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The Badshah Begums: Interrogating Identity and Power in Mughal Fictions

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Abstract

The historical legacy of Mughal rule in India has never been devoid of the interplay of power politics and identity throughout its long history. Needless to say, the history of Mughal women abounds in instances of power struggle and hegemonic interplay of social position. This research paper intends to highlight Ira Mukhoty's *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire* and Indu Sundaresan's *The Twentieth Wife*, which explicitly throw light on this power exchange that inevitably occurred in the Mughal empire. The historical representation of Mughals has been surrounded by narratives of the central patriarchal seat of power. Besides, the paper intends to establish the dedication, intelligence, valor, and diplomacy of these *Begums* whose stories have never been part of the popular narrative. The catalytic role that these women played in building the Mughal empire, as Mukhoty says, needs to be studied as an essential aspect of the development of the Mughal kingdom in India. Considering popular theories of studying cultural theory, this paper questions the prevalent ideas of privilege, power, and position associated with the title of the Badshah Begum and reveals the true socio-cultural suppression that functioned in the background. This paper brings out how the Begums perceived the importance of the title themselves at the personal level, thus contributing to the growth of the domestic, economic, political, and academic levels.

Keywords: *cultural theory, hegemonic interplay, historicity, narrative, socio-cultural suppression*

Introduction

Storytelling has always been a part of human civilization. Every generation of human settlement has passed on its legacy either in written (pictorial) or oral form. Stories took shape in various forms and was affected by the ideologies and thoughts of the narrators. Mythologies, folktales, epics, history are products of the literary quest of civilizations. A historical novel depicts a period of history and convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail, but sometimes the facts are distorted. History is not a technical discipline which can be read and understood if one wants to – read the texts, the narratives to form one's own interpretations and write a story. There is a desire to see oneself in the historical representation and so are the women folk. Women want to see themselves; people from every strata want to be represented and to be understood from their perspective– readers are demanding representation in popular culture and writers responds to the demand. The section of women who are not only the consumers but also the producers of women centric writing produce different narratives. Lives of women includes space from domestic to public space and such is the breadth of the

writings which includes poem, fiction, non-fiction, biographies, podcasts etc. Fiction often portrays characters from history and weaves the life of the protagonist through imagination. Historical fiction is one such literary genre where the story takes place in the past. Historical novels capture the details of the time period as accurately as possible for authenticity, including social norms, manners, customs, and traditions. Many novels in this genre tell fictional stories that involve actual historical figures or historical events. Historical fiction carries readers to another time and place, either real or imagined. Writing historical fiction requires a balance of research and creativity, and while it often includes real people and events, the genre offers a fiction writer many opportunities to tell a wholly unique story. Fiction helps readers to understand others' perspectives. Fiction adds to the unfolding of the character. Fiction allows the author and reader to fancy the character in the bigger frame. It enriches the imagination. The readers of fiction enjoy the endless imaginative and creative side of the literature whereas the reader of the history is refined with facts and evidence-based values of human existence. The readers of the historical fiction have the advantage of enjoying the blend of both aspects of the work. To understand it better the England of 1849 to 1850 is enjoyable yet informative in the work of David Copperfield. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has every detail of the big events India entailed after Independence through the eyes and life of the protagonist Saleem Sinai. The historical fiction based on Mughals narrates the imaginative lives of the beautiful begums and princesses that could have been differed from the narration still brings out their struggles, hopes, survival and imprints of their existence in the world of emperors known for brutality and battles. The narratives of the women folk needs voice as they have been doing all kind of activities to sustain themselves and their suppressed existence. The Mughal Fiction revisits the Mughal era of the Indian subcontinent. The Mughals lived and contributed to the art, culture, architecture and literature of the society. Apart from history, their lives still attract novelists and thus call for the need to understand the underlying layers presented in different genres while representing the Mughals.

Few Mughal fictions that readers might peep into include the *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire* by Ira Mukhoty, a well-researched writing bringing up the lives of the women from historical spaces. Her characters are strong, diplomatic, dynamic and royal. The characters have purpose and are weaved well in the dramatic situation. The choice of words is elevated and superior than the average level. *Daughters of the Sun* is an engrossing tale of the many women who lived behind the Purdah and yet led remarkable lives forming links in a chain that encircled all of Hindustan. She writes it with so much scholarship that it almost reads like nonfiction. She creates an ambience, a setting that is very true to life. It is the case with the writing of Indu Sundaresan.

In addition, Indu Sundaresan is an author of a trilogy namely *The Twentieth Wife*, *The Feast of Roses*, and *The Shadow Princess*. A gripping narrated storyteller whose tales of love, intrigues and sacrifice revolve round the Princesses lost behind the Purdah due to the negligence of court historians. Her tales are well-crafted, spellbinding, and luminous tale of the Mughal women. Her intellectual insights,



conceptual, theoretical and textual experiments have engaged and interpreted the complexities of the women world through different narratives.

Furthermore, Dr. Sugandha Rawat is an author of a book *The Women of Mughal Harem*, written more like a research work than a book with stories. Her work is well researched and contains references of her works from many books, journals and thesis writing. The book is informative and serves the purpose of a chronicle on Mughal History with women at the centre. The book is divided into seven chapters. It is a small, compact, and beautiful book backed by well investigated history.

Another author is Dr. Soma Mukherjee, a writer whose interest lies in Medieval Indian History. Her works are detailed, comprehensive and well investigated. The lives of princesses, queens and begums appears scintillating in her book.

Method

The methodology used for the research is discourse analysis. The approach includes critical reading of the texts and understanding it in the light of theories. The paper readily uses the theory of identity, culture and new historicism. The texts serve as the primary material to be read and work on. This research intends to highlight Ira Mukhoty's *Daughters of the Sun: Empresses, Queens and Begums of the Mughal Empire* and Indu Sundaresan's *The Twentieth Wife*. These works explicitly show the power exchange that inevitably occurred in the Mughal empire. The historical representation of Mughals has been surrounded by narratives of the central patriarchal seat of power. Besides, the paper intends to establish the dedication, intelligence, valor, and diplomacy of the *Begums*, Mughal royal women, whose stories have never been part of the popular narrative. The catalytic role that these women played in building the Mughal empire, as Mukhoty says, needs to be studied as an essential aspect of the development of the Mughal kingdom in India. This paper questions the prevalent ideas of privilege, power, and position associated with the title of the Badshah Begums and reveals the true socio-cultural suppression that functioned in the background. This paper brings out how the Begums perceived the importance of the title themselves at the personal level, thus contributing to the growth of the domestic, economic, political, and academic levels.

Results and Discussions

No study of a society can be complete without a reference to the position of women in it. The position of the women folk suggests and reflects the ideals and standard of the society. Women are the carrier of the civilization and the culture of a particular clan.

Mughal Begums

The Mughal history has a lot to depict about its emperors but less about its counterparts: the Mughal women. The power struggle in the Arab world forced Babur to move into India but their settling down was not easy. New place always comes with different threats, challenges and opportunities to look beyond. In the introduction of the book *Daughters of the Sun* Mukhoty says:

I have examined the lives and influence of some fifteen women who left their mark on India and whose lives impacted, to a greater or lesser degree, the luminous destinies of



these Mughal padshahs. In case of the earlier Mughals, it was the older matriarchs who were most influential, aunts and mothers like Aisan Daulat Begum, Khanzada Begum, Dildar Begum, Gulbadan Begum, Bega Begum and Maham Begum. (13)

There was Harkha Bai, Salima Sultan Begum and were other ladies too whose influence grew within the empire and highly influential was Noor Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. Mukhoty quotes:

Finally, as the empire became truly luminescent, unmarried daughters became powerful and there is the astounding legacy of Jahanara Begum, Roshanara Begum. Under the last of the great Mughals, Aurangzeb, there are the waning stars of his daughters Zeb-un-Nisa begum and Zeenat- un-Nisa Begum. (13)

The Mughal royal women were crucial in the establishment and maintenance of the Mughal Empire's authority in South Asia. In addition to the kings' riches, their efforts in the political, economic, cultural, and religious domains strengthened the Empire. Scholars have rarely given the lives, activities, accomplishments, and contributions of the royal Mughal ladies the credit they deserve, despite the fact that the family's well-known men gain recognition and admiration. Due to their active participation in both court and Harem politics, these royal women had a significant political role. Many of them even oversaw the Empire in secret on behalf of the emperors, having a profound influence on them through their views. In addition to these ladies of the royal house, the Zenana (the women's apartments) has always been a favourite topic of authors and researchers.

The Mughal begums acquire a good space in the history of the Mughal rules whose roles get re-represented and re-defined in the different genres of literature. The history has dearth of materials where the historians had no access or little understanding into the lives of the women. The accounts written by the women, exploring lives of women among the women is the only access to peep into the past. It is very easy to find major portions on manpower who exercised their rules in a new land, but it was the women who participated actively in the acculturation process. Popular belief if not serious scholarship, maintains that position of women in medieval Islamic society was an extremely depressed one. Women were secluded to harems and supposed to have no public life or pursue economic occupations. Famous scholar Ronald Jennings questioned the universal applicability of this theory in the context of Ottoman Empire. Similarly, in India's Mughal empire, efforts have been made to generate lives of women from a new perspective. Life beyond Purdah and lives in the Harem has always fascinated scholars from time to time to look through the nuances of the lives of one the most essential component of the Empire. Similarly, Mukhoty holds the view, "To this day there is a perception that Mughal women operated within a fixed zone of influence, the domestic Harem, an immutable cloistered space in which they led restricted and unfulfilled lives, from which they could seldom escape, and to which only the emperor had access" (xi). The quest for identity is what might have led the begums to play different roles according to the need. Identity (self-views) relates to our basic values that determine the choices we make (e.g., relationships, career). The meaning of an identity includes expectations for self about how one should



behave (Burke and Stets 2009). Mukhoty in her introduction brings out the same perspectives of identity of the begums where she defines them as:

In their roles as ambassadors, peacekeepers, rulers in absentia and even as guardians of memory, it was the Timurid-Chingizid ideal that these Mughal women were claiming. (xiv)

When Akbar became Padshah at the age of only thirteen years, a group of ‘milk mothers’ or foster mothers, became powerful, including Jiji Anaga and Maham Anaga. Then, as the Padshah settled into their growing empire, their wives gained influence and so there was Harka Bai, Salima Sultan Begum and, much more famously, Noor Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. Finally, as the empire became truly luminescent, unmarried daughters became powerful and there is the astounding legacy of Jahanara Begum and Roshanara Begum. Under the last of the great Mughals, Aurangzeb, there are the waning stars of his daughters Zeb-un-Nisa Begum and Zeenat-un-Nisa Begum. (xiii)

Mukhoty felt the need to study those women who placed a very high value on calligraphy writing and erudition. They wrote memoirs and were given the same rigorous education, in mathematics, history, physics, poetry, astronomy etc., as boys. Badshah/Padshah Begum was a title given to the most able Begum of the ruling Badshah. In a way the one who could stand herself out among the other begums, or mothers, or sisters would used to gain the title which was subject to the begum’s will and authority to exercise the power in the empire.

Badshah /Padshah Begums of Hindustan.

Starting from Khanzada begum who was sister of Babur gained this title as a mark of respect to Mehr-un-Nisa (wife of Jahangir) whose domestic, political, economic and diplomacy gained her the title of Noor Jahan (Light of the world) to Padshah Begum of the Mughal Empire. She even issued *farmans* to manage her economic and political affairs. In the next line of succession, the Mughal empire sees Arjumand Banu Begum and her two daughters as the Padshah begum of Hindustan. Shah Jahan’s love for Arjumand Banu begum was unfathomable and was the major reason behind conferring her the title of Mumtaz Mahal and Padshah begum of Hindustan. The daughters Jahanara and Roshanara were way different than the other begums. Jahanara remained unmarried and was the apple of the eye of Shah Jahan but with the advent of time she created a space for herself in the heart of her people in the empire. Her interest and involvement could be seen in every field of the empire. She left behind her desires and sacrificed her personal life for the sake of her love for her father and brother who needed her as guide through the thick and thin. Roshanara gained the title as a product of power clash between the would-be potential King. Her support to Aurangzeb against Dara Sikoh in the game of power struggle was a major reason to recognize her shrewdness and astute political abilities.

Khanzada Begum, a Timurid princess and the eldest daughter of Umar Shaikh Mirza II, the Amir of Ferghana, was also the elder sister of Babur, the earliest of the Badshah Begums known for her valour and sacrifice is the forbearer of the title Padshah Begum who carved her own niche among the men and women of the



Mughals. One of the painting illustrated by the Miniaturist Mansur about the siblings shows:

“Khanzada is seated in front of an attentive and respectful Babur, raising a commanding hand while speaking to the men. She is wearing the classic Turkish tall pointed hat, her face id unveiled and she is the only woman in the composition who is as large as the seated men.” (Mukhoty 11)

One of the most revered Begum who contributed in the foundation of the Mughals in the most critical time of their political turmoil. To tackle the issues with the Uzbeks where Babur was helpless against his foreign foes, he could find solution in Khanzada Begum. She was sent as a ransom to Shaybani Khan at the age of twenty-three. She was divorced after few years. She lost her child Khurram who dies in childhood.

Daughters of the Sun rightly brings out the best of the description about Khanzada.

Long after Babur himself is dead, Khanzada will become the most powerful woman of the Mughals when she is named ‘Padshah Begum of Hindustan’. There are times in the 200 years of the great Mughal empire that no padshah begum is named at all, so it is not an obligatory position. It is, instead, a mark of respect given to truly remarkable women who command enormous authority. In 1535 it is Khanzada, childless and twice-widowed, un-bolstered by son or husband, who holds this title in recognition of the valour of her sacrifice and the legitimacy of her memories. (Mukhoty 7)

Khanzada understood her responsibilities as a chief after Babur lost his mother and grandmother. She held the higher position in decision making claims.

Noor Jahan or Noor Mahal stands for ‘Light of the World’ also known as Mehrunnissa/ Mehr-un-Nissa was the last and twentieth wife of Jahangir. A charismatic woman full of intrigues, intelligence and ambition. Alexander Dow in his work *The History of Hindostan* says:

Mehr-ul-Nissa was a woman of Haughty spirit...To raise her own reputation in the seraglio, and to support herself and slaves with more decency, than the scanty pittance allowed her would admit, she called forth her invention and taste in working some admirable pieces of tapestry and embroidery, in painting skills with exquisite delicacy and in inventing female ornament of every kind. (Sundaresan 310)

Any ambassador or visitor who had been to the court has something to tell about the royal and grandeur of Mehrunnisa. Thus. William Foster, Ed., says:

It is scarcely to recall the romantic story of Nur Mahal (better known by her marriage to Shir Afghan, his assasination, and her subsequent union with the Emperor, who had already been attracted to her before her first marriage. At this period her influence over her husband was so unbounded that she practically ruled the empire.... (Sundaresan 351)

She had no child with Jahangir. Mukhoty describes her presence in the life of Jahangir as “a felicitous blend of comforting, reassuring care and a woman with enormous talent, charisma and ability” (137). Noor Jahan shared Jahangir’s taste in art and made numerous contribution to the advancement of his imperial heritage. She had gold



coins in her name, ships to trade and royal *farman* for issuing orders, constructed majestic buildings in the empire. Mukhoty quotes “sometimes she would sit in the balcony of her palace, while the nobles would present themselves and listen to her dictates.” Even drums were beaten before her move into the court (138). An exceptionally rich begum with lots of wealth, successful trader, offered gifts, organized marriages and ceremonies, sponsor charities rarely done by any other begums beforehand. She was gifted a pair of diamond bracelets worth 100,000 rupees and was poured a tray full of gold coins over her head as an appreciation for her shooting skills where she shot two tigers and knocked other two tigers with four shots (134). She accompanied the king almost everywhere and was his trusted consultant. She spent 200,000 rupees on the Noor Manzil gardens in Agra in 1616. She traded with the Dutch and the Portuguese in addition with the English. She collected duties at Sikandarabad on goods coming from Bhutan and Bengal, raw silk, spikenard, borax, Verdigris, ginger and fennel, and invest specifically in the commerce of indigo and embroidered cloths (142). She built a *serai* outside Agra called the Serai Noor Mahal.

Mumtaz Mahal is portrayed as a fourteen-year-old known by the name of Arjumand Banu Begum, engaged to Khurram in Lahore in 1607. The young bride is the daughter of Abu-al-Hassan Yamin-al-Daulah, niece of Mehr-un-Nisa, and the granddaughter of Ghias Beg. After five long years of wait, Arjumand Banu is married to the prince, now Sultan Khurram in a month-long celebration in March 1612 at Agra. For the next nineteen years of her married life, Arjumand Banu will be the constant companion of a man who will be ceaselessly, restlessly, on the move (Mukhoty 156). She lost her first-born daughter, Hur-al-Nisa to smallpox. Soon after this tragedy, she gave birth to her fourth child, the future Shah Shuja. (157) By the time Arjumand begum acquired the title of Mumtaz Mahal, she had four children. Mumtaz Mahal’s eldest surviving daughter, Jahanara leads the future of the empire in the coming years. Sati-un-nisa was entrusted with Mumtaz Mahal’s seal and as she can read Persian and recite Quran, she became tutor to Jahanara. In the nineteen years of marriage, she bore fourteen children to Khurram which is ‘not very unusual’ for a woman in the seventeenth century as quoted by the Mukhoty. To support the claim, Mukhoty gives the example of Henrieta Maria of France bearing nine children to King Charles I. Mumtaz mahal’s role as mother will remain highlighted in the history whose seven surviving children will shape the destiny of Hindustan. She is regarded as a very different woman in comparison to the other woman or Badshah begums of the Empire. She is cultured and refined woman, certainly, a beautiful one, most probably, and a charming and talented one, no doubt, to have captivated a man like Shah Jahan for so many years. But she is, essentially, a profoundly a voiceless woman. Unlike many other Mughal women, and clearly unlike Noor Jahan, she leaves behind no poetry, no biography, no architecture, no garden, nor any daring deed in battle. What she left behind is seven children. Mumtaz Mahal accompanied Shah Jahan everywhere, even when she was pregnant. She gave birth to her sixth child, Aurangzeb, in Dohad, a small village en route from Gujarat to Ujjain, and three months later, Mumtaz Mahal was pregnant again. Mukhoty also gives reference to one the incidents where Mumtaz Mahal being pregnant rode a thousand miles to the south along with Shah Jahan (161). In 1628 she has been conferred the title of Badshah begum.



Jahanara begum was one of the “most accomplished” and powerful “women of the Mughal empire” during the reign of her father Shah Jahan. (introduction of *Daughters of the Sun*). At the age of fourteen, she was regarded as the second rank to her mother Mumtaz Mahal and was given the title of Begum Sahib. During the war of succession between the sons of Shahjahan, the daughters of the imperial family were divided into two camps. One camp consisted of Shahjahan, Jahanara, and Dara Shikoh while the other consisted of Aurangzeb and her sister Roshanara. She was given an allowance of four lakhs of rupees, while all the other children put together, six surviving siblings, are only allocated a total of six lakhs rupees. Within a year, by 1629, Jahanara was given two trade ships, the Shahi and the Ganjawar. Not only this, the first ten years after the death of Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara is completely immersed in the raucous fastness of managing the imperial household. Murad Baksh, her seven-year-old brother, was entrusted into her care and she was responsible for his education and his well-being in addition to organizing all the glittering events at court. She was not only an elder sister but also a mother to her siblings. In 1633, she arranged for the marriage of her beloved brother Dara Shikoh. Within few years, she was again busy in the arrangement of her younger brother Shah Shuja and Murad Baksh. The eldest daughter and favourite child of Padshah Shah Jahan is described as forty-year-old, unmarried, and at the very height of her glory and power. He is known simply as Begum Sahib, the new Padshah Begum of the Mughal Empire. The brand-new city of Shahjahanabad, completed by the Padshah in 1648, has been shaped in the furnace of Jahanara’s ambition. Five of the nineteen imperial building in the city have been built by her, including the large central avenue through which the procession now travels. The entire revenue of the territory and port of Surat, all fourteen lakhs rupees of it, is hers to command. The revenue from the Panipat estate also goes to Jahanara which was estimated at over two lakhs of rupees. Her role as a daughter makes her character as unique because the seventeen-years-old Jahanara is a constant presence by the side of her dying mother through the endless, bloody hours of her labour, distributing gems and gold coins to the needy in her increasingly desperate and desolate quest for miracle. Her ship, the *Sahibi*, sails from the port of Surat under her colours and Jahanara carries out lucrative trade with the Dutch and the English. Her total annual income, including the imperial allowance, is estimated at thirty lakhs rupees. (1.5 billion rupees in today’s money). In addition, the nobleman at court and the foreign merchants seeking trade favours wrangle to give her the most flawless jewels, the most surprising curiosities. She composed two Sufi treatises in Persian, displaying her confidence in the mastery of the Chisthiya faith. The background of Jahanara also suggests that she had little inclination towards the political war in the court of the Mughals ‘She was loved by all’ agrees Manucci, ‘and lived in state and magnificence’. She was also the favourite of Shah Jahan and is respected by all. From being the favourite daughter of the Padshah, she became a prisoner and lead quite a good number of days in banishment at the Agra fort (169).

Conclusion

These women centric narratives portray an interesting side of historical past of India and its cultural practices. It shows that history is much more than mere dry of events



of the past. It is much more than the mere record of the Badshah's and Begums. It is also about the lives of women in the Harem and their impact in the making of the history. Rather than the man's proclamation on woman, it is about the women's role in cultivating the man's world. Khanzada begum was a powerful woman from within. She paved way for other Mughal women to take decision irrespective of any position or societal judgement. She became a central figure to inspire ladies from the Harem as how one can rewrite her own destiny through the most challenging time. Mumtaz Mahal's extensive mothering connotes her identity as a mother where she felt that only being a mother to the heir of the crown, she can complete her duties. A similar concept comes from Rosenberg's 1979 book on the topic wherein he says that self-concept is an aggregate of an individual's thoughts and feelings which have reference to himself as an object. Jahanara is an erudite and cultured, learned under the guidance of Sati-un-Nissa. Her resplendence is unparalleled and she has accomplished more than any single Mughal ever. She was a loyal daughter and a lovable sister. She had unconditional love for her brother Dara Shikoh. Her journey shows a remarkable up and down of a Badshah Begum's life. Seeking miracle is her spiritual quest and her interest in charity at such a tender age speaks a lot about her character in building. An extensive body of scientific research has found that spirituality plays an important role in mental well-being (e.g., Paloutzian and Park, 2013; Pargament et al., 2013a) and physical health (Koenig et al., 2012) and also serves as a protective factor in psychological adjustment to negative life experiences (e.g., Gall and Guirguis-Younger, 2013). Again, her account of learning and her knack for knowledge is what makes her a woman of substance. Character strengths are also universal (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) which is reflected in Jahanara's positive personality traits. Her responsibilities did not fade with the time and distance. Jahanara, having spent years organizing her brother's marriage and taking on the responsibilities of the imperial household. This paper advocates this nuanced approach to past times that can aid in uncovering the world inside Harem and its impact on the world outside the Harem. That being the case, renewed sensitive research of the Mughal history is essential in bringing out the diverse pursuits of Royal Mughal women. Such research would unravel the multi-layered history of the period that has been veiled by the historians for so long.

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