

# The Multifaceted Women of the Mughal Harem: A Historiographical Essay

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## Abstract

This paper aims to explore the dynamism of the Mughal harem and the multifarious pursuits and accomplishments of women operating within the Mughal harem. This paper attempts to engage with the historiographical shifts in the writing of Mughal history, wherein attention was redirected from the political towards aspects of social history thereby incorporating women and assessing their impact in the Mughal period. The paper deals with the analysis of crucial historical works published on the subject of Mughal women's history, issues of gender, identity, gender relations, socio-cultural and religious engagements by women. This paper argues that the history of Mughal India was highly contingent upon the actions, operations and contributions of different women of the royal family and hence efforts should be organised to study the political history of the Mughal period in connection to the personal lives, actions and participation of women in various respects.

**Keywords:** gender, Mughal, harem, historiography

## Introduction:

Mughal historiography has witnessed the evolution of a number of new trends from the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A deeper and more sensitive enquiry into the gender related issues of the Mughal period is among these. From an overarching engagement with the political history and the key rulers of the Mughal dynasty, there have been crucial attempts to investigate the socio-religious and cultural aspects of this period. This widening

interest in the diverse facets of the period has become especially prominent in the works published over the last few decades. Given these widening parameters of enquiry and analysis, this essay proposes to address some of the significant developments in the historical analysis of the Mughal harem- which for the longest time had been loosely perceived as a private female domain, passive and unchanging through the centuries of Mughal rule. The perception of the Mughal harem as

frozen in time, undifferentiated and uniform with respect to its functions and composition have been challenged and questioned through insightful scholarly interventions, the range and arguments of which would constitute the subject matter of this present paper. In addition the paper would be looking into some important female personalities who are being researched in-depth in some recent writings.

There has been a perceivable expansion of interest in reconceptualising the roles, status, potential and contribution of the Mughal royal women through a closer scrutiny and re-examination of sources from this period. The attention towards historicising women's presence and participation in various social, political, religious and cultural processes is not just pertaining to the objective of reintegrating women with the larger Mughal historical context. In fact, steadily enough, historical works have sought to advocate the significance of recognizing how a comprehensive assessment of Mughal history is possible only by incorporating a nuanced understanding of the vibrant and labyrinthine characteristics of the gendered aspects of this period. This essay will portray how notions of a presumed universality of the Mughal women have been quashed in favour of representing a far more complex mosaic of the Mughal history where the public and private, political and personal as well as female and male domains of influence were intermeshed, so as to defy the possibility of isolated analysis.

An expansive archive is at the disposal of a historian to write on almost any aspect of Mughal history. The analysis of these sources, however, determines and reflects the perspective of the historian. Even an approximate estimation of the number of contemporary Persian sources is not quite possible as these are numerous. However, even the crucial ones were not studied and analysed with a gender sensitive lens by historians until the recent decades. The objective to write women's history and draw attention to the contingency of gender issues in the larger assessment of the Mughal period, led historians to revisit the court chronicles, contemporary accounts and biographical writings to investigate the information that could be gleaned from these to reconceptualise and reconfigure the role, participation, significance and impact of the women upon this period's history. Some of the key works in this regard include Babur's autobiographical treatise *Baburnama*, Gulbadan Begum's account of the Mughal period prior to the ascension of Akbar in *Humayun Nama*, Abul Fazl's seminal works *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Akbarnama*, Jahangir's biographical work *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Mutamad Khan's *Iqbalnama-i- Jahangiri*, Lahori's account of Shaj Jahan's reign in *Padshahnama*, Inayat Khan's *Shah Jahan Nama* and Jahanara's *Risala-i-Sahibiyah* among others. Apart from these works produced from within the Mughal court or under the aegis of Mughal royal instructions, a second set of sources relied upon for writing the history of the later Mughal period from the

17<sup>th</sup> century onwards includes the travelogues and commentaries penned down by various European visitors to the Mughal court during the rules of Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. Some of the crucial ones widely referenced for their close attention to the royal women, their lives, living arrangements, various pursuits and accomplishments and their engagement in political and commercial transactions are as follows: Thomas Roe's letters of correspondence with the Mughal court, compiled and edited by William Foster in *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615-19 as Narrated in his Journal and Correspondence*, Francisco Pelsaert's *Jahangir's India: The Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert*, Francois Bernier's *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D.1656-1668*, Francois Catrou's *History of the Mogul Dynasty in India, from its Foundation by Tamerlane, in the Year 1399, to the Accession of Aurangzebe in the Year 1657* and Niccolao Manucci's *Mughal India 1653-1708* in multiple volumes. The second set of works listed here are written in various European languages such as English, French and Portuguese. Although these comprise of important (and often sensational) information about the private lives of the Mughals, these sources suffer from tendencies of fabrication, misinterpretation and exaggeration as some of these writers heavily relied on hearsay information and bazaar gossips to embellish their accounts and also to compensate for their lack or negligible access to the women and spaces about which they were writing.

### The Evolving Historical Understandings of the Mughal Harem

First there is the need to understand what is implied by the term harem. Frequently the term harem has been used to describe the living quarters for women who were related to the royal family. Harem is sometimes interchangeably used to refer to *zenana* which typically describes women's living quarters. The term *zenana* however does not capture the unique and complex characteristics of the royal harem. *Zenana* can be used to describe the secluded section of any household meant to be inhabited predominantly by women and children. The concept of *zenana* also echoes the description for women's segregated quarters in indic languages wherein it is referred to as *antahpur* or *andarmahal* (inner quarters)-signifying the women's living arrangements that were carefully shielded from the male (outsiders') gaze. Harem has been especially distinguished as 'a system whereby the female relatives of a man—wives, sisters, mother, aunts, daughters—share much of their time and their living space, and further, which enables women to have frequent and easy access to other women in their community, vertically across class lines as well as horizontally' (Ahmed 1982: 521-24). This definition by Leila Ahmed captures the essence of the harem without complicating the subject matter by pointing towards the potential of the harem with regard to the variety of activities and functions that were performed in this space.

*Shabistan-e-iqbal* meaning 'harem of fortune' was a term used by Abul Fazl in *Ain-i-Akbari* to describe the Mughal harem.

History of the Mughal dynastic rule in India for the longest time focused on the political and administrative aspects and hence the rulers and the prominent members of the nobility found an exclusive space in such historical writings. Fleeting glimpses of women are found in these histories arising only at moments when they participated in matters of state administration. A departure from this kind of restrictive history and a simultaneous approach towards a more gender incorporative history is visible with the publication of the work *Women in Mughal India (1526-1748)* by Rekha Misra in 1967. Misra's work re-investigates contemporary works in conjunction with colonial writings to unveil the history of some prominent aristocratic Mughal women (Misra 1967). By means of an organised chronological study of the various female relations of the ruling Mughal emperors, Misra sought to reinstate women in the social and political fabric of Mughal imperial history. She initiated the discussion by pointing out that the Chingizi-Timurid traditions gave females the opportunity to exercise some amount of power by taking an active part in politics. This feature should be seen as a sharp contrast to the status and opportunities available to females during the rule of the Delhi Sultans. With the exception of Raziya Sultan who ruled as the Sultan of Delhi- the one and only women in history to have exercised monarchical powers

from the centre of Delhi- the references and discussion of females in this period are typically laced with a tone of derision. Such impressions are evident in the descriptions of certain royal women in the works of chroniclers like Ziauddin Barani's *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi* and Isami's *Futuh's Salatin* written during the Delhi Sultanate period (Sharma 2009: 156). The Mughal women of the royal household however, had a much more enviable position so as to have the opportunity to acquire different kinds of skills and learning and to exercise these in constructive ways. Misra's work is significant as it presented the first compiled account of several royal ladies and described their key achievements in diverse fields through a close reading of the sources.

The subsequent significant benchmark in Mughal historiography with regard to women's historical significance came about with the publication of *The Mughal Harem* by Kishori Saran Lal in 1988. This work is regarded as a pioneering attempt in presenting the history of the Mughal harem as a system/ phenomenon inextricably associated with the history and role of women from this period (Lal 1988). The Mughal harem had been an intriguing factor of curiosity of the contemporary European travellers as well as some later colonial writers and commentators. Their descriptive accounts most often bore a prejudicial perspective of the Oriental harem characterised by lasciviousness and sensuality. The frame of inquiry into the Mughal harem was often set in juxtaposition to the *seraglios* of the Turkish rulers. Although, in

later years this work was reasonably critiqued for its lacunae and inherent prejudicial analysis of the sources, nonetheless it remains an important reference point for tracing the beginnings of engagement with gender issues of the Mughal period. Through a close reading of the sources, Lal presents the evolution of the harem in terms of its composition and complexity from the time of Babur through Humayun, upto the period of Akbar. By Akbar's reign, the harem had become a much more expanded domain with a great deal of internal politics of diversification. With the numbers of ladies residing in the harem being suggested to be close to five thousand in Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*, the number of people managing the administration of the harem also increased in number and complexity. Women and eunuchs were appointed in specialised positions with designated responsibilities. Some of these posts included the *darogas* (matrons), *mahaldars* (chief lady officer), *mushrifs* (superintendents), *tahildars* (accountants) and *begis* (women guards) among others. Lal's work emphasised the exotic appeal of the harem as the place of recreation of the male members of the royal family. The depiction of the harem as a cluster of women valued for their sexual services and alluring sexual appeal has been pointed out as a shortcoming of Lal's work, alleged to be reiterating the wonder and bafflement expressed by most Western observers and commentators on the harem. The variegated activities of the women are not sufficiently

addressed or discussed in this work.

The historical exploration of the Mughal harem continued with greater zeal to unravel the complexities of the harem, the lives the women lived and how their actions impacted the politics of the Mughal state. Through several instances a fresh perspective was gained to argue that the political, the public and the personal could not be clearly segregated in understanding of the workings within the harem. Works of Harbans Mukhia and Ruby Lal respectively, published in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century best represent this historiographical line of enquiry. Mukhia's work *The Mughals of India* published in 2008, sought to challenge the portrayal of the Mughal harem as a sensual one by reviewing the life, etiquette and norms of comportment within the Mughal court and harem. By means of a discussion of the nuances of the harem organisation and the variety of its dwellers within, Mukhia depicted the harem as replete with changing dynamics of power relations across the times of different Mughal rulers. Mukhia traced a decline in women's liberties in terms of their mobility from the rule of Babur to Akbar. By the reign of Akbar, the harem had become more of a "fortress-like institution" (Mukhia 2004). Thus, this work presented the harem as a fluid space with its own potential to enable or inhibit women from participating in the affairs of the state.

Another crucial work to bring about a

significant and sustained change in the approach towards a historical reconstitution of gender dynamics in the Mughal period was Ruby Lal's *Domesticity and Power in the Mughal World: Historicising the Harem* published in 2005. This has presented a very comprehensive and thorough account and analysis of the Mughal harem from the times of Babur to Akbar, suggesting that the systematisation and consolidation of Mughal power and administration in turn influenced the organisation and importance attached to the harem (Lal 2005). The structure and operations within the Mughal harem, however, ensured that the central figure of power and adulation would be the Mughal ruler. Lal's work delves deep into a range of Persian sources and those in other languages to present a comprehensive sense of the Mughal household in its totality and not just the history of the harem's dwellers. Through this exercise she manages to engage with the gender relations and evolving dynamics of power relations by placing the Mughal household at the centre of the historical and cultural analysis. Her work expertly weaves together the changing notions of love, politics of marriage, kinship relations, sexuality and the range of emotions that characterised the evolving context of the Mughal harem. Women's roles as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters are compounded by their keen involvement in state's political and fiscal administration, trading and commercial activities, religious and mystical engagements, martial arts and various other artistic pursuits.

Through her intensive study of the Mughal harem, Ruby Lal has tried to problematize the linear perception and restrictive understanding of the Mughal harem.

### **Personalities and Proficiencies**

This section of the paper would navigate through the range of critical historical writings that have engaged with particular female personalities from the Mughal period. Ira Mukhoty's work *Daughters of the Sun: Empress, Queens And Begums of The Mughal Empire* published in 2018 represents the variety of female relations that gave a composite character to the Mughal harem (Mukhoty 2018). There were wives like Mariyam uz Zamani, Nur Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, the mothers such as Hamida Bano and Harkha Bai, wet nurses like Maham Anga, sisters like Jahanara and Roshanara, daughters like Zeb-un-Nisa and Zeenat -un-Nisa, aunts like Gulbadan Begum as well as other distant relatives, concubines and female dependents. All these varieties of women were not necessarily valued for their sexual availability. In fact they enjoyed respectability and leisure for their status and for a variety of roles and responsibilities. Some of these women wielded exceptional power and influence- they issued various official orders and stamped documents with their own seals called *farman*, *hukm*, *nishan* or *parwana*. These were clear expressions of the women's authority who were disseminating orders and messages under the aegis of the Mughal state.

Some engaged in extensive mercantile activities, entitled to large profits- an excellent example of a Mughal royal woman owning a large ship and running a vast international trading network is Maryam-uz-Zamani, a wife of Emperor Akbar. A range of building activities were undertaken by women who possessed abundant resources from their different modes of incomes. They established gardens, tombs and mosques among other structures. An exquisite structure built at the behest of Nur Jahan was her father Itimaduddaula's Tomb in Agra, sometimes referred to as the precursor to the Taj Mahal. This section will focus on three Mughal women well known and regarded for their excellence in various fields.

### Gulbadan

One of the earliest women to deserve her place in the annals of Mughal history is Gulbadan Begum- Babur's daughter, Humayun's sister and Akbar's aunt. Princess Gulbadan was inspired by Akbar to write the events from memory and experience of the times from Babur to Humayun as she had been one of the closest members to witness the making of the Mughal imperial establishment. Akbar's determination to institutionalise Mughal power through maintaining official historical records as *Akbarnama* led Gulbadan to comply and write the history of the early years of Mughal rule in India in the work- *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah*, better known as *Humayun Nama*.

Historians have viewed this work as the candid memoirs of Princess Gulbadan wherein she affords a rare and intimate glimpse of the workings of the Mughal domestic spaces in the early years of Mughal rule. Through this work she addresses issues of complexity of gender relations, sexual roles, reproductive norms and a wide range of emotions and perceptions of women are deftly woven into the narrative. Ruby Lal has written an insightful article titled 'Rethinking Mughal India: The Challenge of a Princess's Memoir' wherein she not only discusses the context and content of this work, but also points out how this work has been systematically ignored or has remained in the margins in the course of writing Mughal history. Through an analysis of the treasure of information of the public and political life contained in this work she argues that this work is an exemplar representation of the fact that right from the beginning of Mughal rule in India, the private and public lives were never entirely segregated or isolated from one another. Ruby Lal writes about the *hajj* for a set of women organised and led by Gulbadan Begum as evidence of 'desires and agency of imperial women', 'a bold and significant adventure, given the constraints of passage and other restrictive circumstances...' (Lal 2003). This instance was reminisced by Gulbadan and also incorporated in the *Akbarnama*. However, historians paid little attention to this unique trip undertaken by a group of women, which has not been recorded to have happened ever before or afterwards. According to Lal's

analysis, a close reading of Gulbadan's memoirs and its perceptible little use in writing Mughal history, challenges and questions Mughal historiography's tendencies to ignore or marginalize issues of social history which directly engage women with the larger Mughal body politic.

### Nur Jahan

The most well researched female persona from the Mughal period is Nur Jahan, the final wife of Emperor Jahangir, who exercised a lot of power and influence in state affairs. Nur Jahan entered the Mughal harem not as a queen but as a helpmate of other Mughal ladies. Through a use of her charm, intelligent strategizing and diplomatic manoeuvres she attracted the attention of Emperor Jahangir and quickly rose in power and status, becoming his last wife and the chief female presence in the harem during Jahangir's reign. Mihrunnisa was 34 years old and widowed at the time of her marriage to Jahangir and was given the title of Nur Jahan and her rise to a position of power was unmitigated from this time onwards. It is important to point out that Nur Jahan was not a commoner but was related to a significant lineage and was connected to influential people. This becomes especially potent wherein she operated within a family compact referred to as the 'junta' which included her father Itimad-ud-daula and her elder brother Asaf Khan. Some recent historical writings on Nur Jahan have resorted to in-depth investigation

into the personality, accomplishments and literary and visual portrayals of her. Ellison Banks Findly's *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* published in 1993 weaves a political narrative of Mughal imperial history in a bid to situate Nur Jahan and her family members within the Mughal body politic and the larger administrative and military networks of that time. In this work she discusses the preconditions which may have been instrumental in making Nur Jahan such an expert strategist during Jahangir's reign (Findly 1993). In addition, Findly undertakes a close scrutiny of the legends and rumours that were in circulation to piece together the history of how Nur Jahan made use of every opportunity to rise to an enviable position of power and influence. Findly especially highlights that despite abiding by the extant norms of *purdah* etiquettes, Nur Jahan's ambitions and activities were not restricted. Nur Jahan was well known for her business acumen in managing overseas trading enterprises, she definitely influenced and manipulated the running of the state administration (as the emperor, her husband Jahangir is known to have been immersed and disillusioned by addiction, arts and pleasures), she issued a number of royal *farmans* and orders in her name as well as coins were struck with Nur Jahan's name which indeed was her unique achievement as a woman in the Mughal period. Her power and influence steadily eclipsed after the death of Jahangir and the war of succession that ensued. The reconfiguration of power dynamics within the imperial court

after Shah Jahan became emperor, led to Nur Jahan being physically exiled to Lahore where she remained until her death in 1645. However, during her days of glory, Nur Jahan left her mark in various fields of art, aesthetics, fashion, architecture, literature and was even well known as an expert hunter.

Another recent work by Ruby Lal titled *Empress: the Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan* published in 2018 presents crucial research on the personality, encompassing circumstances and the wide range of accomplishments of Nur Jahan. Various aspects of Nur Jahan's life, experiences, her ambitions, aspirations and determination have been explored in this work. This work has enriched the appreciation of Nur Jahan as a fascinating figure and an indispensable case study for looking into the women's and gender history of the period. In Chapter 10 of this book called 'Wonder of the Age', Nur Jahan's accomplishments are minutely noted and recounted with intriguing attention to detail. Her multi-talented pursuits combined with her multi-faceted persona are presented through engaging examples (Lal 2018). For instance Lal describes a unique portrait of Nur Jahan by the celebrated court artist Abul Hasan, a contemporary of the queen. While most conventional paintings depicted the royal ladies in a glamorous and jewelled ideal, Hasan through his evaluation of the feats of Nur Jahan decided to paint her as an exclusively strong and confident woman in a hunting attire with a regal turban as well as adorning her ruby and diamond earrings while

loading a musket. Lal argues that such visual representations of royal women are unique and these provide a rare glimpse to the historian to rethink and reconceptualise women- their position, power and status through the Mughal period.

### **Jahanara**

Jahanara was the eldest and most favourite daughter of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, and sister of Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb. She assumed the title of Begum Saheba or chief queen at age of 17 in 1631 at the time of her mother, Mumtaz Mahal's untimely demise. As the most important female in the harem during the rest of Shah Jahan's reign, she assumed the status and responsibilities as his queen consort and deliberated with her father in matters of politics and other state affairs. Jahanara came to be highly respected as an imperial lady and also for her pious and mystical proclivities expressed through her dedication to the Sufi Qadiriya order. Afshan Bokhari has analysed Jahanara's biographical work *Risala-i- Sahibiyah* wherein she has traced 'the princess's mystical poetic ruminations, the biography of her *pir* Mullah Shah Badakhshi, her relationship with her brother Dara Shikoh (1615-59), her discipleship and initiation into the Qadiriya order, and the intense interiority of her mystical experience and subsequent spiritual ascension' (Bokhari 2008). Bokhari's analysis pays particular attention to issues of identity, gender and religion to portray the complexities of Jahanara's personality traits. Jahanara

performed her duties as a powerful imperial woman while also pursuing her personal interests in uplifting and asserting her spiritual identity. Thus Bokhari has presented the twin personas of Jahanara as an imperial woman and a spiritual mystic represented through her biographical text as well as through the visual depictions in architectural projects undertaken by Jahanara particularly the Jami mosque in Agra and the Mullah Shah Badakhshi Mosque in Srinagar- dedicated to her *pir* (spiritual teacher). Through her life, her assertive position and her contributions, Jahanara actively participated in the political life and influenced the socio-cultural milieu of the period. Supriya Gandhi's work *The Emperor Who Never Was* sheds light on the special nurturing bond between Jahanara and Dara Shikoh demonstrating the nuances of relations between men and women that went beyond the conventionally perceived gender relations in the Mughal period (Gandhi 2020).

### Conclusion

Mughal women's accomplishments are being more thoroughly examined, recognized, registered and accounted for through insightful analysis of contemporary sources and the gender sensitive reading of the Mughal history has become integral to research in this field. The diverse pursuits of Mughal women are now being assessed with renewed zeal to unravel the layers under which the history, relevance and significance of the women from this period had been veiled or concealed from

the historians' superficial gaze for so long.

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