

## SEGREGATION AND AUTHORITY IN LATE-MEDIEVAL INDIA: WOMEN, THE HAREM, AND THE HUMAYUN-NAMA PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

This article provide a glimpse into the complexities of gender dynamics within the Mughal Empire, focusing on the late-medieval period as portrayed in the *Humayun-Nama*. This paper examines how the *Humayun-Nama* illustrates the impact of the Mughal harem on the segregation and authority of women, exploring how this depiction both challenged and reinforced the gender dichotomy prevalent in late-medieval India. The study highlights the enduring patterns of segregation and authority, revealing that the Mughal society largely perpetuated earlier patriarchal structures. Relying on Gulbadan's account, it reveals that how women's roles, including aspects of beauty, love, and motherhood, were reflected and influenced by their societal status and equality within the Mughal harem practices. Similarly, the paper explores why the Mughal Empire implemented specific institutional practices regarding the harem, as described in the *Humayun-Nama*, and how these practices contributed to the construction of gender dynamics and the authoritative representation of women in Mughal society. This inquiry assumed the complexities of women's experiences and the multifaceted nature of their roles within a male-dominated framework of segregation and authority.

**Keywords:** Segregation; Authority; Late-Medieval India; Harem; *Humayun-Nama*; and Gender/Women.

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, binary thinking about gender has profoundly influenced human societies, leading to the marginalization of women. This dichotomy, whether consciously or unconsciously constructed, has perpetuated the notion that women are fundamentally inferior to men. Historical figures and ideal civilizations have contributed to this view by describing women as inherently lacking compared to men. Religious interpretations, such as those from

Genesis, have further entrenched these beliefs, portraying women as subordinate beings derived from men.<sup>1</sup> The Agricultural Revolution, which introduced private property, marked a significant shift, reinforcing patriarchal structures and exacerbating gender inequality. Despite these systemic inequalities, ancient matriarchal societies and the symbolic roles of women in fertility and prosperity highlight their historical significance.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sibte Hassan, *Pakistan me Tehzeeb ka Irteqqa* (Karachi: Danyal Publisher, 1977), 83; Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde, & Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintages Books, 2011), 25-45; Gail Hawkes and John Scott, eds., *Perspective in Human Sexuality* (New York: Oxford university press, 2005), 155- 166. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender:*

*Biology in a Social World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> The intellectual legacy of the Greeks like Aristotle asserted that "female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities," while the *Hippocrates'* doctrine also narrated that "there are two types of seeds, a weak or female one, and a

Modern perspectives, including those from Simone de Beauvoir and contemporary feminist scholars, challenge these traditional views by emphasizing the equal genetic contribution of both sexes (and other gender variants or contemporary gender categories) and questioning patriarchal and traditional/historical narratives.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the *Humayun-Nama* by Gulbadan Begum provides a unique lens through which to explore women's segregation and authority within the Mughal harem, offering valuable insights into the gender dynamics of late-medieval India.

In late-medieval India, power was predominantly controlled by men, relegating women to subordinate roles due to deeply entrenched societal norms. The Mughal harem, as depicted in the *Humayun-Nama*, exemplifies how women were systematically excluded from positions of power and influence, marginalized by cultural traditions and monarchic evaluations. This patriarchal society valued power and perceived weakness as a significant flaw, a notion that became deeply ingrained in the cultural heritage imposed on women.<sup>4</sup> The amalgamation of Indus and Islamic civilizations, both male-centric in their nature, reinforced this gender bias, making it challenging to question or alter these roles. From the Mauryan and Gupta periods through the 11<sup>th</sup> century, women were often confined to roles as household servants or entertainers, reflecting their low status and limited agency.<sup>5</sup> The *Humayun-Nama* offers a critical perspective on how the harem's practices and broader societal views shaped women's roles and representation. Within the Mughal Empire, the persistence of gender dichotomy and ill-representation stemmed from a patriarchal legacy inherited from ancient Indian, Islamic, and Timurid-Mongol influences. This male-dominated power structure shaped the way women were perceived and

treated. Evaluating the Mughal society and the harem through historical and philosophical lenses reveals the impact of these institutions on women's representation, identity, and roles, including practices like wet nursing and their broader implications on gender dynamics.

All the aforementioned discussion can depict the picture of Medieval India in terms of the under-represented status of women systematically because of these reasons women were always unsubscribed from the application of muscle as power. The old Adam and Eve version of reality the "women are the enemy"<sup>6</sup> was plumb present almost everywhere in the Mughal Empire, because masculinity occupied a higher ranking than femininity in the gender hierarchy characteristics of Mughal society; that is hegemonic masculinity, the culturally dominant idea of masculinity centered around authority (the king), warrior, strength, heterosexuality, and paid work. Although, nepotism and favouritism were plumbed in the medieval society of India. The wealth of documentation (Gulbadan account) on women in the Mughal imperial household shows, that women were often as powerful as their husbands acting (status-based) as patrons of art, and architecture, playing a role in government and intervening in political matters as told by Gulbadan. In other words, the representation of one especially women was status-based either about woman to man or man to woman.<sup>7</sup> Besides these, racism, classism, and sexism were glaringly obvious in Mughal society.<sup>8</sup> As feminists like Bell Hooks explained in her book, that class is much more than Marx's definition of relationship to the means of production, the class involves your behaviour, your basic assumption about life, how you are thought to behave (imagined order), what you expect from yourself and others.<sup>9</sup>

strong one, which was male."<sup>2</sup> However, Beauvoir pointed out that the Mendel's statistical laws proved that in the biological inheritance, the hereditary traits transmitted in equal proportion from their parents. She further said that the point is clear that "in this meeting neither gametes takes precedence over the other but both the gametes sacrifice their individuality." For more details see Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender*; and Bill Hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* (USA: South End Press, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 24; Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 161-173.

<sup>4</sup> Rehana Ghadially, ed., *Women in Indian Society: A Reader* (New Delhi: Sange Publications, 1988), 20-24.

<sup>5</sup> Mohamed Taher, ed., *Mughal India* (New Delhi: Anmol Publication, 1997), 47.

<sup>6</sup> Hooks, *Feminist Theory From Margin to Centre*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Gulbadan Begum, *Humayun-Nama: The History of Humayun*, vol., 1 trans. Annette S. Beveridge (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications), 1974.

<sup>8</sup> K. S. Lal, *The Mughal Harem* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988), 14 and 52.

<sup>9</sup> Hooks, *Feminist Theory From Margin to Centre*, 3.

Contrarily, it should not mean “all women are oppressed” in the Mughal harem or society as modern feminists thought; because there is a class in the Mughal harem, who indirectly or sometimes directly influenced the Mughal politics.<sup>10</sup> According to S. K. Lal because of the division of society, the harem had a major disadvantage in terms of participation in the outdoors, and the women inside were generally submissive.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, sexist discrimination, exploitation, and oppression, most sources expostulate that all women were not oppressed in the Mughal society in general and harem in particular. Gulbadan aptly said, that there were women who indirectly or sometimes directly influenced the Mughal politics, court, sovereignty, and trade.<sup>12</sup> For example, the following are notable for their contributions, Esan Daulat Begum (wife of Yunus Khan),<sup>13</sup> Khanzada Begim (Babur’s sister)<sup>14</sup> Maham Begum (the Shia wife of Babur), Hamida Bano Begum (the wife of Humayun), Dildar Begum (wife of Babur), Nahida Begum the daughter of Qasim, Babur’s foster brother, Mah-Chuchak Begum (wife of Humayun), Gulbadan the daughter of Babur, Bega Begum (empress consort of Mughal Empire)<sup>15</sup> Nur Jahan (Mihrunnisa),<sup>16</sup> Mumtaz Mahal (the wife of Shah Jahan),<sup>17</sup> Jahanara Begum<sup>18</sup> and Zebunnisa (eldest daughter of Aurangzeb)<sup>19</sup>, etc. Yet from this perspective, it would be rightly said that the sovereign power of the Mughal’s elite women was misinterpreted. Because female designation is defamatory not because of her creation (or evolution) as a woman but because of her sex.<sup>20</sup> Correspondingly, man held sway sovereign authorize himself, therefore, his sexual lust made his psyche sleep with slaves or courtesans and he became polygamous.<sup>21</sup> The ladies of Royalty enjoyed an exalted position in the Mughal court, wars, culture, and politics. However, it is unequivocal that women in the Mughal Empire generally remained subject to a broad range of discrimination imposed on them

through the collusion of rigid custom, gender bias, male chauvinism, systematic subordination, determined by the force of patriarchy across classes, regions and the rural-urban divide as well as religious interpretations and entrenched feudal system.

Intriguingly, the dichotomy<sup>22</sup> between the two entities was also explicit in the Mughal harem and society. As Prokhovnik explains dichotomous thinking inherently underlines a range of social practices and cultural values that result in the subordination of women.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, if we apply the feminists’ dichotomous thinking to the Mughals as Gulbadan asserted, the political significance of dichotomous thinking is that it maintains inequalities of power as male supremacy over the authorities in the form of governance or Emperor. It is also explicit and unequivocal that the author befittingly explains the status and role of the harem but could not talk about the life and rights of non-harem or classism, racism, and sexism; therefore, the present study would like to critically evaluate the harem, its political and non-political role in order to explain some basic questions of the present article. **In what ways does the *Humayun-Nama* illustrate the impact of the Mughal harem on the segregation and authority of women, and how did this depiction challenge or reinforce the gender dichotomy prevalent in late-medieval India? How did the portrayal of women’s roles, including aspects of beauty, love, and motherhood in the *Humayun-Nama*, reflect and influence their societal status and equality within the context of Mughal harem practices? Why did the Mughal Empire implement specific institutional practices regarding the harem, as described in the *Humayun-Nama*, and how did these practices contribute to the construction of gender dynamics and the authoritative representation of women in Mughal society?**

<sup>10</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Annette Susannah Beveridge, trans., *Babur-Nama* (Memories of Babur), (London: LUZAC and CO, 1921), 1:43.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-37 and 85.

<sup>15</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 1-9, 58, 62-67 and 112.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Rogers, trans., and Henry Beveridge, ed., *the Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri or Memories of Jahangir* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1974), 1:265-57.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-25.

<sup>18</sup> Zeenut Ziad, ed., *The Magnificent Mughals* (New York: Oxford University press, 2002), 36.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Beauvoir, *the Second Sex*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>22</sup> Raia Prokhovnik, *Rational Women: A Feminist Critique of Dichotomy* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

### Literary Contributions and Intellectual Pursuits

In Mughal society, the intellectual and literary contributions of women have often been overlooked due to prevailing patriarchal norms. Historian Ruby Lal argues that Princess Gulbadan Begum's pioneering journey to Mecca in 1576 challenged these norms, asserting female agency and highlighting its significance in the broader struggle for gender equality.<sup>24</sup> K.S. Lal notes that during a time when many nobles and even kings were uneducated, the education of harem ladies was deemed inconsequential. However, Mughal royal women painted a different picture. They not only received education but also participated in political activities, often challenging their male counterparts.<sup>25</sup> Dalia Roy supports this view, emphasizing that Gulbadan Begum, born in an era when women's education was undervalued, defied societal norms by receiving education and engaging in political activities.<sup>26</sup> In the work of Shahnoza Nasimovna Ahmedova, Gulbadan Begum's "Humayun-Nama" is described as a unique historical work that, despite being incomplete, provides invaluable insights into the era. Gulbadan's proficiency in Persian and Turki, her poetic temperament, and her maintenance of a personal library in the harem all highlight her intellectual pursuits. Her memoir, written at the request of Emperor Akbar, stands as a significant revolution in women's history and writing, reconnecting missing historical links caused by patriarchal dominance.<sup>27</sup> Despite historical debates, accounts of women were often written by women themselves, who were part of harem life, making Gulbadan Begum's firsthand account particularly significant. This work challenges the conservative ideology that sought to suppress women's voices, showcasing the vital intellectual and literary contributions of Mughal women.

As one of the fine characteristics of the Mughal Empire the record keeper Empire, education

was throughout remained a prestigious play. Besides being active in politics of the epoch, a fairly important activity of ladies of royalty or Harem was their active interest in literary pursuits. Narcissistically, the ladies of the Mughal royalty were plumb educated and the author aptly asserts that they occupied themselves in reading, writing and comprising verses. Mughal emperor always hired some experienced old person especially for the education of their women (upper class); she was entitled Atun Mama. Interestingly, the author told that the in-charge of Harem, Sati Khanum, knew the art of reading Quran and was expert and familiar with Persian literature under the instructions of Begum Sahiba. Further, we have reference to female Waqia Navis also who would read out news letters in emperor's presence.<sup>28</sup> But the social hierarchy in Mughal patriarchy didn't allow the gender equality as contemporary feminists believe because in Mughal society or Harem theoretically higher class women and men are the powerful, women of lower race or class were powerless, adults the power, children the powerless, white peoples the powerful, and non-white or black the powerless.

Although, the adaptation of royal Childs by respective eldest ladies remained connected to educating them accordingly as has also been discussed by Gulbadan extensively. For instance, the adaptation job a consistent theme throughout in Mughal Empire, Maham Anga to bear and educate Gulbadan. Begum. Conversely, Babar made it in other place that adoption of royal children were leads by high degree slave or servant accordingly.<sup>29</sup>

### The Mughal Harem: Dynamics of Segregation and Authority

It is believed among the hyper and sceptical historians and thinkers that the harem (or *Zananah*) was considered a powerful institution through where the other institutions took their instructions from that is the King, as a patriarch was invulnerable but S. K. Lal had postulated that it is generally accepted that

<sup>24</sup> Ruby Lal, "Historicizing the Harem: The Challenge of a Princess's Memoir," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 3 (2004): 590-616; and *Vagabond Princess: The Great Adventures of Gulbadan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024).

<sup>25</sup> Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 14-20 and 52.

<sup>26</sup> Dalia Roy, "Gulbadan Begum: The Zenana View of the Mughal Period," *International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature* 6, no. 1 (2018): 503-510.

<sup>27</sup> Shahnoza Nasimovna Ahmedova, "Humāyūn-Nāma" By Gulbadan Begim Is A Magnificent Contribution To the Field of Literature," *International Scientific Journal Theoretical & Applied Science* 91, no. 11 (2020): 108-110.

<sup>28</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 130-132, 205-208.

<sup>29</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 8.

harem had a major disadvantage in term of participation in the outside world and that the women inside were general passive.<sup>30</sup> Although, the safety and protection of the *Zananah*, however, did not stop Mughal women from direct and indirect involvement in public affairs. In the male-centric history, women were often out of politics in Mediaeval India, but the role of Mughal women in politics was magnificent and the ladies of harem enjoyed an exalted position in the Mughal society. Interestingly, honorific titles were given to some of them respectively. Rekha Mishra aptly pointed out some popular titles in her book like the Akbar's mother enjoyed the title of "Miriam Makani" (the Mary of both the worlds), the wife of Jahangir was known as Nur-Jahan (the light of the world) and the beloved wife of Shahjahan popularly known as Mumtaz Mahal (exalted one of the place).<sup>31</sup>

Notwithstanding, the orientalist and indologists debates over the women dichotomy, sexism, and binary thinking, historians claimed that whilst the queen played the public political role in the Mughal sovereign power, Nur Jahan (Nur Jahan League)<sup>32</sup> was an exceptionally powerful woman.<sup>33</sup> Being the Jahangir's wife, she ingrained herself as a formidable organ of the imperial households, female townships<sup>34</sup> and enjoying strong political influence over the emperor.<sup>35</sup> But the feminist critique that "queens were neither male nor female: they were sovereigns."<sup>36</sup> Thus, we should say that softness and inferior constructed attitude of the ladies were glaringly witnessed in the harem. Women have to follow the men command and willingness. During the time of Akbar, the ladies like, Miriam Makani, and Gulbadan Begum wishes to go on pilgrimage to Mecca but that need the king's will and his sovereign power to conciliate with the Portuguese<sup>37</sup> because man consider himself as divine power.

Besides, Euro-centric observers narrated that since Shah Jahan era, the Mughal autocrat were no longer sanction their daughters to marry. For instance, Francois Bernier (a French doctor) recount that Jahanara supported her brother's claims as a next king, in order to allow her to marry. However, this promise justify that the Princess marriage rare occurrence in Hindustan.<sup>38</sup> But we never judge the female politics and their sovereign myth either because the historical discourses represent like that or the existing male-centric society do not open that Pandora box.

It was also a fact that the Indian society was polygamous and V.D. Mahajan asserts that elder wife had more respect but the mother of first son, who would be controlled the succession line or the heir of the dynasty. The author further argued that although women have some rights in marriage but being a patriarchal structure, women in harem did not have direct access to power. Accordingly, they were bound to make their way either by being favourite consort or through her sons i.e. elder and talented.<sup>39</sup> While Rekha Mishra befittingly argued that the Petti-coat government (1560s BCE) government, led by Maham Anaga did not appeal much. However, it showed that how Akbar took tremendous advantage of Maham Anaga's position. And how he did not allow himself to be dominated by the ladies of the harem. So it would not be wrong to say that how systematically the talents of the women exploited by the male to fulfil their ends. Truly, some women, exploited their extraordinary talents in order to fully control over the king's power. The best example of Noor-Jahan was a one like de-facto ruler who totally controlled the person of the emperor, sovereign and family members. In contrast, Rekha Mishra explains that Nur Jahan's influence on Jahangir was

<sup>30</sup> Lala, *The Mughal Harem*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Rekha Mishra. *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748 A.D.* (Delhi: Oriental Publisher, 1967), 59-60.

<sup>32</sup> Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Lisa Balabanlilar, "The Begims of the Mystic Feast: Turco-Mongol Tradition in the Mughal Harem." *Association for Asian Studies* 69, no. 1 (February 2010): 123-147.

<sup>34</sup> Ziad, *The Magnificent Mughals*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, 36.

<sup>36</sup> Beauvoir, *the Second Sex*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Abu'l-Fazl, *The Akbar Nama*, trans. H. Beveridge (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 2000), 37-38; and *Humayun-Nama*, 58, 69 and 73. Pilgrimage were undertaken by Muslim and Hindus alike and most considered it a duty. Gulbadan and Salima Sultan Begum, such prominent women undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca from 1576 (left for Mecca) to 1582 (returned to Fatehpur Sikri).

<sup>38</sup> Balabanlilar, "The Begims of the Mystic Feast," 143-44.

<sup>39</sup> V. D Mahajan, *India Since 1526* (New Delhi: S. Chand and Company Limited, 1996), P. 80.

emotional in nature, it will be completely unfair to attribute purely political ambitions to her acts.<sup>40</sup>

In similar vein, historically the Mughal Empire bestowed the harem heritage from their progenitors the Timurid and Mongolian. For instance, in the Timur's epoch, the Central Asian elite women dragged on to engage in tribal governing councils and act as governor for their descendent, and enact distinct roles in public ceremonies.<sup>41</sup> Along these lines, Gulbadan unfold that in his early ruled, Khanzada Begum's sacrificed<sup>42</sup> for Humayun. Besides she served as leading lady in the harem, while maintaining the legacy of sovereign women since Babur or Timurid.<sup>43</sup> Therefore she was dubbed as *Padshah Begim*, or Lady King.<sup>44</sup> Abul Fazl, insinuate that in the Fatehpur Sikri, the harem was more conservative and isolated than the Timurid-Mughals. The construction of a new personal and inner space for the silent majority, was quite far from the public world of politics and commerce.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Gulbadan declared that the harem at Kabul as comparatively free, because the women were not veiled and practiced different customs.<sup>46</sup>

However, Ayesha Jalal argue that in the wider sense, even though the Mughal dynasty did not contribute to improving the status of women but substantial authority were given to women of the *Zenana*.<sup>47</sup> While Rekha Mishra postulates that "the Mughal harem has been considered to be more organized than that of the Turkish and Lodi sultans."<sup>48</sup> Thus it will be apt to state that if we apply the perceptions of Adam and Eve version of reality or women are the enemy, on the Mughal's sovereign women myth, it quite make sense that the Mughal society was masculine in nature. The structure of that society was based on the man powers, manipulations and representations. The uncertainties in Humayun's

era made him to enter into matrimonial alliances with other rulers of Central Asia.<sup>49</sup>

Above all, there were also a three-fold classification of females existed such as *nikahfied*, concubine and inferior. Gulbadan narrated that "many Begums were there and sisters and ladies of rank (*Begaha*) and of position (*aghas*) and other ladies (*aghachahs*) and musicians and reciters."<sup>50</sup> There was no common-law marriage for concubines and other inferior wives. So the harem life would be dubbed as a sweet will of their husbands. For example, some historians believe that the four-wife concept was an uncomfortable one for Akbar. Interestingly, "Badaoni criticizes Akbar for openly claiming that he had married many wives, both free-born and slaves and had not restricted to the legal number of four."<sup>51</sup> Secondly, in the female township there were also courtesans (or charmers of India)<sup>52</sup> and women slaves. The main works of the courtesans was to contact men and women with each other.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, their exploitations in the sexual context were really high because in *Ain-i-Akbari*, Abul Fazl argued that a Mughal noble, Ismail Quii Khan kept 1,200 women. It is, however, difficult to assert if they too kept free wives beside the legal four, as the royalty did. In their harems were mainly the concubines and the female slaves that accounted for the strength.<sup>54</sup>

Hence, Mughal women contributions remained of immense importance in the politico-culture, social order, business, education, in wars and strategy-making, hunting, pilgrimages, as mediators and reconciliatory and peacekeepers, as a source of amusement; dancer, story-tellers, entertainers and as guards, of their times by different ways and means as follows:

<sup>40</sup> Mishra, *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748 A.D.*, 21-33 and 40.

<sup>41</sup> Balabanlilar, "The Begims of the Mystic Feast, 126.

<sup>42</sup> Begum, *Humayun-nama*. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Ziad, *The Magnificent Mughals*, 31.

<sup>44</sup> Balabanlilar, "The Begims of the Mystic Feast," 133.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>46</sup> Begum, *Humayun-nama*. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2011), 36.

<sup>48</sup> Misra, *Women in Mughal India*, 11.

<sup>49</sup> Muni Lal, *Humayun* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), 224.

<sup>50</sup> *Begum, Humayun-Nama*, 37.

<sup>51</sup> Shadab Bano, "Marriage and Concubinage in the Mughal Imperial," *Indian History Congress* 60 (1999): 356-57.

<sup>52</sup> In the Court chronicles like *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* refer to them as 'charmers of India', who 'kept up the excitement of the assemblies. See, *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, 1:48-9.

<sup>53</sup> Shivangini Tandon, "The Presence of the Marginalized in the Life Sketches of the Ruling Elites: Slaves, Musicians and Concubines in the Mughal "Tazkiras," *Social Scientist* 43, no. 5/6 (May-June 2015): 69.

<sup>54</sup> Bano, "Marriage and Concubinage in the Mughal Imperial," 357.

### The Social Status and Political Agency of Women in the Mughal Harem

Despite the contemporary debates in the discourse, accounts of women in the Mughal harem have often been written by the women themselves, whose subjective experiences and perspectives were integral to harem life. Among these, the most significant and primary sources/account is that of Gulbadan Begum. Being daughter of Babur, sister of Humayun, and aunt of Akbar, she possessed a privileged position of “giving intimate glimpses”, and to describe the real position of women in India. Interestingly, her tremendous memories were quite valuable as a rare account of domestic life and takes us through the complex set of relations in which women of the upper class or nobility were directly involved in the domestic sphere. Gulbadan glaringly asserts in *Humayun-Nama* that at one time, her brother Humayun asked her and his mother to go to his brother Hindal and reconcile the latter to him. In another place and epoch, old aunt of Humayun worked for the peace between Kamran and Humayun.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, Gulbadan has narrated the event of Humayun’s marriage to Hamida Bano Begum which provided a glimpse into the male-female relationship of the time.<sup>56</sup> So in the light of Gulbadan discourse of women’s and harem activities therein, specifically Hamida Bano Begum’s conduct so full of modesty, humility and dignity. Following a thorough analysis of *Humayun-Nama*’s narrative also reveals that the public and private life were not separate, but rather the private life was perhaps used in order to get rid the multiple problems of the public sphere. However, male supremacist ideology made women to believe we are valueless. Mughal-harem was compartmentalized and an apartment was assigned according to one status. If we apply feminists thought on women’s life in harem so sexism, racism and classism divide women from one another. As rightly said by Bell Hooks that women had been socialised to accept a sexist or male dominated ideology that stressed such differences.<sup>57</sup>

In the Mughal harem, women’s lives were often depicted as centered around sexual allure,

exploitation, and oppression. However, the harem was not merely a space for wives and concubines but included a range of dependents, servants, and slaves. Gulbadan’s account reveals that women in the harem occupied distinct quarters, not only for high-ranking women but also for their attendants and slaves. For example, female guards known as Urdubegis, who were primarily from Central Asia and Kashmir, were actively involved in protecting the emperor’s private quarters.<sup>58</sup> From Gulbadan’s account, it becomes evident that the harem represented a complex intersection of the public and private spheres, with the public realm being associated with power and control, while the domestic realm was perceived as a subordinate space.<sup>59</sup> Contrary to the notion of seclusion, Gulbadan notes that Turki women in Hindustan maintained more openness and freedom in receiving visitors compared to their counterparts in other Muslim and Hindu households in India.<sup>60</sup> This detailed analysis highlights the multifaceted dimensions of women’s social status and political agency within the Mughal harem, revealing the complex interplay between institutionalized gender roles and individual agency.

### Women as Entertainers and Patrons: Roles in the Court and Harem

Interestingly, the discourses on the Mughal either exaggerated or misinterpret while tracing the concepts of beauty and love. It is considered that in the existing structure of society, for girls, love justifies desire,<sup>61</sup> and/or “the word love has not at all the same meaning for both sexes.”<sup>62</sup> In the context of the Mughal society, Jalal says that Mumtaz Mahal, the Shah Jahan’s wife was not as sovereign as Nur Jahan. She further added that “She had to die trying to bear Shah Jahan’s fifteenth child, and her death became the inspiration behind the emperor’s patronage of the Taj Mahal.”<sup>63</sup> However, in a broader way, the Mughal society, the poor women of labor class, after the birth of child the very next day the mother would be found moving about and doing works.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, Nietzsche in ‘*The Gay Science*’ rightly narrated that “what woman means by love is pretty clear, total devotion (not mere surrender) with soul and body, without any consideration or

<sup>55</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 138-139, 160-161 and 176.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 150-151.

<sup>57</sup> Hooks, *Feminist Theory From Margin to Centre*, 84

<sup>58</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 39-40.

<sup>59</sup> Prokhovnik, *Rational Women*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Scott, *Perspective in Human Sexuality*, 90.

<sup>62</sup> Beauvoir, *the Second Sex*, 273.

<sup>63</sup> Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, 36.

<sup>64</sup> Misra, *Women in Mughal India*, 132.

reserve.”<sup>65</sup> In view of the fact that beauty is not universal or changeless and nor is “beauty” a function of evolution.<sup>66</sup> In short, the laddish binary thinking designs the individual in the masculine viewpoint.

Singing and dancing were considered the women’s profession in Mughal India and these groups were essential part of the Mughal Court. Notwithstanding the education and politics, a multi number of dancing girls were maintained by the Sultan or the king as well as by Harem ladies or king’s ladies to amuse and entertain themselves. Gulbadan explains that there is explicit evidence of dancing girls being sent outside India to Afghanistan (Kabul) for great Begums. These were best of dancing girls of Ibrahim Lodi.<sup>67</sup> But according to Bernier, all Mughal emperors, Nobles and Amirs enjoyed the dance performance of these girls some less some more, but at all. They were full involved in the activities of marry making and licentious life women were the only object through whom they satisfied their sexual appetite.<sup>68</sup>

In addition, at that time, it was gay social fashion (homos-sexuality), it helped the ladies to run the days into nights by tale-telling (story-telling time passing) to masters they loved.<sup>69</sup> Along with entertainment, during Babar time and followed subsequently arranged, the ladies to go out of the city to garden of the audience hall, to present thanks-giving for the success of warriors. Subsequently, the princesses would also make the same sense of thanks-giving to the giver of victory.<sup>70</sup>

In fact, the dancing girls in the harem enjoyed high status and they were rewarded with gifts distributions as well. As pointed out by Gulbadan Begum, she was chosen as distribution manager by Babar to distribute the gifts or war booty among them accordingly. Thus we should say that it might be right notion that “men make gods and women worship them.” It is men who make a decision about the gender of their supreme divinities

but the position of woman in the male-centric society is always the one they designate her while she never imposed her own law.<sup>71</sup> The most illustrative example is that, during the cheerful days of Jahangir and shah Jahan, they enjoy their lust and germinate *Kenchens* or *Nautch* girls used to play in the court euphoria and would keep the joyful monarch awake half the night with their voluptuous dances and agile antics.<sup>72</sup>

### **Women in Warfare, Strategic Decision-Making, and Diplomacy: The Role of High-Birth Status in Mediation and Peace-making**

In times of crisis, women played crucial roles in strategic decision-making and military arrangements. For instance, Haram, the wife of Kamran, swiftly mobilized over five thousand troops for the army of Badakhshan and sent additional reinforcements when necessary.<sup>73</sup> This exemplifies how high-birth status women could significantly influence wartime decisions. Janet Sayers' argument on sex-role theory highlights how boys and girls learn their social roles through interaction, which is shaped by societal constructs of bravery and aggression. Traditionally, masculine warriors were expected to demonstrate both courage and clemency.<sup>74</sup> Gulbadan’s accounts of Shah Tahmasp’s hospitality towards the exiled Humayun further reflect the expected magnanimity. In contrast, Humayun’s perceived focus on luxury over warfare, as noted by Gulbadan, suggests a disconnect between his personal inclinations and the demands of leadership. Despite his lavish coronation celebrations, Humayun’s marital alliances, including his union with Hamida Bano Begum, who later gave birth to Akbar, were marked by political and social tensions. This indicates that Humayun’s strategic and personal decisions were often overshadowed by his emphasis on pleasure and desire, impacting his effectiveness as a ruler.<sup>75</sup>

Therefore, status occupied a tremendous place not only in medieval Indian history but all over

<sup>65</sup> Beauvoir, *the Second Sex*, 273; and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>66</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are used against women* (New York: HarperCollins e-Books, 1991), 12-13.

<sup>67</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 46-47.

<sup>68</sup> Francois Bernier, *Travels in The Mughal Empire* (London: Archibald constable and company, 189), 139.

<sup>69</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 8.

<sup>70</sup> *Humayun-Nama*, 7-8.

<sup>71</sup> Beauvoir, *the Second Sex*, 111.

<sup>72</sup> Stanley Lane Poole, *Aurangzeb* (Lahore: Sindh Sagar Academy, 1893), 101.

<sup>73</sup> *Humayun-Nama*, p. 47.

<sup>74</sup> Janet Sayers, *Biological Politics: Feminist and Anti-Feminist Perspective* (London: Tavistock, 1982), 148-149.

<sup>75</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 32, 69 and 52-53.



the world. Status either by birth or occupied through matrimonial alliances, remained a consistent pattern in power exercising and reconciliation. Gulbadan argued in her account, the status of women by birth was important. The mother of Kamran was of low birth and thus provoked unrest. Similarly, Dildar was a lady but not a begum; by birth. In fact, the advice of high status women was significant as Gulbadan pointed out that Turkhan Begum, a good birth lady, advised Kamran to love her wife Haram Begum; it shows good birth status has role even in personal matters. Similarly, Khanzada Begum, the wife of Babar, was responsible for negotiating the surrender of Askari, making several trips between the warring brothers. Another example is, Gulbadan Begum, Maryam Makani and Salima Sultan Begum proved successful in bringing about a reconciliation between Akbar and Salim. The same case happened later on when Khusrau rebelled against Jahangir, but this time the mediator role of harem women failed including Jahangir mother who tried to comply with the situation.<sup>76</sup>

Conversely, the apartments in the Mughal harem were assigned based on rank, with foreigners knowing which women were in which areas. This system showed how social status was used and exploited, mirroring similar practices in Islamic history. Women's social status was manipulated in line with patriarchal values and strategic alliances. The Mughal Empire, in this regard, shared many characteristics in terms of gender discrimination. This pattern highlights how women's roles and statuses were shaped and constrained by longstanding patriarchal traditions.<sup>77</sup>

#### **Dichotomy and Symbolic Orientation in Wet Nursing: Foster Mother's Influence in the Mughal Empire**

In the Mughal Empire, the role of women as wet nurses and fosterage represent the different dimensions of gender and societal norms in a predominantly male-centered world. Wet nursing, alongside other auxiliary roles illustrates how women's contributions were often confined within

the bounds set by patriarchal values. The intrafamilial tradition both in Mughal or their ancestor, the Timurid Empire did not affect the foster mother's relative power or influence. Unlike the Ottoman, the Timurid custom had authorized the power of the childless noblewomen, therefore, the same legacy had been bestowed the Mughal women.<sup>78</sup> However, skeptic asserts that "whether the regime is patrilineal, matrilineal, bilateral, or undifferentiated, the woman is inevitably under men's guardianship or anything more than the symbol of her lineage"<sup>79</sup>

Historically, the sources given a vivid picture of the power structure behind the wet nursing, such as the Bible, the Code of Hammurabi, Egyptian papyri, Greek and Roman literature, it was profoundly entrenched in primitive societies and money-oriented nursing practice prevail in those society and civilization.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, visible documentation of Mughal rule hardly ever illustrates the maternal role of the noble woman, however, even though a small group of representation filled that role. For example, these women seem to have wet nurses to princes and princess and they label with the title such as imperial nurse, *angah*<sup>81</sup> and *maham-angah*<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, the anthropologists turned up the choices concerning the feeding of their children, such as Vanessa Maher who accentuates that "breastfeeding, and childrearing in general, is not just a biological or natural phenomenon, but part of cultural, local and social pattern."<sup>83</sup> Notwithstanding, it is glaringly obvious that whether sex is taken too seriously in the Mughal society, then sexual persecution is not taken seriously enough. There were (in *Zenana*) organize manhandle of women and other fabric of society on the basis of salacious taste or behavior.

But, the orientation or dichotomy behind the wet nurses also illustrated in the classical works. For instance, there is some symbolic orientation while selection the wet nurses. Firstly, Abul Fazl testifies that "wet nurse had to be even tempered, spiritually-minded (*qabil-i-rawhani-i-qavalib*), because from

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 17, 44 and 76.

<sup>77</sup> Barnaby Rogerson, *The Heirs of The Prophet Muhammad: The Roots of Sunni-Shia Schism* (Great Britain: Clays Limited, 2006), 135.

<sup>78</sup> Balabanlilar, "The Begims of the Mystic Feast," 136-138.

<sup>79</sup> Beauvoir, *the Second Sex*, 106.

<sup>80</sup> Balkrishnan Shivram, "Wet Nursing in Imperial Mughal Family: A Study in Social Relations," *Indian History Congress* 72, no. 1 (2011), 327.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ziad, *The Magnificent Mughals*, 32.

<sup>83</sup> Shivram, "Wet Nursing in Imperial Mughal Family," 326.

whose breasts infant Akbar's mouth was sweetened by the life-giving fluid"<sup>84</sup> Secondly, the women status, symbol and central traits of character. For instance, "Bibi Fatima, Humayun's nurse was amongst high-born and Jiji Angah (Akbar's nurse) was wife of lordly born Shamsu-ud-Din Muhammad of Ghazni who served in the Humayun reign"<sup>85</sup>

Despite the above wrangling, a question arise that why the wet nursing practice bestowed by the Mughal? How it harmed the women identity? There are numerous reasons. Firstly, wet nursing contributed to either increase or decrease the fertility among the loyal ladies. Like "lactation induce amenorrhea and women (wet nursing) are much less likely to become pregnant than women who do not nurse."<sup>86</sup> Therefore, the childbirth rate was very high in the Mughal era. Secondly, because of the childhood morality, wet nurses were used in order to limit hot-blooded feeling or emotions. In this perception the "upper classes were probably aware of the high infant mortality of that time, and welcomed, an increased number of children, since this would ensure sufficient infants were born for an heir to survive and inherit."<sup>87</sup>

Gulbadan also taken into account the other services of women i.e. nurses. She mentioned about the nurses whose provided first aid box in the need of time to kings and royal family. When Humayun wounded in 1540, an old lady provided first aid box and he recovered as early as possible. Subsequently, When Humayun was in his illness, in 1546, Bibi Fatima, the nurse of Humayun served him wholeheartedly. In addition to the above, women also remained in the services of guards. As has been mentioned by Gulbadan that Bibi Fatima was, for example the chief guard of Humayun's harem.<sup>88</sup> They were frequently armed and they were divided into enclosed sections and faithful servants appointed as officers. The *Daroughas*, for example, were virtuous matron women appointed as superintendents over each section, with one being selected for the duties of a writer.<sup>89</sup>

### Conclusion

The notion that the harem facilitated gender equality in Mughal society requires careful reconsideration. Is it correct to suggest, that harem brings women equality? This is, if Harem or women's divided into

class or race. Though, the upper class women in the Harem enjoyed higher status as compared to lower class women but if we analyse it critically so the gender gap between male and female are glaringly obvious. In Mughal society male gender had dominancy over female because men and women were conceptually divided into two separate worlds. Inside home was defined as a woman's legitimate ideological and physical space, while a man dominance the world outside the home. Moreover, except the royal women, male member of the family were given better war skills and are equipped with skills to complete for resources in the public arena m, while female members were imparted domestic skills to be good mothers, wives and servants. On the other hand, it was not just the fact of difference between the Harem women, but how they were interpreted, used, and how it made women feel that there was a hierarchy (patriarchal) of authenticity.

Gulbadan Begum's *Humayun-Nama* stands as a primary historical document, providing a unique perspective on India during the reigns of Babar and Humayun. As an author, Gulbadan joins the ranks of esteemed court historians and writers. Her writings not only possess historical significance but also literary merit, introducing a new ethical dimension to historical narrative. Unlike the male chroniclers of her time, whose accounts were often marked by political/violent conquests and personal glory, Gulbadan's work offers a revelatory (subjective) perspective that enriches our understanding of the Mughal era. Her memoirs emphasize the importance of everyday domestic life, thereby broadening the scope of Mughal historiography. Recent historians must recognize and respect such indigenous sources, acknowledging that both male and female voices contribute significantly to our understanding of history.

Besides, the dominant discourse like Gulbadan account has never emerged from the women who are most victimised by sexist oppression, women who daily beaten down, mentally, physically and spiritually. Interestingly, racism and classism abounds in the writing of Gulbadan, reinforcing upper class and more clearly racism is explicit in Mughal society. But the concept of contemporary feminists that all women are

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 328.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 329.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 40-50.

<sup>89</sup> Fazl, *The Akbar Nama*, 45-47.

oppressed (absence of choices) was not totally present in Mughal harem because there was a choice among the upper elite women in a decision making as has been mentioned time and again in Gulbadan account.

In a nutshell, in historical discourse, the dichotomy of interior and exterior between the men and women has not been explored but interpret women's contributions quite subjective in nature and patriarchal in practice. It does not interpret the reality of the Mughal's women and their sovereign politics. But we can say that sexuality is narrated in a political sense, organized in power-structure. Basically the second custom (society) reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others. Additionally, the women thereby became the property of the victor both in *Zenana* and outside female townships. It goes without saying, that the Mughal society was male-dominant in nature and practice. Although the historical discourses befittingly glorified the status of women while dealing with harem or their sovereign politics but ignored the identity which they (women) bestowed. Therefore, it should be right to say that the Mughal transformed the women status within the structure of society not particularly.

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