

Womb, Power, and Politics: Mughal Women and the (Un)Making of Biological Essentialism

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ABSTRACT

Historical narratives and retellings of the Mughal Empire 1526–1857 often describe women as confined to the Harem and excluded from political life, reducing their roles to reproduction and motherhood. This paper explores how historical norms about women's reproductive and post-reproductive roles affected their participation in Mughal society and courts. It examines how exclusion from public power was supported by the social construction of gender and biological essentialism, the idea that women are naturally suited only for domestic roles, and how such ideas were reinforced by later Orientalists in historical narratives. Using the reign of Empress Nur Jahan as a case study, the paper analyses how power could be negotiated through gender, especially through symbols of authority including portraits and coins. The paper also considers other examples, such as Gulbadan Begum (1523–1603), who commissioned the Humayun-nama and led the historic 7-year Hajj pilgrimage, highlighting women's contributions to literature and the inclusive participation of post-reproductive women in politics. By analysing these cases, the paper argues that Mughal women's political power was more complex than traditional narratives portray. It assesses the extent to which exclusion from authority in the public sphere contributed to biological essentialist justifications for inequality, and how gendered assumptions were used to marginalize Mughal women's political authority. It also explores the extent to which women could exercise authority in the Mughal Empire independent of their maternal role. This research paper analyses both primary sources and contemporary scholarship to offer a revised view of the agency of women in Mughal India.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How have historical norms surrounding women's reproductive and post-reproductive roles affected their participation in society and politics during the Mughal period, and how has exclusion shaped biological essentialism as a justification for inequality?

INTRODUCTION

In 1526, exactly half a millennium ago, a glorious Empire existed primarily in the Indian subcontinent, founded by **the** Great Emperor Babur after the historic Battle of Panipat. While the Empire's strength and 'glory' have often been ascribed to great men, women also played significant roles, a fact that has been largely obscured by historiography. From Aisan Daulat Begum (1494–1505), in the nomadic court, who taught Babur how to navigate politics when he was just a child, to Jahanara Begum (1614–1681), in the settled palace, who was the wealthiest woman at her time, and the brilliant mind behind one of the oldest and busiest markets in Old Delhi, the famous Chandni Chowk; the Gurkani legacy was profoundly indebted to these women.¹

If the Mughal Zenana - a secluded place dominated by women - was designed as a place of total domestic seclusion, why did it consistently produce some of the most formidable political leaders, military experts, traders, and architects of the Mughal Empire? This is a question that will resonate throughout the reader's mind while going through this paper. However, the question that initially resonated in my mind was, 'Why are the women in Mughal History secluded to a small margin in a history book while the Emperors dominate pages upon pages of historical narratives?'. Did the women truly have no contributions? Or was it the pushing of Orientalist eurocentric gendered historiographies that made us believe this? Historians and their historiographies are the pivotal factor of influence in the interpretation of historical narratives. This is due to the fact that a historian's role is not simply limited to providing a reflection of the events, but rather to inform, interpret and analyse the event in gender-aware language as their work constitutes the event into the reader's mind.

Gender History is a field of historical study that examines historical events through the objective lens of gender. It treats gender as **not** biological fact but a social construct constituted through cultures, societies and historical occurrences which have adapted and changed over time.

Judith Butler's idea of 'gender performativity' suggests that gender is a socially constructed identity that is produced when people participate in particular roles, activities and responsibilities repeatedly which then gets adopted and performed throughout generations. Butler does not mean that all of us are 'acting' in daily life, but rather that this is done unconsciously.²

The paper works in the context of the Mughal era, particularly Mughal court politics and Zenana culture, keeping a dominant focus on the role of the elite and noble women. For years, it has been assumed that the role of Mughal women did not extend further than producing heirs. However, recent scholarship has

¹ Ira Mukhoty, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018)

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³ Ira Mukhoty, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018)

disputed these narrations. Scholars such as Ruby Lal and Ira Mukhoty have challenged these assumptions, arguing that Mughal domestic life was not separate from politics but a key area where power was shaped, hence establishing the political, economic and social agency of the Mughal women. They also critique the importance of reductive, gendered language which diminishes the women's authority into a spectacle, rather than legitimate power (Mukhoty 2018, 12 & Lal 2005, 17-19).³⁴ This paper analyses historical actors and their legacy such as Padshah Beghum Nur Jahan, who dominated court politics, and Gulbadan Beghum, a literary honorary figure, independent of their reproductive roles, drawing parallels with them to figures like Mumtaz Beghum who is historically defined by her marriage and motherhood.

Despite development in scholarship, there is little recognition of shifts in a women's agency without using the child as a proxy for power. This paper aims to explore the transition in a woman's authority and its wielding, independent of her maternal role. Additionally, it will evaluate if a woman's body was used as an implicit reason for exclusion through a biological lens, and if it was, then why did they exert such great power. Furthermore, it treats the women in the Harem as historical agents, understanding the cognitive changes they went through.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main argument is grounded in contemporary critical scholarship which focuses on Mughal noble women and their relationship to imperial authority, relying on influential works such as *'Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World'* (2005) by Ruby Lal and *'Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Beghums of the Mughal Empire'* (2018) by Ira Mukhoty. It also relies upon scholarly articles such as 'The Empress Behind the Veil: Nur Jahan's Silent Sovereignty and Cultural Renaissance' (2025), "Mughal Empire and the Role of Royal Women" (2025) by Shabnam Bharti, and "What a Mughal Princess Can Teach Us About Feminist History" (2024), which primarily focuses on Gulbadan Begum.

This paper also analyses primary sources such as the famous portrait of Empress Nur Jahan holding a musket and the coins minted in Empress Nur Jahan's name. The primary method is a literature review grounded in the revisionist scholarship of Ruby Lal and Ira Mukhoty. The second method is a visual analysis of the two primary sources: the coin minted in Empress Nur Jahan's name and the portrait of her holding a musket.

³ Ira Mukhoty, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Beghums of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018)

⁴ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

1) The Historiography of the Zenana

The Zenana was an institutionalized, sacred, domestic space that served as the center to imperial power in the Mughal Empire.⁵ (Lal 2005, 1-24) Previous historiography of the Zenana has been largely influenced by Eurocentric and Orientalist perspectives. These have rendered historically inaccurate documentations by the use of reductive, gendered language in later historiography, which have presented the 'Harem' as a perennial, pleasure-oriented institution rather than a complex construct with meanings that shifted over time. Popular scholarship caricatures the Harem to be a sensual place of mystery and intrigue, which not only is a narrow and inaccurate view, but which also turns the political power that the women wielded through it into a spectacle.⁶

R.Nath, a distinguished historian of Mughal architecture in his book, "*Private Life of the Mughals*" (1994) depicts the Harem as a flattened building with sexual pleasure being the only thing to offer. He mentions the Harem to be a place where the emperors could "excessively indulge both in wine and women" (Nath 1994, 13). Ellison Banks Findly's biography of Nur Jahan "*Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India*" (1993), despite being one of the most initial illustrations of the power wielded by women in the Mughal Era, still interpreted the Harem as a place of overindulgence and jealousy. (Findly 1993, 89)

Revisionist works by Ruby Lal redefined the Mughal Harem as a place not of pure sexual exploitation separate from politics, but rather as a state organ, an important place where imperial power and authority were constructed and maintained. She argues that the Harem was not secluded from the court; hence, the domestic and political worlds were intertwined, this meant that despite their physical and ideological position, the women were always involved in politics. In her book, '*Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*' (2005) Lal introduces the idea that due to the Harem's not being a static entity, the women's influence also continuously evolved as the Mughal Empire transformed from Akbar's peripatetic predecessors to an institutionalized court during Akbar's time. Historians would often look at the stone palaces of later Mughals and assume that the women were always secluded, while Lal shows that the tent Zenana was actually far more fluid during the time of Akbar's predecessors. Lal also critiques the prevailing tradition of Orientalist interpretations of the Harem to have created two different domains, the public sphere relating to men and politics, and the domestic sphere relating to women and domesticity. She argues that this artificial binary opposition ignored the fact that most of the political

⁵ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶ Ruby Lal in her *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* draws the distinction between the Zenana and the Harem. The Zenana is a South Asian term which refers to the women's domestic and social quarters in a household (not a place of confinement), the Harem on the other hand, mostly used in Orientalist accounts and carrying stereotypes, is said to be a place of seclusion and sensuality.

decisions were taken inside the inner chambers; reiterating the historical importance of the Harem.⁷

Ira Mukhoty, in her “*Daughters of the Sun*” (2018), explores the lives of the Mughal ‘Haraman’, who were the early Mughal women, emphasizing their role as educated, politically important and influential figures. Mukhoty, just like Lal, intertwines the public and private spheres, showing the social and political power that was exercised by the women through the imperial courts. She describes the instance of a grand feast which Khanzada Beghum (1478–1545), the older sister of Babur and a trusted advisor to both Babur and Humayun, presided over beside Humayun, signifying that the royal women held a status equal to that of the Emperor. More so, Khanzada Beghum acted as an ambassador between Humayun and his brother Kamran to negotiate peace, illustrating her power. Mukhoty claims this power was derived not from her biological status, but rather her power as the eldest matriarch and protector of the family’s legacy.⁸

Hence, both Lal and Mukhoty revisionize the Harem by bringing the power wielded by the women residing in it to light, and redefining it as a place of not merely overindulgence and sexual power, but as a part of the imperial court. It also ties back to the main argument, demonstrating that women’s power and agency were not tied to their biology but to their being an integral part of imperial court functioning.

2) Biological Essentialism in Mughal Culture

Lal in her ‘*Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*’ (2005), suggests that once the empire became more powerful, it started using biological categories such as ‘motherhood’ and ‘sanctity’ to institutionalize the Harem. She discusses this by using the example of the Emperor’s mother, Hamida Banu Begum, who was given the title of ‘Maryam Makani’ or ‘Dwelling with Mary’. (Lal 2005, 198-199). Lal observes how over time during the reign of the first 3 Mughal Emperors the Harem slowly became a more well-defined space.

As the empire started growing from a nomadic court to a settled court, the ‘natural’ roles of women were now more strictly defined by the state to ensure that the lineage continues. There was also a social hierarchical structure within the Zenana, where power was distributed according to the biological status of the women in different life stages from wives, concubines, mothers of princes and newborns. Under Akbar’s reign in particular the mobility that the women had during Babur/Humayun’s time was fairly restricted.

One of the more major turning points was the settlement of the capital at Fatehpur Sikri. Akbar made the Harem into a fixed architectural site, which thereby led to the sacralization of the Mughal women and

⁷ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁸ Ira Mukhoty, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018)

their roles. Women started becoming recognized as individuals with the 'sacred' duty to reproduce and continue the lineage. The role of the 'Padshah Beghum', the 'Queen Mother' was elevated and became sanctified. Paradoxically, while the Queen Mother's status rose, the lives of the women in the Zenana became more secluded. Their power was tied directly to their biological proximity to the King, rather than their own political agency.

Lal's main argument is that 'biological essentialism' was never an ancient practice in the Mughal Empire as often depicted by Orientalist writers, by giving evidence of the leadership and advisory roles the women held in the peripatetic phase, but rather it was a political tool that was used under the reign of Akbar to institutionalize the Harem.⁹

Ira Mukhoty in her *'Daughters of the Sun'* (2018) talks about the agency of the Mughal women and its relationship with their biological status. She talks about the instance of Gulbadan Begum's Hajj pilgrimage, where she led a group of senior women to a 7-year pilgrimage to Mecca. Mukhoty argues that Gulbadan's financial independence and mobility shows that post-reproductive women had the authority to bypass the biological restrictions that were placed on the otherwise young fertile women who were required to stay enclosed within the seclusion of the Harem to ensure the continuity of the legitimate lineage. She says in reference to the pilgrimage, "It is clear that Gulbadan is very much in charge of the decisions... there are no younger women on this Hajj... it is a company of matriarchs and older women". (Mukhoty 2018, 123-134) Mukhoty also describes the rise of inequality and the reinforcement of essentialism during the reign of Aurangzeb. When Aurangzeb came to power, he further intensified the 'sacralization' of women that began during Akbar's reign. Aurangzeb's strict interpretation of Islamic law resulted in the reinforcement of the women's 'natural' place; the power wielded by Jahanara Begum and Nur Jahan began to dissolve.

Mukhoty argues that for a long time, Mughal women fought off biological essentialism by remaining unmarried like later princesses like Jahanara Begum or becoming powerful matriarchs like Khanzada Begum using their intellect and agency; adding to this, Lal shows that the four wall enclosure at Fatehpur Sikri which was a physical manifestation of the ideology and the later institutionalization of the state inevitably overtook them.¹⁰

3)Pre- and Post-Reproductive Women: The Power of Fertility

Ruby Lal in her *'Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World'* (2005), draws two distinct parallels to describe the power dynamics of the early and later Mughal women.

Lal argues that in the peripatetic world, under Babur and Humayun, there was no distinction between the

⁹ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Ira Mukhoty, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018)

‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres, hence the agency of the women was not defined by their reproductive status. As the court was constantly moving, women travelled with the army, participated in the council and acted as intermediaries in times of conflict. Hence, their ‘biological’ role of being a mother was simply one of the many political functions they had a part in. Over here, Lal asks a very critical question, if the Empire was on a constant move, how was a secluded place, the Zenana, maintained for the women? She asserts that during the early Mughal years, the ‘biological essentialist’ view that women had to be secluded for protection or legitimate lineage had not yet been thought of as extremely important. Older women, who were post-reproductive, did generally have more mobility. They were the matriarchs and they led camps. However, their power originated from their experience and their role as the protectors of the Timurid legacy, rather than their fertility. While younger, fertile women were often valued and used for making potential alliances via marriage, they still wielded more power and mobility than they would under the later Emperors.

Then Lal goes on to describe the institutionalization of the Harem, emphasizing the spatial enclosure at Fatehpur Sikri. She argues that the enclosure was not a separate quarter for women to give them privacy or to protect them, but rather a physical manifestation of biological essentialism. By restricting them to a distinct physical space, the state also fixed their social roles to that place only. Lal also observes the hierarchies within the Harem. She explains that there was a noticeable difference between the noblewomen and the ‘service providers’. The noble women’s status was then additionally linked to the number of heirs they produced and their biological proximity to the Emperor. Under Akbar, the Zenana was reinvisioned as a ‘sacred’ space for women, it meant that they were the keepers of the purity of lineage. This was a double-edged sword, while it meant that the women who were producing heirs gained a high status, it provided a justification for secluding the women and limiting their agency. Hence, Lal’s argument is that biological essentialism was not primarily a harsh truth of Mughal/Indian society, but rather a 16th century tool used to consolidate the Mughal Empire.¹¹

Ira Mukhoty, in her *‘Daughters of the Sun’* (2018), introduces the concept of the “Haraman” where women spent their lives in tents or on horsebacks. Mukhoty introduces some critical historical actors to show the agency of women in the early Mughal times. In the nomadic years, older women held a great amount of power, and individuals like Aisan Daulat Begum (Babur’s grandmother) and Khanzadah Begum were thought of as great advisors and protectors of the legacy. Mukhoty highlights a critical moment in Mughal history, when Khanzadah Begum was left behind with the Uzbek warlord Shaybani Khan to secure Babur’s safety. When she returned a decade later, she was celebrated as a hero rather than stigmatized for loss of honour for being taken by the enemy. She contrasts the early Mughals with the Rajputs, who held stringent views relating to chastity with practices such as Sati. Mukhoty then observes Nur Jahan, whose whole life is evidence of a Mughal woman defying biological essentialism. Nur Jahan married Jahangir in her 30s, and did not give him any children. Hence, her power went beyond the womb. It did not come from being a young bride or having children for the Emperor. Yet, she was the first Mughal woman to have coins minted in her name, she issued farmans (royal decrees), and took part in the

¹¹ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

jharoka darshan (a daily ceremony where the Emperor appeared at the balcony so the subjects could see him) - practices otherwise reserved for men.

Mukhoty also draws a very interesting parallel between two Mughal queens. She touches upon Mumtaz Mahal, the 'Moon', who died giving birth to her 14th child. This highlights the cost of being a reproductive woman in the imperial court. Then she refers to Jahanara Begum, a Mughal Princess who never married, the 'Sun', who became the Padshah Begum after her mother's death. Mukhoty emphasizes Jahanara's massive amount of wealth. She owned the Surat trade port, and designed the famous 'Chandni Chowk' in Delhi. This proves that a woman's power was not simply restricted to the domestic sphere, she was equally capable as the Emperor to step into administrative and political roles. She never married, hence her power was not through a biological categorization of being a wife or a mother, but rather through being an intellectual woman.

Mukhoty proves that women were capable of achieving great power in the Mughal world, despite their biological status and the constructed gender roles that came with it, however, they achieved their greatest power by either being 'post-reproductive' or 'non-reproductive'. Essentially, while Lal argues that architecture such as the Fatehpur Sikri aimed to essentialize women by their biological proximity to the King, Mukhoty introduces us to certain historical outliers such as the childless Nur Jahan and the unmarried Jahanara Begum, who proved that intellect and agency could be used to overcome these constraints.¹²

My argument builds on and adds to the existing scholarship and, by using primary sources, illustrates that the Zenana was a complex and continuously changing entity, which had great influence on the public sphere as power was never divided; it was interlinked. Furthermore, it will assert the great power that was wielded by the Mughal women who defied the shackles of biological essentialism that policies such as the 'institutionalization' tried to exclude them with.

RESULT/SOURCE ANALYSIS

Two main primary sources will be analysed to strengthen my argument. Throughout Mughal History, only two women have had coins minted in their names, with one being Empress Nur Jahan. The transliteration of the inscription on the coin referring to the Empress as 'Lady Emperor' speaks towards the power and authority of Nur Jahan despite bearing no children to the Emperor. The second source is a portrait which depicts Nur Jahan wielding a musket ready to go for a hunt. Weapons are often associated with powerful individuals, specifically with men to represent their authority. Hence, this portrait redefines the assumption that Mughal women were inherently confined to domestic roles.

¹² Ira Mukhoty, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018)

Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2



1) Minted Coins

One of the sources analysed (Fig 1.1) is silver coins which were circulated in the cities of Lahore, Agra, Surat and Ahmedabad, specifically minted for Nur Jahan, the only co sovereign and queen in the history of the Mughal Empire, to have coins struck under her name. These coins often had poetic couplets engraved on them. One such famous inscription said,

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"By the order of Emperor Shah Jahangir, this Gold hath gained a hundred beauties; when the name of Queen Nur Jahan, Badshah Begum, was struck on it".

This inscription is a powerful political statement. It represents the esteem and admiration of Nur Jahan, as it describes the gold which was a material of supreme luxury, gaining immense beauty by having the name of the Empress engraved on it. These coins serve as tangible proof of Nur Jahan's authority, as rather than memoirs, which are accounts that could potentially be argued as carrying bias, they are coins which were circulated in the Empire. The Mughals viewed wealth as a sign of authority. The Mughal Empire was a flourishing empire in the early modern world. The king was thought of as having the divine right to rule, hence his wealth was a sign of blessing by God. Currency was the fundamental proof of wealth. By having Nur Jahan's name on the currency, it showed her authority over spheres such as economics, trade, and commerce.

Moreover, it could also be said that she was viewed as having the same status as the King, as the equivalence of the regnal title that is used to describe Jahangir, which is 'Emperor', is being used to describe Nur Jahan as she is being referred to as 'Queen' which further strengthens her authority not as the King's wife, but rather as a de facto co-sovereign. Unlike courtly portraiture confined within the private sphere, these coins circulated in the hands of merchants, soldiers, and peasants in the public sphere. Every monetary transaction in the everyday life of the subjects symbolized the queen's authority by having her inscription on it. This demonstrates the widening circle of influence that the Empress wished to reach. The coins, paired with the immense architecture and endowments she made, she wanted to make the public aware of her authority and legitimize her authority.

'Padsha Beghum' is a farsi word, which translates to 'Lady Emperor'. This transliteration is very crucial. It constitutes her status as the female sovereign, rather than the wife of the Emperor. These coins are now exceptionally rare to find, with the exception of some museums such as the Indian Museum and the Lahore Museum, due to Shah Jahan, Jahangir's successor who had them melted. This was a deliberate attempt to physically erase Nur Jahan's authority and female sovereignty from history by eradicating the most physical evidence of her power. The coins uncover a significant truth. Nur Jahan was a widow, who did not bear any children with Jahangir. Her title of a female sovereign rather than just the wife of the Emperor reflected how reproductivity did not necessarily define the status of a woman in the Mughal world. The capabilities, skills and intelligence that she possessed played a much bigger role in legitimizing her power and agency. Moreover, not being able to reproduce did not deem her as biologically incapable of holding power. Rather, despite these facts, she established herself as having much more influence than any other female sovereign in the history of the Mughal Empire.

Existing scholarship on the interpretation of the numismatic evidence further reinforces Nur Jahan as one of the most influential female sovereigns in Mughal history. Ellison Banks Findly in her biography "*Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India*" (1993) portrays the prominence of the coin by explaining the concept of the '*sikka*' (coinage). Findly explains that according to Mughal customs and traditions, coinage in your name was a right exclusive to the reigning monarch. It characterized the highest symbol of utmost and

absolute authority. Through this theorization, Findly argues that Jahangir's decision of minting coins under Nur Jahan's name was not merely a symbol of his affection or a token love towards her, rather an indisputable sign of her authority. The coin served as conclusive evidence of her sovereignty and legitimized their shared control.¹³ Ruby Lal in her book *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan* (2018) recognizes the economic and public significance of the coin, and reaches a similar conclusion. She highlights that by minting coins under her name, Nur Jahan successfully brought her power into the 'public sphere'. These coins, which were circulated throughout the Empire, were not just a means of monetary transactions, rather they were a political instrument used to circulate her name and assert her status throughout the Empire's economy. Lal also emphasizes upon the visibility granted by the coins. She proves that by serving as perceptible evidence of her rule to not only her subjects, but also foreign merchants and traders these coins legitimized the openness of her rule and documented her active role as a co-sovereign. Through this interpretation of public declaration of power, Lal also challenges previous Orientalist historical narratives that pushed the Mughal women as being confined within the jurisdictions of the Harem, wielding little to no power.¹⁴ These interpretations support my argument, that Nur Jahan serves as a contradiction to Orientalist historiographies which claimed the Mughal women to have been secluded with no political power. In reality, women in the Mughal Empire exercised control and imperial authority in both the public and the private sphere, based on their capabilities rather than their reproductive ability.

2) Nur Jahan holding a Musket

This portrait by Abu'l Hasan, as shown in Fig 1.2, depicts Empress Nur Jahan, the only co-sovereign in the history of the Mughal Empire, holding a musket. In the portrait, Nur Jahan seems to be dressed in what could be anachronistically termed androgynous in modern terminology. Contrary to Orientalist assumptions of Mughal women being thought of as secluded and passive figures, this portrait presents a confident and skilled lady Empress wielding a mechanically demanding weapon expertly. Her attire is symbolic to her authority. She is wearing attire that mixes gendered clothing - a turban on her head, and traditional clothing with henna stained feet. This essentially characterizes her role in the Empire where she performed many of the duties particularly associated with the male sovereign such as military leadership, holding the Jharodoka Darshan, and issuing farmans. A noteworthy thing is that no feminine body part is visible in the portraiture, which could be thought of as a deliberate action as she is participating in the act of hunting which was a sport associated with men primarily. Usually, women were painted in flamboyant, feminine court attire with their chests bare. However, this painting represents a contrast to other, normative descriptions that have otherwise been presented in portraiture. **(Refer Fig 1.3)** Moreover, Nur Jahan is embodied in the role of a hunter. The hunt was a reflection of battle. It required courage, leadership and precision to take control of the prey; qualities associated with a sovereign. This depicts Nur Jahan's possession of these qualities, as she was a female sovereign. The hunter had to strategize, plan and impose order on the wild. This shows that Nur Jahan was capable of subduing rebellions and restoring peace and order in times of disorder. This is historically supported by

¹³ Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993)

¹⁴ Ruby Lal, *Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

incidents such as the rebellion of Mahabat Khan in 1626, where Nur Jahan was the saviour.

In two passages from Jahangir's memoir, he fondly describes her as a 'tiger-slayer' (shikar afgan) which directly speaks to her hunting prowess. It stems from an incident that took place in the Mathura region, where a man-eating tiger had been terrorizing the inhabitants of a village. Jahangir, who had vowed at 50 to never hunt or injure an animal again, relied on Nur Jahan to be his protector. Nur Jahan fired a shot from her musket, from within her howdah, and killed the tiger. Some accounts claim she killed it with a single shot, while others say she killed four tigers with only six shots. This painting is one of the most famous pieces of art which show a woman in a man's guise. Other than her henna-stained feet, she appears to be dressed like a man. It also contradicts and provides an alternative to the previous accounts of Nur Jahan which speak to her beauty and grace, by characterizing her in a masculine manner. Other portraits of Nur Jahan, often show her with a veiled face, her body being represented as having lush breasts with a small waist. It illustrates how masculinity and femininity are socially constructed concepts; not concrete biological realities.

The 'musket' was a traditional firearm used between the 16th–18th century, which was heavy and mechanically demanding to operate. Weapons in general were wielded largely by soldiers, rulers, or predominantly men. The musket's operation required control and technical knowledge, both skills, which are shown as wielded by Nur Jahan. This is a deliberate visual disruption that speaks loudly to Nur Jahan having the right and being worthy to wield power. This challenges Orientalist assumptions of Mughal women being confined to seclusion and being child-bearers. Hence, this portrait legitimizes Nur Jahan's authority and proves her status of being a historical actor with agency rather than just a consort. Nur Jahan's embodiment of roles in economics, politics and military supports the idea that women were not strictly thought of as inferior and incapable of performing the same duties as men. Rather, in instances like Jahangir and Nur Jahan, the women were more equipped to perform 'masculine' duties even when they did not perform the duties traditionally thought of as 'feminine' such as producing heirs like Nur Jahan.

Existing scholarly literature on the portrait by famous court artist Abu'l Hasan provides a critical analysis of it being evidence for Nur Jahan's exercise of imperial power. Scholar Angela Finkbeiner in her thesis, "Empress Nur Jahan and Female Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of a Long-Forgotten Mughal Portrait" (2021), emphasizes upon the deliberate politicization of the portrait. Typical Mughal portraiture of royal women depicted them through a lens of feminine grace, in translucent fabrics adorned with jewelry. Often, they were shown holding symbolic items such as flowers rather than being depicted participating in court rituals which was reserved usually for men. However, Finkbeiner argues that this portrait provides a breakthrough from these assumed traditions. In the Mughal era, weapons were a sign of military strength and used strictly in the connotation of male regal rule. By showing Empress Nur Jahan wielding a musket, a right reserved for men, the portrait aims to symbolize imperial authority. Finkbeiner further states that it being painted by Abu'l Hasan was a deliberate move. Since he was the

top imperial court artist, this strategy aimed to legitimize her status as the co-sovereign.¹⁵ This interpretation further supports my argument that this portrait by visually constructing Nur Jahan participating in the act of hunting, and wielding a weapon symbolic for military strength challenges Orientalist narratives that claim Mughal women to have been purely reproductive figures who were confined within the walls of the Harem, and had no role in the imperial court.

PERSONAL ANALYSIS

Historiography of the Zenana

When analysing the historiography of the ‘Zenana’ or the ‘Harem’ in the Mughal Empire, it becomes evident that the ostracization of the Harem women is a by-product of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty refers to as ‘Western Eyes’.¹⁶ This idea treats the Harem and its inhabitants as homogenous victims and a monolithic category, taking away their diversification under different time periods, cultures and Emperors and generalizes the Harem as an exotic and sensual place; with the women in it having nothing to offer except sexual pleasure. This Orientalist definition of the Harem takes away the agency of the many strong and formidable female leaders which originated from within the ‘boundaries’ of the ‘seclusion’. Orientalist narration does not acknowledge the shifts in the Harem. The transition of the Harem from a peripatetic court to a settled court played a huge role in the political mobility and power of the women.¹⁷ During the nomadic court, women exercised a significant amount of political agency, which continued after institutionalization, albeit in different forms. This proves Lal's point that the Mughal women's political agency did not have much to do with their physical place.^{18,19}

When R.Nath, a renowned architectural historian, adopts and strengthens the idea of the Harem being a place of overindulgence, the effects of the colonial gaze become evident. He writes, “By a routine estimate, he (Jahangir) had nearly 300 young and beautiful women attached to his bed, an incomprehensible figure in the modern age. This shows his over-indulgence in sex and his excessive engagement in the Harem.” Claiming that the main activity of the Harem was sexual pleasure. (Nath 1994, 13). Similarly, even writers like Ellison Banks Findly who has produced one of the most initial pieces of literature showcasing power exercised by Mughal women which is commendable, yet has

¹⁵ Angela N. Finkbeiner, *Empress Nur Jahan and Female Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of a Long-Forgotten Mughal Portrait* (master's thesis, University of South Florida, 2021)

<https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=10780&context=etd>

¹⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 17–42.

¹⁷ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Ira Mukhoty, *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018)

described the Harem in terms of intemperance and intrigue, reveals how patriarchal and misogynistic frameworks continue to shape historical narratives. She writes, ‘this process was surely a more vibrant and honest affair given that it took place in the company of women.’ But “pleasure (in all its forms)” remains the “main competitive commodity”. (Findly 1993, 89.)

My point is that, although biological essentialism and inequality within the Mughal Empire did constrain the political authority of the women, later historical accounts further marginalized them by erasing their contributions through gendered language and biased narratives.

Hence, the inequality that has been perceived is a modern-day construct - the failure of historians to realize that in the Mughal world power was not divided between the private and public spheres. Rather, sometimes the most secluded areas were the most influential. The rigid binaristic divisions have led to misinterpretations in later historiographies, as influence exercised in the imperial household has been disregarded as domestic rather than courtly exercise of power.

Biological Essentialism in Mughal Culture

‘Biological essentialism is a belief system that suggests certain characteristics, behaviors, or abilities are inherently linked to one’s biology or genetics. This perspective tends to oversimplify the complexity of human identity and diversity, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices’.²⁰ Biological essentialism in the Mughal Empire was a political project used to mandate and consolidate the state’s power. To properly understand this concept, it is necessary to divide the Empire into two time periods. The peripatetic court (**nomadic court**) in the times of Babur and Humayun, and the settled court during the time of Akbar and his successors. We observe women like Gulbadan Begum, Humayoun’s sister in the peripatetic court, who led a group of women on a 7-year pilgrimage to Mecca. Aisan Daulat Begum was thought of as a powerful matriarch and protector of the Timurid legacy.

As the court started getting more settled, and the Empire expanded vastly, it was imperative that heirs be produced so the legacy would continue. That is when Akbar’s policy of institutionalization came in. The state constructed a version of womanhood which had to be ‘protected’ and was ‘sanctified’, and the ideas of gender performativity that Judith Butler talks about were strengthened.²¹ The Zenana stopped being a home for the women, and became a theatre of legitimacy. The fort of Fatehpur Sikri made by Akbar was a physical manifestation of the ideas that women were biologically fragile and needed protection. In reality, these stone walls existed not to protect ‘fragile’ women, but to provide a means of justification for the state to control the reproductive assets of the women to ensure legitimacy. These built boundaries did not just limit the realm of their existence, but also the realm of their agency. By secluding them into this spatial enclosure, the state also limited their powers to just reproduction. When Akbar limited the

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¹⁷“Biological Essentialism Definition and Explanation,” *The Oxford Review*, accessed February 14, 2026, <https://oxford-review.com/the-oxford-review-dei-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dictionary/biological-essentialism-definition-and-explanation/>

²¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

physical realm of the Mughal women, the power dynamics shifted. Now, the power of the woman did not originate from her intellect, but rather her womb. The more heirs a woman was able to produce, the more servants she received. This institutionalization aimed to standardize women. It aimed to replace her place of a powerful matriarch, to an ideal mother, with her value lying in her womb. Aurangzeb's strict Islamization policies further intensified the sacralization of the Mughal women and substantiated their 'natural' place of reproducers.

My argument is that this 'sanctification' had less to do with the fact that women were biologically incapable and more to do with the fact that their biology was important for the continuation of the Empire. If they were truly deemed incapable, then women like Nur Jahan and Jahanara Begum would never have been able to come to the forefront and become such formidable leaders. Moreover, this serves as my foundational argument against Orientalist narrations. Reproduction as the sole duty of the woman was not an ancient practice of the Harem, it only came about during the Akbarid state. Additionally, in my opinion, even after institutionalization the authority of the women did not suddenly 'vanish'; however it was significantly changed. It still existed and was exercised; just not in the public sphere as it used to be before institutionalization. Ultimately, while Akbar's policy of institutionalization aimed to use biological essentialism as an excuse to cage the Mughal women, it unintentionally created a loophole. The very biology that was being used to seclude the young fertile women, became the foundation of sovereignty for the post-reproductive women as will be explored in the next section. When they did not marry, or were no longer in the position to produce heirs; they became gender neutral allowing them to operate as 'honorary males' in the words of Leslie Pierce.²² Their authority was no longer tied to their womb as the state essentially stopped seeing them as 'women'. Now it was tied to their mind.

Pre and Post Reproductive Women: The Power of Fertility:

This section will be analyzed through real-life examples, rather than theoretical concepts. Again, we will divide the Mughal Empire into two distinct time periods; the peripatetic and the institutionalized. An interesting concept I noticed throughout the history of the Mughal women was that politically active women during the nomadic period were thought to be formidable historical agents, while the women with the same very characteristics after institutionalization were, in addition to formidable, thought to be outliers as well. This is a result of certain factors.

Firstly, during the period of Babur and Humayun, the court was not settled and nor were the 'roles' of the women. There was an intersection between the 'domestic' and the 'public' sphere, as a result of which, there was an intersection between the roles and responsibilities of the men and the women. Women like Aisan Daulat Begum weren't seen as 'breaking the rules', because this was the 'norm'. Once Akbar built the stone walls of the Harem, it created a new normal. Now, there was a distinct difference between the private and public sphere; and the women were to be confined to the private sphere. Their role as a reproducer came first, before their political power and agency. Hence, when women like Nur Jahan and Jahanara Begum acted with the same ferocity as their ancestors, they were

²² Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

now viewed as transgressors and outliers. This is why in later historiographies, the Harem was viewed with such intrigue when viewing women like Nur Jahan. They had to describe her as an outlier to the system, rather than simply reclaiming the nomadic sovereignty of her ancestors that the stone walled state had tried to label as 'extraordinary'. A woman's role as a child bearer has always been associated with her in the Mughal Empire; however, she has never been linked solely to it. My argument is, 'child as a proxy for power' and essentially the power of a woman being tied to her reproductive ability was again, not an ancient ritual, rather it was a concept that originated during Akbar's tenure when the Harem women's power started to get associated with her biological proximity to the Emperor.

Now, we will examine three Mughal women. While discussing them, we will keep in mind Leslie Pierce's idea of 'honorary males'. According to this, when the women were no longer able to reproduce, they were viewed as 'gender neutral', and their power was no longer associated with their anatomy.²³

Firstly, the woman who followed a biological mandate. Mumtaz Mahal, the wife of Shah Jahan, bore him 14 children. Eventually, she passed away in childbirth. She followed the rules to the letter, and she got killed. While she achieved the highest status possible within the Akbarid idea of 'Sacred Motherhood', her death serves as the evidence of the biological cost of her status. She was never a victim of a lack of power, but of power that defined her worth solely through being reproductively utilizable. However, there is another angle to her story. In popular memory, Mumtaz Mahal is remembered as a woman who gave the Emperor Shah Jahan the most kids, however this is a simplistic understanding. She existed in a system where women got power through reproduction, hence we may understand her as a person who recognized this and wielded power through her reproductive status.

In contrast, we have Nur Jahan; the non-reproductive sovereign. She was the wife of Jahangir, previously widowed with a daughter; she bore the King no children. Nur Jahan's influence is firmly grounded in historical evidence. She was the first female sovereign to have coins minted in her name, and she was a fierce hunter as described in the Jahangirnama. Moreover, she used to hold court sessions under the name of 'Jharoka Darshan' as well as the Friday Sermon beside the Emperor, signifying her authority. By appearing in these public places, Nur Jahan took over the visual language of the Emperor. In the Mughal Empire, there were certain things only an Emperor could do to establish his sole authority. By standing next to him, she was not just showing the public that she was helping him, but rather that she was his equal. As she never had kids, she did not fall into the biological trap. When she ascended into the 'gender neutral realm', she moved into a special category where the court stopped seeing her as a 'woman' but rather as a part of Jahangir. She used her lack of children as a political weapon to gain mobility that women weren't 'allowed' to have.

Nur Jahan is also remembered for her diplomacy and military expertise in the conflict with Mahabat Khan, contradicting that Mughal women were secluded and powerless.

Then, we have Jahanara Begum, who became the queen after her mother passed away. Jahanara Begum

²³ Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

never married, yet she was one of the most formidable matriarchs in Mughal History. She had immense wealth, and she owned the famous Surat Port. Additionally, she was a brilliant architect, having designed the whole 'Chandni Chowk' in Delhi. Her ownership of the port, and her architecture displayed her defiance. They served as footprints dominating the Empire, and proving that her power was not biological, but ancestral and intellectual. While Mumtaz Begum is commemorated as nothing more than a queen who gave birth to heirs, women like Jahanra Begum and Nur Jahan are viewed as powerful, intelligent women with prowess over politics, trade and the military.

My argument is that there were many Mughal women like Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum and Gulbadan Begum who defied the shackles of essentialism and became powerful matriarchs. However, if we continue to treat them as 'outliers' of history, we take away the agency they fought very hard to have. This categorization results in us participating in very colonial and patriarchal narratives that Mohanty and Spivak warn us against. It suggests that female power was not a natural right, but rather an anomaly. If we view them as 'exceptions', we validate and consolidate the walls of Fatehpur Sikri as the true reality for the Mughal women.

CONCLUSION

This paper, through scholarship and primary source analysis, assesses three intersectional zones of enquiry which show that gendered exclusion was not just due to assumptions of women being biologically inferior to men but rather a by-product of a culmination of factors. Gendered and Orientalist historiography, which refused to acknowledge the paramount contributions of the Mughal women, along with rigid binaristic divisions, which resulted in the erasure of imperial courts and authority exercised by them, had a pivotal role. In essence, the gender roles that were constructed and maintained by the Mughals, later reinforced in Orientalist historiography, fail to hold as they are 'constructs', they are not derived from a biological reality, which could potentially be used to justify a woman's supposed incapacity in exercising the same semblance of power as a man. Such theories do not hold in discussions of issues such as 'power' and 'fertility'. Reproductivity did not translate to more authority. If this were the case, figures like Mumtaz Mahal, who bore numerous children, would have emerged as the most powerful matriarch. Yet women like Nur Jahan who did not produce an heir, and Jahanara Begum who remained unmarried, wielded great political authority and emerged as the two most powerful matriarchs.

Hence, it can be concluded that reproductivity alone cannot explain the political agency exercised by the Mughal women. It is imperative for future researchers to build upon these ideas more and explore the agency of Mughal women independent of their reproductive status.