

RE-FIGURING TRADITIONAL ARCHETYPES OF MEDIEVAL MUSLIM WOMEN'S POSITION IN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

In order to validate their hegemonic theories, professional historians' practice dehistoricization, elimination of the historical context, while making the Eastern history especially about women. The third world's history has always been misinterpreted, exaggerated and scandalized by the Universal historiography, a professional way of writing history which labels the third world people as ahistorical, the nations without any history. So, the Eurocentric accounts create historical distortions within the false historical facts. Conversely, postmodernity disobeys the traditional way of writing history and brings out the existed narratives with a new form. It lays emphasis on the deconstructions and re-historicization of the past using new ways and means. As the glorious past is destructed in the Eurocentric narratives, so the postmodern narrative strategy entails its rebirth to repair what has been lost so far. A postmodern condition, indeed, relies on the multiplicity of truth and history as well. Therefore, using the postmodern prism of 'refiguring history' this paper is concerned with renewal of Eurocentric narratives about the sixteenth and seventeenth century's women depiction of Muslim women in general. The research methodology used for this research paper is qualitative and exploratory. In this endeavour, an attempt has been made in this paper to shed light on the traditional archetypes of Medieval Muslim women's status in the annals of history.

Keywords: Medieval Muslim Women, Refiguring History, Postmodernism, Eurocentric Narratives

Introduction

A postmodern condition, indeed, relies on the multiplicity of truth and history as well. It asserts that the existence of actual historical knowledge is impossible because it is in the process of conversion at all the times. No experience is stable at present as instability is always there to mutilate it. Accordingly, the postmodern realm transforms the so-called perfect narratives in an attempt to create an alternate history. Therefore, using the postmodern prism of 'refiguring history' this paper is concerned to renew Eurocentric narratives about the sixteenth and seventeenth century's women in general. Women often seem indiscernible in what is generally professed as the male-oriented society of Islam. The women of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries especially Mughal and Ottoman period women are often misinterpreted. This paper refigures this misunderstanding with series of opinions on women in the pre-modern phase of history. Beyond the clichéd reflection of these two eras' women are always depicted as submissive and in need of freedom from the shackles of patriarchy and social standards. Many individuals lack the knowledge about this period and their females in particular. Mostly stories tell a tale of these Muslim women as a common set of different figures and elements that were things of interest and need for European people. The usual image of these era's women is portrayed as confined, hidden and veiled ladies of their captivating and enthralling harem or seraglio. As Ronal C. Jennings, in his article 'Woman in Early Ottoman Seventeenth century' states:

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Woman have generally been considered by modern western observers to occupy a despised and servile position in the social and economic order of Islamic civilization. [...] Muslim woman is held to have been utterly unable to challenge or even question the authority of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. (54)

So, it is important to dismantle the stereotypes that are circulating in the West and most of the times in our own Muslim domain.

Research Questions:

- i) What is the position of women in the pre-modern phase of history?
- ii) What is the position of the women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries especially in the Harem culture of Mughal and Ottoman period?

Research Objectives:

- i) The main objective of this paper is two-fold. Its objective is to explain that there is a need for the Muslim women to be considered as individuals under their own unique culture struggling for emancipation warranted by individualistic choices rather than solutions forced upon them by patriarchy.
- ii) Secondly, to dismantle from the traditional narrative that Muslim woman mainly belonging to the age of Ottoman and Mughal Empires were powerless because of their gender or the cultural norms.

Additionally, a widespread misconception is to view retrogressive Islamic regimes as synonymous with Islam, whereby adherents of Islam are at times understood as monolithic by the West, framed under one identity that of a terrorizing Oriental. Similarly, Muslim women are seen as victimized and persecuted under the Islamic reign. Many Muslims may not necessarily conform to the retrogressive politicized interpretations of Islam that unfortunately mark much of the Muslim world. A realistic and balanced portrayal of Muslims is rarely cited where the Muslims may come across as individuals: normal and human. The politicized and orthodox interpretation of Islam primarily depicts Muslim woman as sentimental, ignorant and homogenous, driven and restricted by the obscurantist Islamic interpretations. For example, the Western view of Muslims starts and ends with the image of bearded men and veiled women. This

politicized version of a pseudo-Islam hinders the real faith and essence of Islam from surfacing out into the open. What the Western scholars mostly ignore in all this is that Arabs are not the only Muslims in the world. There are many other Muslim nations with diverse cultures of their own. Even within the Arab world, the awareness among Muslim women for education and their sexuality is constantly on the rise.

Furthermore, if we look into the pre-Islamic era where matriarchy was the custom, sexual merchandising ruled and “women reduced men to anonymous sexual commodities and denied them the right to fatherhood” (Mernissi, 10). It’s Islam itself which accepts that men are created as weak companions who actually cannot repel woman's charisma. This approach alters the orthodox conventions that in traditional Islamic society woman has no power at all, thus giving woman a high point because of her sexuality and confirming the views of Imam Ghazali's interpretation in his book *The Revivification of Religious Sciences*, which “casts the woman as the hunter and the man as the passive victim” (64). Therefore we can say that Islam considers women individuals who can play an important role in their societies and are fully able to carve out their own destiny.

Quran, the ultimate authority in Islam, is a polysemous text and the various interpretations of its verses are definitely debatable. An essential element towards an understanding of Muslim narratives is their culture. What Lila Abu-Lughod terms as “cultural relativism” (786) poses that no culture is dominant to another. Therefore, the narrative of a Muslim living under one culture will vary from that of another Muslim belonging to another culture. This automatically leads to varying religious interpretations which will reflect the culture of the region.

Likewise, the emphasis on female nature and excavation of women narratives is called Gynocentrism: women are fully able to hold the office of power both in society and at home and should not be seen as an inferior counterpart to men. While the Western view seeks for freedom and independence of women, Islam has its own female narrative of women's emancipation. Muslim society in terms of female narrative holds its own history. Islam is the religion under which Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, an established tradeswoman of Mecca, dubbed the Mother of Believers, first proposed marriage to Muhammad (PBUH). A widow proposing to a man fifteen years younger than herself is something unthought-of under patriarchal values. This in itself speaks of the stature granted to a woman under Islam. The Battle of Camel is a mark of female determination led by Hazrat Aisha upon hearing of the death of Hazrat Uthman. There exist ubiquitous narratives of women's decisiveness and

courage in face of opposition. Their contribution to Islam is undisputable whether in the realm of society or religion.

Discussion:

There are a number of women in Muslim era who made significant contributions in a number of fields and they also had the resilient control on the governing authority. These women shunned the notion that women in purdah were oppressed, docile or unable to influence men. During the Mughal era, Hameeda Banu Maham Begum Begum Tughluq Nigar Khanum and Akbar mother Maham Anga are the foremost examples. Similarly, Jodha Bai exercised extraordinary influence on Akbar and his Empire. Same is true about Noor Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. As Lindsay E. Rankin points out that "observation of [these] heroic women can change the perception of women in general" (421), and since the women of the Mughal Empire took risks and remain courageous within their domestic sphere instead of being fearful and weak, it gives a new perspective of these Muslim women characters as modern archetypes whose quest for free will necessitates a quest for a new identity and a new insight of Muslim women. In addition to the heroic nature of such women, they are also modern in their quests because they attempt to break away from their archetypal characters, anticipations, or fates, and choose new callings defining their own 'self' in the established social norms.

To have the option to comprehend the noticeable job of ladies in the Mughal court it must be kept in the psyche that ladies in the focal Asia from which the 'Place of Timur' started from the very beginning delighted in significantly more autonomy and was more successful than those in the focal Islamic regions. Alan Gua, the unbelievable lady's predecessor of Chingiz Khan assumed an extraordinary job in the ancient times of the Mughals. The premier life partner of Timur, the establishing father Mughal tradition was likewise a free lady. Babur's grandma, Isan Daulat Begum, who was the spouse of Yunus Khan Mughal, after the death toll of Babur's dad adapted everything for her grandson. As Baber himself expressed in *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince, and Emperor* interpreted by Wheeler M. Thackston with regards to strategies and methodology, there were hardly any ladies like my grandma Isan Daulat Begum. She was a scholarly and a decent director, for the most part game plans were made by her terms. (2) Furthermore, Babur's mom Qultug Nigar Begum was an extremely excited woman, the main spouse of Umar Shaykh Mirza and in *Baburnama* he makes reference to that "my mom went with me in numerous fights as well." (56)

Another model is of Maham Begum, the spouse of Baber who accompanied her significant other to Tranoxiana and Badakhsan and remained by him through various challenges. She appreciated a grandiose situation in the rule of Babur and was the main sovereign who use to sit by the side of the ruler on the seat at Delhi. For more than more than two years after the passing of her better half, she was a functioning member in the governmental issues of that time.

She held a recognized situation in the collections of mistresses of Babur as well as in the rule of Humayun and Akbar.

Likewise, Gulbadan, who was the girl of Zahir-ud-racket Babur who was conceived in 1522 A.D additionally assumed an essential job in different fields. In the period of Humayun when Sher Shah Surie threated to Humayun's time, he assembled a warning conference to pound the uprising notoriety of Sher Shah Suri. In this meeting, Gulbadan Begum took an interest effectively. It was because of her ceaseless endeavors that she had the option to expel the conflicts among Humayun and Hindal. The first authority record was composed by her. As per Mrs. Drink who is the interpreter of Humayunnama states: "When Jahangir rebelled against Akbar around then Gulbadan Begum and Hamida Banu Begum played out the job of the arbitrator and on the solicitation of both these women Akbar pardoned Jahangir." (15) Similarly, Hamida Bano Begum, the girl of Sheik Akbar impacted Humayun and Akbar, it was a result of her knowledge and extraordinary aptitudes that the relations among Iran and Hindustan consistently stayed great. Hamida Bano Begum was a lot of overwhelmed by the legislative issues of the court. She reserved the privilege to give the decree and she had likewise assumed the job of legitimate correspondence for the settlement of different issues.

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After the death of Nur-e-Jahan, the honour of being the premier lady of Harem fell upon Jahan Ara Begum who was the eldest daughter of Shahjahan. She took an active part in political matters. We can consider her importance through this event of history that Raja of Sirmur Budh Prakash bequeathed her with valuable presents and wished her to present his case to the emperor

for deciding his clash with the Raja of Garhwali. Realizing the massive impact of Jahan Ara Begum, the foreign traders personally went to pay her respect. When the Dutch embassy understood that they are ineffectual in obtaining permission to run out their trade in the sub-continent they made every Endeavor to gain the favourable response of the official members of the court and above all of Jahan Ara whose influence on father was unbounded. As Niccolao Manucci, an Italian writer and travel who worked in the Mughal court writes in his book *Storia do Mogor*,

“Jaha Ara, the eldest daughter, had an annual income of three million of rupees, in addition to the revenues of the port of Surat were assigned for her. Among all these ladies, the most valued and esteemed were Begam Sahib, because she attained from her father whatever she liked.” (364)

Consequently, we can say that it is a tremendous accomplishment of these Medieval Muslim women that they became successful in leaving their marks not just in the area of politics but also in other aspects of life irrespective the restrictions of purdah and harem in medieval times. They did not only participate in the political affairs but in many events seem to be more dominant on their male sovereigns. These ladies advised them in the critical matters. They had the coins of their name; they acquired the right to sit beside the king and to issue the orders on his behalf. All these aspects are an excellent example of liberal attitude towards Muslim women in the Mughal Harem which was considered a confined structure.

Moreover, all these unusually skilled women not only advised on the important matters of the state but they were the most celebrated figures in the palace. In the Harem the mother was the solitary in charge of all the affairs and was respected by all the family members. It was observed by in *The Akbar Nama of Abu-l-Fazl*, that “paying homage to one’s mother was a Chingizi tradition” (432). Harban Mukhia, an Indian historian in his book *The Mughals of India* (2008) states “Mughal histories are full of stories, especially told in the archives, of the powerful rulers who stood before their grandmothers and mothers almost like cringing children” (88) Of these, women of the zenana were continuous and closest to an Emperor in every walk of life. Not only were they closest to him in proximity and fondness, but also they could offer the emperor more personal pleasure, more free support, and more wise counsel than any other person or group. He further highlights three things which were a constant source of power in the Mughal emperor: his army, his treasury, and his women (Mukhia, 100). The zenana women went with the emperor everywhere, and according to A.S.

Beveridge, who translated *Humayun Nama* states “how fully the fate of the ladies was involved in that of the emperor” (26).

The palaces in which these royal women resided were self-sufficient cities with an extensive range of castes, professions, and administrators, and were as diverse with a mix of religions, nationalities, and artistic talents as to be found in any city of the time. The laws of privacy governed the public lives of the women of the aristocracy. The practice of purdah, or the confiscating of women behind a veil or wall, had already been known to ancient and medieval Muslim world and had been used through epoch to epoch by the aristocrats. By the time of the Mughals, the Harem culture was an accepted way of life especially for Nobel families, and this practice later came to be observed as a sign of a strict adherence to Islam by the foreign travellers. Conversely to this perception sober and energetic woman guarded the harem on the inside. Urdubegis, the class of women were allocated to protect the emperor and residents of zananas who were armed with bows and arrows, short daggers, were from Kashmir and central Asia and they were rated throughout the zanana, the trust worthiest. As Kishori Saran Lal, in his book *The Mughal Harem* mentioned that “The urdubegis of the Mughal court were so skillful in warfare, that during the war of succession, Aurangzeb rejected to visit Shah Jahan because he feared the female armed guard would murder him” (52).

Additionally, another Eurocentric narrative portrays Indo-Muslim culture in association with the crafty concubines who knew the art to control noble men. This report historically traces the social construction of the Indian concubine which has always been misrepresented and degraded in the colonial stories. In the grand narratives of Indian history, usually, courtesans are depicted as sex-starved and shaming over their ‘fallen’ pasts. It is a pity that historiographers’ inadequate understanding of concubine institution makes them unable to distinguish courtesan (a woman who cohabits with an important man) from prostitution (a woman who engages in sexual intercourse for money), as both are perceived in the same way. As the courtesans have been examined as an underclass and remained neglected as yet.

In contrast, in the eighteenth century, courtesans made significant contributions to the development of culture as they were not only the great artisan of that time but also the cultural builders. These sophisticated artists had proficiency in essential skills like music, poetry, and dance. They were trained in entertaining the noblemen and teaching them civilized manners. In his book *The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, Abdul Haleem Sharar portrays the courtesan tradition as;

Some courtesans within this environment gained sufficient social status and respect that the wealthy of the city sent their sons to them in order for them to learn manners, grooming, and etiquette. It was not uncommon for the house of the chief courtesan, or chaudhrayan, of the more sophisticated kotha to be the chief meeting place for the most important musicians in the city and those visiting from elsewhere” (Sharar, 139).

Courtesan tradition or tawa'if bazi is one of the mesmerizing traditions of Lucknow. Somehow, they were the manufacturers of Indo-Muslim culture as in the development of classical music, they played a dynamic role. In Delhi, Akbari Bai's establishment or house “came to be known everywhere for its refinement and élan” (187) and soon attracted admirers and visitors from the elite class. She was a rich and extremely popular lady. “She had female singers, musicians, music masters, armed guards, and outriders: a whole range of attendants and dependents traveling with her” (184). Their presence was assured at all the occasions even in the religious festival. Thousands of enthusiasts, at Muharram, came to Lucknow from distant places to attend Haidar's Imambara and listen to the courtesan Lady Haidar's song of lament. Moreover, sophisticated manners, civilized conversation and refined values of courtesans paint the striking portrait of the bygone age. They were not ordinary women rather they had adorned history books. For example, Begum Hazrat Mahal was also a *khangi* and her name was Mehak Pari. She came into the royal harem of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah who married her later. She was one of prominent leaders of the Revolt in Awadh (1857-58). Her skillful art and wise planning in the rebellion had embellished historical texts.

Furthermore, the Ottoman era women veils a more convoluted history than the Mughal era women. It traverses the long tradition of the Ottoman Empire, from the mid-fourteenth to the midtwentieth century, and incorporates a different land and social range, including women from Greece, North Africa, and West Asia 1, and in addition Christian, Jewish, and Muslim women. The investigation of Ottoman women is generally new before the late 1970s little had been composed.

The traditional narrative locates Ottoman Era women firmly in the household area and is not able to see how noticeable they were outside the home, either in the neighborhood or beyond. Women lifestyles, considered in contemporary European conditions, were indeed proscribed. But now scholars are discovering the level to which females were publically

noticeable, whether they were associates of the upper-class women or peasants working in the areas

One of the most lasting images of Ottoman women's segregation is the harem. The unique and eroticized image of the harem has been a Western obsession, and because of their less knowledge, they overlook the much more complex functioning of this significant foundation. Leslie Peirce, in *The Imperial Harem*, one of the most substantial works on gender in the pre-modern era, has disputed the traditional image of Ottoman woman as confined and therefore powerless. She establishes that as the sultans retreated into their harems in the late sixteenth century, their royal women especially their mothers became more and more potent and influential. Contemporary critics and many later historians called this epoch the "Sultanate of the Women."

(67) The reality, Peirce reveals, is more complicated. Many women of the harem used their wealth to support important community developing tasks and non-profit tasks.

Due to their closeness and impact on the sultans, they likewise assumed a dynamic part in authoritative political matters. For instance, Nurbanu, one of the beloveds of Selim II, played a major role in achieving the peace that finished up the War of the Holy League in 1573. Rather than interpreting them as weak individuals, their isolated status in the harem enabled these royal women to exercise extraordinary impact on the political existence of the early present-day Ottoman state.

Additionally, it was behind the veil that these elegant women wielded their impact. We can witness that their power found expression through their support of important architectural projects. As Reina Lewis, a post-colonial feminist, in her book *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* writes that

It was in the mid-sixteenth century, Hurrem Sultan referred as Roxelana in Europe, the talented partner of Suleyman the Magnificent, started the development of the Haseki Hurrem Kulliye in Istanbul, it was a multiplex that incorporated schools, few mosques, a kitchen, a clinic for ladies and a bathhouse. The Mihrimah mosque in Edirne also known as Adrianople, Thrace, begun in 1555 under the aid of Hurrem Sultan's daughter and it was designed and completed by the greatest Ottoman architect of the early-modern era, Sinan. The Yeni Valide Mosque in Istanbul instigated in 1598 by Safiye Sultan which is another astounding example of royal women's pown as charitable institutions which were funded by their own plentiful personal assets.

Apart from being highly generous, Ottoman Era women played a very vital role in the economy. Asli Sancar demolishes this myth as it is expected from the female gender to be enclosed within the four walls, but in his book *Ottoman Women: Myth and Reality* he describes that the:

Women borrowed and lent money, served as private tax collectors and created a variety of business relationships. Throughout the Ottoman Era, women from urban and rural areas were widely associated with certain craftsmanship, mainly textiles. Women also sold foods, they were small-scale traders, even managed public washrooms, and were musical players. In the rural area, women were involved in agriculture and animal farming, often while men were away on protracted military operations. Ottoman Empire we see women who were owners of lands, some even held timers' sand were also identified as 'military fiefs. They could inherit and allocate property, and they often played an active role in managing their own treasure. (28-29)

Likewise, Kosem Sultan and Noor Banu were two such women who did not accept their status as just a widow in the Ottoman court, and instead became a real powerful ruler of the Empire. One could associate the status of Ottoman's woman with that of European women. Certainly, Lady Elizabeth Craven , who travelled in the region, reported in her *Journey through the Crimea to Constantinople* , "I think I never saw a country where women may enjoy so much liberty from all accusation, as in Ottoman Empire [...] The Ottomans in their conduct towards our sex are an example to all other nations." (187)

Conclusion:

Not just these women but in early days of Islam Hazrat Khadija, the wife of the last Prophet (P.B.U.H), was considered as the most powerful women in Islam. Therefore, enough evidence has been provided that women were too strong and it is a myth created in the West that the Muslim women are always confined in the four walls and had no voice at all.

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