



Womb, Power, and Politics

Mughal Women and the (Un)Making of Biological Essentialism

A REVISIONIST ANALYSIS OF IMPERIAL AUTHORITY, SPATIAL ENCLOSURE,
AND NON-MATERNAL SOVEREIGNTY IN MUGHAL INDIA



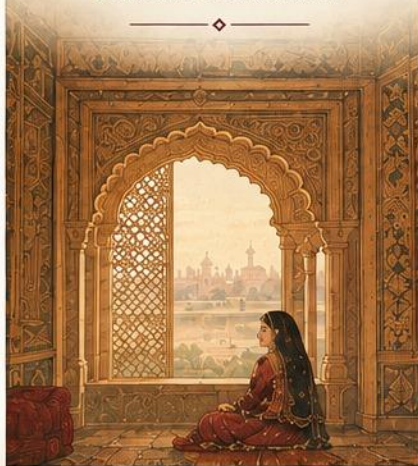
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THE PROBLEM

Deconstructs Eurocentric & Orientalist myths of the Zenana as a purely sensual space of domestic confinement.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



Judith Butler

Gender Performativity

Gender is a repeated social performance rather than a fixed biological truth.



Leslie Peirce

Honorary Males'

Post-reproductive women transcended biological constraints to wield gender-neutral sovereign authority.



Chandra T. Mohanty

Under Western Eyes

Rejects monolithic assumptions of non-Western women as helpless victims of patriarchal culture.

VISUAL EVIDENCE



The Coinage (Sikka) of Empress Nur Jahan

- Supreme monetary sovereign
- Inscribed as *Badshah Begum*
- Circulated in public economic sphere
- Non-maternal legitimacy



Hunting Prowess & Disruption of Normative Visuals

- Androgynous attire, turban, and musket
- Symbolic performance of sovereign power
- Rejects European tropes of passive harem women

CASE STUDIES

Mughal Women Exercising Independent Agency



Nur Jahan

Co-Sovereign & Commander

- Issued imperial decrees (*farmans*)
- Led military rescue
- Managed trade (Surat Port)
- Architect of Chahdri Chowk



Jahanara Begum

Unmarried Padshah Begum

- Authored *Humayun-nama*
- Led 7-year Hajj expedition
- Financed international diplomacy



Gulbadan Begum

Literary & Religious Leader

- Chronicled the Mughal dynasty
- Preserved family legacy
- Promoted religious and cultural life



Mumtaz Mahal

The Cost of Reproduction

- Died in childbirth
- Demonstrates the personal toll of status tied to reproduction



THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE

Colonial & Early Tropes

- Sensual confinement
- Piety rivalries
- Passive victims

Revisionist Framework

- State imperial organ
- Diplomatic matriarchs
- Fluid public-private spheres



The Takeaway

Independence from Fertility:

Sovereign authority was successfully exercised without maternal proxy.