in the 1920s, for instance, the reformist head of the State, Amīr Āmānullāh Ḥān promulgated regulations in this regard [NEŽĀMNĀMA-YE NEKĀH, ^cARŪSĪ, ḤATNASŪRĪ 1924 / 1303 H. Š.]; see also POUILLADA 1973. Significantly enough the new ban targeted the celebration spaces and not the expenses themselves.



Ladies and babies at the Ālmās, the wedding hall most in vogue at the moment. October 2012

Men's and women's parts of the festive gatherings in wedding halls strikingly adhere to a basic set of oppositions. The men's gathering is rather short and includes a lot of formal greeting but only limited showing-off and festivities. It basically focuses on the consumption of the substantial, meat-based food. Women's celebrations, on the contrary, span from early afternoon up to, in some cases, late in the night, and are the occasion of intense competitive showing-off and displays of beauty and gaiety amid extremely loud music and almost uninterrupted dances. As men put it: "Wedding is women's entertainment time. Men are merely organizers at their service." The joke's aim is to enforce men's biased view according to which women celebrate the weddings which men arranged. It also underlines the strong difference between the two ritual spaces. The table below summarizes the set of oppositions.

Feature	Men's part	Women's part
time	at dawn	from noon to late at night
duration	short	long
food	lots of meat	little meat
music	subdued	loud
dancing	minor	predominant
performance	formal greetings	competitive showing-off
bridal presence	groom alone	bride and groom
attendants	male only	women & close male kin & male servants

Structural differences between men and women parts of wedding ceremonies celebrated in public halls.

Wedding halls provide an appropriate place for competition over social prestige, which is a prime feature of matrimonial prestation (payments and ritual obligations). The choice of the wedding hall, the number of guests and the level of expenses are all topics much scrutinized and talked about by attendants. The ceremony itself is the occasion for women to engage in a competition for social prestige (*sīyāldārī*), which is acknowledged and voiced as such, through the display of jewellery, stylish make-up and dress, beauty of the body, grace in dancing and power of seduction. As every guest and every important move is scrupulously filmed by a cameraman, the outcome is duly recorded. It is noteworthy that in such a 'public' — though gendered — space, women are very fond of exhibiting nude parts of their body: arms and breast mostly. And they do so as a means of demonstrating their power of seduction to one another. Waiters (*pāyḍaw, gārsun*) are often implicated, willingly or unwillingly, in seduction tournaments of sorts between women.

The wedding cake is being cut and shares will be distributed in small quantities among a selected group of guests. The waiter eventually brings a plate with a sizeable piece of cake to the table. A pretty seventeen-year-old lady boldly declares: 'Oh, see how he's fond of me, he has brought a big share of cake just for me'. An amicable quarrel ensues between the younger and not-so-young but still attractive women at the table, all arguing jokingly for their own attractiveness. The argument ends with the plate slipping from hands and falling carelessly on the ground!

Despite the spatial and temporal separation of men and women's ceremonies, celebrations in wedding halls are nevertheless the occasion of distant encounters and exchanges of glances between yet-to-be-married young men and women.

The bride's brother has a crush on a young lady present at the wedding, whom he would like to propose and eventually marry. He asks one of his sister's friends, who is close enough to her, to have her dance in her company, so that he would be able to discreetly observe how she behaves. The girl does as he said and toward the end of the wedding comes to the boy and asks him: 'how did you find her?' He answers with a smile.

Interactions between members of the opposite sex are likely to happen because close male relatives on both the groom's and bride's side are allowed in the women's party, whether it is held at home or in a wedding hall. Women's celebrations in halls nonetheless contravene sharply to gender seclusion: male waiters and cameramen get in close contact with women during their service. Although male servants are considered *maḥram* by most people, deeply devout women refuse to attend ceremonies in halls on these very grounds.

5. Trade spaces

The heart of Mazār-i Šarīf presents itself as a dense and busy market (*bāzār*⁸) surrounding the Mausoleum. The separation of shops and markets by trade still organizes the market space. Large-scale commercial establishments, either of more 'traditional' *sarāy* type packing together shops around a courtyard or on galleries, or *mārkēts*, which are rather modern in style and in the type of products sold, have multiplied during the last decade and are attracting a good share of customers. The *bāzār* has always been and remains essentially, if not exclusively anymore, a male space.

Due to the fact that it requires unrestricted social interaction, trade, in contrast to other professions which have opened themselves up to women, is still a male prerogative. Shopkeepers, sellers and street traders are all men. Even the lingerie trade, whose customers are women (and not men buying on their behalf), is no exception.

High above sea level, on the other side of the border in Tajikistan's Badakhshan, an elderly man turns to questioning us, in a reversal of roles to which ethnographers are accustomed: 'Tell me, you have just come from Afghanistan, isn't there really any woman seller on markets?' He simply could not believe it and thought that the fellow villager who told him so just embroidered his travel narrative with exotic details.

Exceptions⁹ to the rule are rare: a few highly impoverished women hidden under their *čādarī* sell second-hand wares at the foot of the outer fence of the *Rawza*, like beggars; groups of gipsy (*jōgī*) women trade cheap Indian-style bracelets on the median strips of avenues; and, last but not least, poor widowed women sell home-made bread on the food market (*mandāī*).

A recent initiative of the local Bureau of Women Affairs (*riyāsat-i umūr-i zanān*) further proves the rule: a women-only market place (*bāzār-i zanāna*) opened in 2011 in a location far-off the actual *bāzār*, where women sell handmade products and trade goods to female customers. Men are not allowed inside — and thus, some female sellers are bare-headed and in short sleeves, as one would otherwise only be in private quarters. Shops surround a courtyard — as typical of *sarāys* — and a playground accommodates the children of sellers and customers. Once in a while, sales exhibitions are organized for women who cannot afford or are not allowed by husband or family to run their own shop.

On the occasion of the opening exhibition, the director of the local Bureau of Women Affairs answers media questions. "Women can gain their economic independence by selling their products here. They don't need to own a shop. [...] They can freely trade as men do in the city."

⁸In Afghanistan a *bāzār* is a collection of shops and workshops' — and street markets and peddlers — 'forming a topographic unit' [GRÖTZBACH 1989: 44].

⁹Outside Mazār-i Šarīf, I observed a couple of women sellers trading live chickens and hand-woven basketry on the weekly *bāzār* of Tāšqurgān / Ĥulm. Similar observations were made in Šibirgān [GRACE & PAIN 2011: 267].



Women selling second hand clothes at the foot of the Rawza's outer wall. October 2012.



A sales exhibit at the women-only market (bāzār-i zanāna). October 2011.

Outside the genuine commercial space of the *bāzārs*, women have long carried out trade as peddlers. These female peddlers visit women customers in their home to sell primarily clothing and fabric. In Mazār-i Šarīf, many of them seem to be cross-border shuttle traders. The women-only market initiative and the more traditional peddling activity of women share the same concern of avoiding cross-gender interaction while giving women room to engage in commercial activities. Simply put, whereas in the latter the seller travels, in the former the customer does.

Beauty salons (*ārāyišgāh*) have long been the only commercial space for women held by women, yet located in the immediate vicinity of men-run shops, right on the most central avenues of the city. In the same way that wedding halls have taken precedence over courtyard homes for marriage celebrations, visits to beauty salons before wedding parties have mostly replaced make-up sessions at home.



A bride-to-be and her girlfriend in a beauty salon, deciding on a suitable hairstyle for the wedding ceremony. September 2013.

Shopping on the *bāzār* was almost impossible for women in former times. Shopping on the grocery market (*mandāī*) is men's (adult and teenage males) duty even today. Raising the veil to assess the quality of dairy products is particularly sensitive on the *mandāī*, because the place is considered, far more than other markets, to be a place for men. Shopping for commodities on the regular *bāzār*, on the other hand, has become quite natural for women.¹⁰

¹⁰See also the remarks of Elizabeth White [1977: 35] on the impact of seclusion on regular shopping.



A woman scrutinizing merchandise and bargaining with her veil levered up. December 2011.

Shopping for commodities – like fashionable garments, trinkets, cosmetics, utensils, either for themselves or as gifts — has become for many women in Mazār-i Šarīf a legitimate occasion to go out of the home and enjoy the public space. This type of shopping is mostly performed in small groups of female kith and kin and is slowly turning into a habit for many women. The best occasions are provided by the purchase of commodities as dictated by matrimonial obligations: items to be included in the dowry, the bride's gold set, gifts to the bride's and groom's family and so on. In open-minded families, after the engagement brides-to-be have come to accompany the grooms-to-be to buy the ceremonial presents which will be given to them. Appearing together in the public trade space anticipates their becoming husband and wife and allows for dreaming of being a modern couple which shops as one.

A bride and a groom to be married within the next six months walk toward the *bāzār* with the purpose of buying, as a modern couple should, the future husband's gifts to the future wife. During their cute stroll, they happened to cross the neighbourhood of the young man's close acquaintances, so it appeared when he suddenly begins to walk two or three steps ahead of her. The young woman acknowledges the situation: on the one hand, she thinks, he is nice enough not to walk five or seven steps ahead as conservative men do; on the other hand, he has left me alone behind for the sake of pride. And she gets pretty angry at that. In revenge, when they reach the *bāzār*, she has herself bought two pairs of shoes — instead of one!

Consumption turns surprisingly into a form of agency, whereby women assert their presence in a sphere of social interaction from which they ought to be absent. They may get caught in the net of

consumerism, although less in pursuit of individual accomplishment than for social prestige (*sīyāldārī*) and entertainment (*tafrīh*).

6. Leisure spaces

From Paradise's garden to Luna Parks, a single path runs and connects the conception and use of leisure spaces in and around Mazār-i Šarīf. The present section explores a few features of the garden as a gendered leisure space.

The *Rawza-yi Šarīf* (the Noble Garden), also known as *Rawza-yi Saḥī* (the Garden of the Generous), hosts the mausoleum of ʿAlī, around which the city grew as a regional market place. The square-shaped complex gives the city its cardinal orientation. The garden surrounding the mausoleum is frequented by all. It may pass for the sole genuinely public space within Mazār-i Šarīf.



Families enjoying the park of the Rawza. August 2013.

Men, alone or in small groups, leisurely hang about in the garden, either at the duck pond (*[ḥawz-i] murġābī*), a favourite place, or at one of the many refreshment kiosks, or merely on the stone benches and on the lawns — chatting, idling and watching the passing crowd. Women mostly stroll through the garden rather than enjoying its facilities. They either simply cross the garden as a pleasant walk to reach the part of the city on the opposite side of the *Rawza*, or they walk up to the mausoleum itself and its white marble esplanade, where small groups of people enjoy chatting and sitting. Prayers (*namāz, ṣalāt*), invocations (*duʿā*) and ritual circumambulations also offer their share of devout pleasure. An attraction of which visitors are particularly fond consists of feeding, chasing and having pictures taken among the famous white holy pigeons at the dovecote (*kaftarḥāna*).

Four or five young men appear, having obviously decided, as a challenge, to grab a white holy dove — a difficult and reprehensible task which many nevertheless attempt — and even secretly carry it away. Yells and rebukes from the dove keeper hardly put them off. Although one of the two who successfully captured a poor bird sets it free again out of mercy and

shame, the other seizes the occasion to cross the guarded gate of the *Rawza* unchecked with a holy dove under his vest. What a virile abduction!

The *Rawza* shelters also rare encounters between men and women — the latter duly hidden by the traditional top-to-bottom veil (*čādarī*) — who, sitting discreetly, are able to share the kind of intimacy in public which is elsewhere nonexistent.



A couple in the Rawza. November 2011.

Another type of garden is the object of secular devotion. Planted gardens and orchards (*bāġ, bustān*) have always been the place of choice for leisure purposes. With blossoms in spring and fruits and shade in summer, they offer a pleasant and relaxed space behind their walls. But gardens have become a scarce resource for many city dwellers. Thus, picnicking (*mēla*) in a remote spot in the countryside, usually in the nearby mountains or by a spring, has gained huge popularity. It offers not only fresh air but a welcomed breathing space for women and families: remoteness ensures the required privacy, while at the same time being outside the home, in the open. Groups of men also enjoy such trips for the day, or a day and a night.

Leisure parks (*pārki-tafrīhī*), open to women and families, are yet another kind of leisure 'garden'. The most fashionable ones are the 'Afghan-Turk park' (officially *pārki-tafrīhī-yi dōstī-yi Afġān-Turk*), with Turkish-style exercising equipment, and the *pārki-Ustād 'Aṭā'*, (the park of Mr. [mayor governor] 'Aṭā', officially *Pārki-Mawlānā Jalāladdīn-i Balhī*), a kind of amusement park.

Located five kilometres south of the city centre in a newly built modern residential urban district (*šahraḳ-i rahāyīšī*) named Ḥālīd ibn-i Walīd, which is the private property of the governor himself,

the *Pārki 'Aṭā'* consists mainly of an amusement park and a picnic garden. The gate is barred by concrete blocks and guarded by armed men. Entry is restricted to families and women: no man is admitted on his own. A cheap fee per person is paid at the entry and attractions are pay-as-you-go. The attractions are of the classic type: a mid-size Ferris wheel, a swing ride, a swing boat, a merry-go-round, a bouncy castle, bumper-cars, a small but fancy aquarium, a tiny 3D-cinema and a huge open-air video screen — plus a mosque and a medical point.



At the Ferris wheel in the Mayor's Luna Park. September 2013.

Families like to come for the whole day and have a picnic in the garden. Spending the evening there (up to midnight) has a special savour to it: it is one of very few occasions for women to be out after dark.

On the huge open-air screen, a film unfolds which tells the unhappy story of an oppressed woman. The sitting ground in front of it is completely empty. As we, a group of women, pass by, a unanimous voice rises among us: 'This, we hear and face every day, we have come here to enjoy ourselves, let's go have fun!'

The Ferris wheel turns slowly to allow even more excited and screaming women on board. A girl in the cabin, fed up by the quietness of our company, cries out with joy and passion: "Come on, why are you keeping so quiet, let us scream! And let us shout, and scream and shout as loud as we can! When and where can we scream this way?"

7. Virtual spaces

In a country without railways or genuine cabled telephone, a new means of communication is altering aspects of gender seclusion and spatial segregation in many ways: the massively widespread adoption of the cell phone has given rise to new patterns of social interaction across physical and moral boundaries. This section reviews some of the most significant ones, in the form of short anecdotes.

Once, in the middle of the night, the mother hears murmurs of a conversation intermingled with giggles and whispers. She creeps inquisitively toward the girls' room and eavesdrops at the door. Her elder daughter talks on the phone with a suitor of hers for the first time, while the other girls — a sister and a cousin — whisper advice. After some customary sweet teases and romantic allusions, he finally seriously proposes to her. The next morning, the mother must confess that she caught a cold because she stuck to the door during the whole conversation. Laughter among the girls!

An engaged bride-to-be is abashed at the idea of chatting on the phone with her betrothed and refuses to accept the cell phone which the groom's side included in the engagement presents. The groom-to-be's sisters appeal to the girl's best girlfriend to convince her. The girl agrees to accept the present, although she resolves to call only the sisters. Upon the call, the sisters hand over the cell phone immediately to their brother, who answers. Under the pressure of shame, she is almost voiceless. After a year, though, she is quite at ease and happy to have gained intimacy with her future husband despite his living faraway!

An engaged groom-to-be wants his family to buy his betrothed a cell phone as a present, so he could be able to converse with her before their marriage. His mother strongly opposes the idea on the grounds that people would gossip that the bride is 'morally perverted'. The young man's youngest brother persuades him to disregard his mother's opinion. The mother eventually finds out that the two future married chat regularly on the phone and gets very angry. Her youngest son ultimately talks her into compliance on the argument that, if she hadn't got a cell phone among her engagement presents, the family would have been charged with stinginess, and lost face!

The phone of a pretty and self-confident, albeit unmarried, mid-aged woman rings and hangs up before she can even answer. Again and again. She understands that the caller is one of those guys who try out numbers and hunt girls for phone talks. She calls back. She gives him a good telling-off: 'You're not man enough to load a bunch of credit on your phone and go after girls decently. Go buy yourself phone credits, you miserable!' The day after, the poor guy calls back!

Engaged couples are today expected by many families to chat before marriage and in this respect conversing on the phone is far more convenient with regard to the observation of moral standards than meeting at the bride's home or in 'cafés'. Cell phones offer virtual walls within which legitimate and illegitimate lovers encounter for endless talks, particularly at night. There is still something sensitive to it, although cell phones have now for many come to be compulsory engagement presents. All kinds of chat-ups and even harassment are also part of this game. The breach in spatial segregation and gender seclusion, which cell phones enforce, is in all cases quite real.

8. Shifting boundaries of gendered spaces

As new spaces of social interaction emerge, one is obliged to ask: When do small changes add up to structural ones? As a matter of fact, the emergence of new spaces of cross gender interaction and the increased presence of women in open spaces do not preclude gendered spatial segregation. Moreover, the seclusion of women operates nevertheless as the main mechanism of gender segregation. One may add that, all things being equal, gender segregation has long coexisted with spaces where cross-gender interactions are the rule: state offices and universities.

This is not to say that new spaces do not have deep effects on social relationships. On the contrary, with the shift of wedding celebrations from the home to dedicated premises, the net of reciprocal obligations, which allowed for the practical organisation of the long, costly and work-intensive series of ceremonies at home, definitely weakened. As a further matter, the new sphere of privacy and long-lasting intimate conversations, which cell phones enable between betrothed couples, have already had – as far as one can account for this – a strong influence on the degree of intimacy and the nature of the relationship between young newly married couples.

A structural feature with regard to spaces of social interaction in Afghanistan is rather to be seen, I would argue, in the constant aspiration, at least in some strata of the society, for the advent of a true public space. This is in evidence over a long period in the history of the Afghan press and media, for instance, which tried, and succeeded, many times, to build a kind of public sphere. The pursuit of a public space is equally obvious in the repeated attempts (and failures) to open all social spaces to men and women indiscriminately.

The shifts in the boundaries of gendered spaces, which the sections above documented, result – it seems to me – from antagonistic inclinations and expectations regarding the nature and extent of the public space in the context of Mazār-i Šarīf's post-Taliban urban society.

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Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to Northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group **"Conflict"** will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group **"Migration"** aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the **"Development"**-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network aims to mediate between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at www.crossroads-asia.de.

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