
Strangers' Gaze: Mughal *Harem* and European Travellers of the Seventeenth Century

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Travellers generally show an uncommon interest in describing the women of the country they visit and European travellers of the seventeenth century were no exception. This article examines their representation of Indian women and demonstrates how they in their narrative discussed Mughal *harem*. European travellers' representation of Indian women and their conditions have been considered by some modern historians as indispensable, simply because the indigenous contemporary writers have left large gaps, which could only be filled by the information provided by the foreign travellers. However, a little scrutiny of portrayals of women by overseas visitors and a comparative analysis of this material with the information provided by local writers, contemporary or of a bit earlier or later period, abundantly reveal that European travellers were equally deficient in this area.

*Harem*¹ has generally been depicted by foreigners as a place of exotic curiosity² and was "viewed with fascination and loathing."³ Indira Ghose comments about colonial travellers that "nowhere is the range of travellers' gazes more clearly shown than in the descriptions of visits to the *zenana*."⁴ The same is true of European travellers' of the seventeenth century. However, while describing the Mughal *harem*, European travellers were handicapped in two ways: first as foreigners, they possessed limited resources to understand the language and culture of the locals and secondly,

they were all male and thus private domain of the women was nearly completely inaccessible to them. Nevertheless, the Europeans, without realizing these handicaps, used their gaze with unbridled speculative power and unleashed their erotic imaginations by trying to reveal what was concealed from them. In this way, their information is more a case of fantasizing than of historical veracity.

Indian writers of the Mughal period used different terms for describing the living place for the women. Commonly, it was the *mahal* or *harem*.⁵ As a term, it was derived from the Arabic word *haram* which originally meant a sanctuary but later began to be applied to female apartments as well as to the inmates living therein.⁶ It also literally meant something sacred or forbidden. As explained by R. Nath, "it denoted seraglio, or the secluded part of the palace or residence reserved for the ladies of the Muslim household. It was also called *zenanah*; *harem-sara*; *harem-gah*; *mahal-sara*; and *raniwas*." He further clarified that "the females of a Muslim family resided in apartments which were in an enclosed courtyard and excluded from public view. This enclosure was called the *harem*."⁷ K. S. Lal has added that from original meaning as sanctuary, "with the passage of time it became synonymous with the female apartment of the elite as also with the inmates lodged therein."⁸

The term *harem* or *mahal* was, thus, used by the indigenous writers in a sense which came quite close to mean "a system whereby the female relatives of a man—wives, sisters, mother, aunts, daughters—share much of their time and their living space, and further, which enables women to have frequent and easy access to other women in their community, vertically across class lines as well as horizontally."⁹ European travellers generally preferred the term *harem* but also used the term *mahal*. However, their use of these terms was significantly different. They used it in the sense which came close to mean "a system that permits males' sexual access to more than one female" and in this way, "the system often but not invariably elicited from Western men pious

condemnation for its encouragement of sexual laxity and immorality."¹⁰

According to European travellers of the period, the Muslims were "very fond of women, who are their principal relaxation and almost their only pleasure"¹¹ and therefore, they "indulge an extraordinary Liberty for Women" and "practise the Use of Concubines, according as their Fortunes and Abilities can reach towards their Maintenance."¹² English traveller, John Marshall believed that it was written in the Arabic books that "nothing is desirable but women."¹³ William Finch's description of the very location of *mahal* revealed its centrality to the Emperor: "Within the second court is the *mahal*, . . . between each corner and this middle, most are two fair large chambers for his women (so that each *mahal* receives sixteen) in separate lodgings, without doors to any of them, all keeping open house to the King's pleasure. . . . in the midst of all the court stands the King's Chamber, where he, like a cock of the game, may crow over all."¹⁴

The travellers fantasized about the number of women in the King's palace and provided different figures. Italian adventurer, Niccalao Manucci, said that "ordinarily there are within the *mahal* two thousand women of different races."¹⁵ English ambassador to Emperor Jahangir's court, Thomas Roe stated that the King "keepe a thowsand."¹⁶ Another English adventurer, Thomas Coryat, also confirmed Roe's figure by stating that Emperor Jahangir "keepeth a thousand women for his own body."¹⁷ According to another English traveller, Robert Coverte, the Emperor had ten queens, one thousand concubines and two hundred eunuchs.¹⁸ The same was the case with nobility and high officials of the state. Francisco Pelsaert, a Dutch traveller, recorded that the governors "fill and adorn their *mahals* with beautiful women, and seem to have the pleasure-house of the whole world within their walls."¹⁹ This representation of *harem* as the pleasure-house has led to the general misconception that every woman in the *harem* served a sexual purpose. However, the facts were quite different. There were not more than five per cent

women who were either queens or concubines or slave girls of the king. There were also a large number of other women who lived inside the *harem*. These were mothers, step-mothers, foster mothers, aunts, grandmothers, sisters, daughters and other female relatives of the king. The male children also resided inside the harem till they grew up. Then, there were other classes of women, such as slaves and servant girls. Most of women in the *harem* were female slaves or maid-servants who were employed to serve the royal ladies and to maintain the household. There were also a number of women officials and guards who were appointed by the emperor for taking care of the various needs of the *harem*. There were also eunuch guards who guarded the surrounding areas of the *harem*. Female fortune tellers and various other female entertainers also lived inside the harem. The King had a network of espionage system inside the *harem* and some women and eunuchs acted as spies and kept him informed about the activities of the *harem* women.²⁰

For European travellers, *harem* represented a paradise on earth. Their accounts generally exuded in women's fine clothes and extravagant jewellery. Francois Catrou, who based his history on Manucci's manuscript, recorded that: "The reader may possibly here imagine, that it is intended to transport him into fairy land, where nothing is seen besides pearls and diamonds; but the description which is now given is still far below the truth."²¹ Here the emperor assigned names to his possessions, not just to his jewels but also to his slaves and wives: "One is called Gokal, the rose; another, Narguis, the tulip; some other, Chambeli, the jessamine."²² The *harem* in contrast to the outside had its own climate: "The apartments of the queens are magnificent; and whatever can contribute either to convenience or pleasure has been consulted in their arrangement. It may be said, that the ardour of a burning climate is never experienced in these abodes. Here are to be seen running streams, shadowy groves, fountains, and subterraneous grottos for securing the enjoyment of a delicious coolness".²³ These descriptions proved that "in this watery, sensual region, inside and out are confounded: fountains

and streams run through apartments, fresh air is found in underground caves; the seraglio is like an inverted world".²⁴

European travellers referred to the extraordinary expenses of the *harem*. According to English traveller, William Hawkins, "the expences daily for his [King's] women by the day is thirtie thousand rupia."²⁵ Hawkins' companion, John Jourdain also confirmed that "his wives, there slaves, and his concubines doe spend him an infinite deale of money, incredible to bee believed."²⁶ The influential French traveller, Francois Bernier, also emphasised "the enormous expenses of the seraglio, where the consumption of fine clothes of gold, and brocade, silks, embroideries, pearls, musk, amber and sweet essences, is greater than can be conceived."²⁷ Manucci described the royal antics when "the king took it into his head to fix the costume of the women in his harem, dividing them into groups or companies—that is, so many got up in such a manner and in such colours, another company in another colour, and so on for the whole of them. He was also anxious that these clothes should all be of the finest materials procurable."²⁸ Manucci also added that the King also built a special hall "for the greater satisfaction of his lusts". It was twenty cubits long and eight cubits wide, "adored throughout with great mirrors". It consumed a huge amount of money and "the gold alone cost fifteen millions of rupees, not including the enamel work and precious stones, of which no account was kept." Manucci believed that "all this expenditure was made so that he might obscenely observe himself and his favourite women."²⁹

The travellers have described a special bazaar (fair) which were for the women of *harem* at the time of the *Nouroz*. English traveller, Peter Mundy, mentioned that in this fair, the wives and daughters of all the nobles attended as "noe man daringe to refuse the sendinge them if the king require them (although of the greatest Amrawe)." He has also given the reason for holding such a fair: "This they doe because the Kinges weomen are never suffered to goe abroad, that they may then see the varieties, curiosities etts. necessaries that are in the Cittie or elsewhere."³⁰

However, in contrast to Mundy, many European travellers attributed it to the erotic pleasures of the Emperor. Coryate described that "by this meanes he [Emperor] attaines to the sight of all the prettie wenches of the towne."³¹ Manucci's description was also filled with erotic allusions. He wrote that Emperor Shah Jahan's only interest lay in searching beautiful women "to serve his pleasure." With this purpose in view he arranged eight day's long fair in which hordes of women, which when once counted numbered more than thirty thousand were invited. They attended the fair with a variety of goods the best piece being "her own body." Honourable women avoided the festival but those who showed up, vied for the love of the Emperor who had a round of all the "stalls" and whomsoever, amongst the sellers, "attracted his fancy" was in due time "produced" in the royal presence through his appointed "matrons" who had been given "an agreed-on-signal" for the purpose.³² Thus for Manucci, the buyers, the sellers, the merchandise and the bargain nothing was real. The entire show was meant for facilitating the King to select women for his carnal pleasures. English traveller, Alexander Hamilton, has garbled the contemporary popular story of Jahangir falling in love with Nur Jahan in such a *bazaar* and attributed the role of Jahangir to Shahjahan who, according to him, fell in love with a married lady in such a fair and brought her to his *harem* in opposition to her husband and later she became the mother of Aurangzeb.³³

European travellers believed that the ladies of the *harem* lived "with no cares or anxieties"³⁴ and that was the reason that "these queens and princesses have the title of Begam, which signifies that they are void of care."³⁵ Their principal indulgence was in "occupying themselves with nothing beyond displaying great show and magnificence, an imposing and majestic bearing, or making themselves attractive, getting talked about in the world and pleasing the king" and naturally, "so much idleness, enjoyment, and grandeur, they cannot fail to get their minds loaded with the impurity of many vices."³⁶ According to Catrou, "It is easy to conceive, that indolence, joined to a life passed in the softest and most voluptuous enjoyments, and exposed to conversation not the

most pure, should be the source of vices among persons so secluded; and whose minds are uninfluenced by the principles of the true religion."³⁷ And these 'vices' they did not leave for the readers to imagine but described them in detail.

Mundy dilated upon the incestuous relationship between Shah Jahan and his daughter. He wrote: "This Shaw Jehan [Shah Jahan], amonge the rest, hath one named Chiminy Beagum, [probably Jahanara Begum] a verie beautiful Creature by report, with whome (it was openly bruited and talked of in Agra) hee committed incest."³⁸ Bernier also hinted at the same incestuous relationship when he wrote: "Rumour has it that his [Shahjahan's] attachment reached a point which it is difficult to believe, the justification of which he rested on the decision of the *Mullahs*, or doctors of their law. According to them, it would have been unjust to deny the King the privilege of gathering from the tree he had himself planted."³⁹

However, Manucci refuted this accusation of Bernier and opined that it was because of her love for her father that "the common people hinted that she had intercourse with her father, and this has given occasion to Monsieur Bernier to write many things about this princess, founded entirely on the talk of low people. Therefore it is incumbent on me, begging his pardon, to say that what he writes is untrue."⁴⁰ Thomas Roe has alluded to the amorous relationship of Prince Khurram [later Emperor Shahjahan] with his step-mother Nur Jahan. He stated that he always found in Prince Khurram a "settled a countenance" and a "gravety, never smiling, nor in face showeing any respect or difference of men" but once when he went to meet him, he "found some inward trouble" and "kind of brokennes and distraction in his thoughts." Roe opined that "If I can judge any thing, hee hath left his hart among his fathers women, with whom he hath liberty of conversation. Normahall [Nur Jahan] in the English coach the day before visited him . . . and carried away, if I err not, his attention to all other business."⁴¹

The royal princesses, according to European travellers, longed for the amorous relationships because "the Great Mogolls or kings daughters are never suffered to marrie."⁴² The reason was that "no man being considered worthy of royal alliance; an apprehension being entertained that the husband might thereby be rendered powerful, and induced perhaps to aspire to the crown."⁴³ However, this idea that royal princesses never got married was not true, as some other travellers and Persian chroniclers described the marriages of different princesses.⁴⁴

The contention that royal princesses were sex-starved women has led to different scandalous stories, popularised by European travellers. Bernier described two such anecdotes of Princess Jahanara. Being conscious that he would be suspected of incredulity, found it necessary to first reassure his readers. He clarified that "hope I shall not be suspected of a wish to supply subjects for romance. What I am writing is matter of history, and my object is to present a faithful account of the manners of this people." He went on to compare the impact of romances in Europe and Asia. He argued that "Love adventures are not attended with the same danger in Europe as in Asia. In France they excite only merriment; they create a laugh and are forgotten: but in this part of the world, few are the instances in which they are not followed by some dreadful and tragical catastrophe."⁴⁵

Bernier then related the two incidents in which Jahanara developed clandestine relationships with two young men and the Emperor on knowing the secret got the two men killed.⁴⁶ Manucci cast doubts on the story of Bernier and commented that "I leave the reader to judge if a father, who loved so much this princess, would do such an infamous act to his daughter at such a great court, where there were so many ambassadors. Although he might know that his daughter had her hidden diversions, he always dissembled, holding the princess equal to her mother."⁴⁷ But at the same time, Manucci has himself recounted some other scandals. He wrote that the princess "contenting herself with the pleasure she had with her lovers. The principal one was a vigorous youth of

goodly presence, the son of the chief dancer in her employ, who was her mistress of music. . . . he sang with such charm before the princess that she gave him the epithet of 'Born in the House'. Under cover of this title these princesses and many great ladies gratify their desires." Manucci further contended on the basis of his being "on familiar terms with her house" and "in the confidence" of her servants that the princess liked drinking wine and on many occasions had sent bottles to his house in token of her gratitude for curing people in her harem. She participated in nocturnal drinking festivities which, at time, exhausted her so much that she had to be carried to her bed.⁴⁸

The same treatment was meted out, by European travellers, to Shah Jahan's second daughter, Roshanara Begum. Bernier found her "not deficient in artifice,"⁴⁹ and then related the scandal when the Princess secretly admitted two men in the *harem* and on being discovered, incurred the displeasure of her brother, Emperor Aurangzeb. Here again he deemed it necessary to reassure his readers that he would "relate the whole story exactly as I heard it from the mouth of an old woman, a half-caste Portuguese, who has been many years a slave in the seraglio, and possesses the privilege of going in and out at pleasure."⁵⁰ Manucci repeated the story,⁵¹ but moved a step further and related another one. He recalled how a "sad" incident took place in the "apartments" of Roshanara Begum who had clandestinely concealed "nine youths" for her "diversion."

What happened was that her niece Fakhr-un-Nisa Begum, who desired to satisfy her sexual urge, though not desirous of marriage, requested her aunt to at least "make over" to her one of her nine paramours, and on her refusal, "moved by envy" divulged her aunt's secret to her father, Aurangzeb. The apartments were thoroughly searched and the "well clothed and good looking" youths were apprehended and later delivered to the Kotwal who under royal instructions tortured them to death, though for public consumption it was announced that they were thieves. In total disregard to her services for helping him in winning the crown,

Aurangzeb, already displeased with her previous transgressions cruelly poisoned his sister.⁵² Manucci's story is intriguing in many ways. Roshan Ara kept hidden in the *harem* not one or two but "nine youths" who were discovered by her niece. The latter "although not desirous of marriage" could not resist the opportunity as the men were "well clothed and good looking". She demanded her share and asked "to make over to her at least one out of the nine" but Roshan Ara refused. The girl now "moved by envy" revealed the secret to the Emperor. The young men were caught and "destroyed". And like a typical oriental ending, the Emperor "shortened her life by poison" and she met her end "dying swollen out like a hogshed" for her "great lasciviousness". The moral of the story is that in India, everyone was corrupt and immoral. Kate Teltscher has rightly pointed out that "'sensuality reigns supreme in the account of the Mughal emperor's seraglio offered by Manucci" and it seems to be "a sexual reverie."⁵³

These scandalous and fanciful tales popularised by European travellers have been included as authentic facts in a normal routine manner in some of the well-researched books on the Mughals.⁵⁴ However, if one keeps in mind the mutual social and filial relations of the Mughals, these stories fail to pass the test of veracity. As Soba Mukherjee explains, "the Mughals had a strong sense of family ties and great regard for family members and there could never have existed such relationships between fathers and daughters, mothers (even step-mother) and sons and brothers and sisters."⁵⁵

European travellers have meted out the same treatment to the women belonging to nobility. Pelsaert testified that "some of the nobles, again, have chaste wives, but they are too few to be worth mentioning; most of the ladies are tarred with the same brush, and when the husband is away, though he may think they are guarded quite safely by his eunuchs, they are too clever for Argus himself with his hundred eyes, and get all the pleasures they can, though not so much as they desire."⁵⁶ According to M. De Thevenot, a French traveller, the women in Bengal were "bold

and lascivious, and use all Arts imaginable to corrupt and debauch Young Men and especially Strangers, they easily trapan."⁵⁷ Manucci emphasized that nearly the whole nobility, whether Muslim or Hindu, followed the royal style and designed their own *harem* on the pattern of Mughal Emperor and maintained "strict supervision over the inmate of their harems."⁵⁸ Coryat provided an example of such "strict supervision" when he wrote: "Observe that whatsoever is brought in of virill shape, as instance in reddishes, so great is the jealousy and so frequent the wickednesse of this people, that they are cut and jagged for feare of converting the same to some unnaturall abuse."⁵⁹

The fact of the matter was that European travellers had no means to verify these scandalous stories. They themselves had no easy access to the inside of the *harem* while Bernier's mention of his source--"an old woman, a half-caste Portuguese"--who had the privilege "to go in and out" does not give any credulity to his stories. At the maximum, what can be accepted, even this with reluctance, is that these stories were the popular bazaar gossip of the time. One cannot help agreeing with Kate Teltscher that "travel writing grants considerable licence to its authors; its quasi-scientific status confers authority, while the public expectation of foreign outlandishness ensures that sensational stories are happily consumed."⁶⁰

Eunuchs played an important role in Mughal *harem*.⁶¹ These eunuchs, whose "Virile Parts are cutt off smooth, to prevent the least Temptation from the Sex,"⁶² performed a lot of functions. Manucci has described their activities. Princesses won them over through generous financial help and at times "get permission to enjoy that of which I cannot speak." They also facilitated men to clandestinely enter harem and obtain "the favour of husbands." They also acted as their spies because they were always found eavesdropping.⁶³

The European writers further reported that the Mughal Emperor and princes also kept "matrons as spies" to whom

eunuchs provided information of "the lovlist (sic) young women in the empire." These matrons, then, employed all their means to lure these girls and to carry them off to the palace of the king where they become mistresses or concubines.⁶⁴

Catrou, who based his history on Manucci's account, believed that *harem* was also the locus of all political power and it was a place where even the safety of the Emperor was entrusted to an armed contingent of females. Catrou's words are worth quoting

they [ladies of the *harem*] have a much greater share in the government of the empire. It is by their instrumentality, that intrigues of state are managed, that peace or war is declared, that viceroalties and governments are bestowed; they are, indeed, the true dispensers of fortune's gifts. These ladies . . . have each an office, and a name, corresponding with the post and title of the chief ministers of the crown. . . . They are, properly speaking, the privy council of the Mogul. . . . It may be easily conceived, that the chief officers of the crown pay the greatest attention to cultivate, each, his lady of the palace. The least variance with her entails upon him, sooner or later, some serious injury, or reverse of fortune. Happy the minister, whose good fortune it may be to escape being dependent on a correspondent of a capricious disposition. . . . what may appear not a little extraordinary, he [the Emperor] is guarded always in the interior of the haram by a company composed of one hundred Tartar women, armed with the bow, a poigard, and cimetar. Their leader has the same rank, and the same pay, as a War-Omrha.⁶⁵

In the opinion of Teltscher, Catrou has thus insinuated that "customary political and gender hierarchies are completely overturned in the seraglio: men sue for favours from the women."⁶⁶

The only men, besides their close relatives, who were allowed to enter the *harem* were the physicians. As some of the Europeans, particularly Italian adventurer Francesco Carreri, English John

Fryer, Bernier and Manucci were physicians or posed as physicians, they were able to provide some eyewitness accounts. Manucci provided the interesting details of the procedure of entering the *harem*. He stated that "it is the custom in the royal household, when a physician is called within the *mahal*, for the eunuch to cover his head with a cloth, which hangs down to his waist. They then conduct him to the patient's room, and he is taken out in the same manner." On his first entry into the palace, he was also covered in the same way but "by premeditation, I walked as slowly as I could, in spite of the urging of my guides, the eunuchs. The prince, having seen this, ordered them to uncover me, and that in future I was to be allowed to come in and go out without being covered. He said that the minds of Christians were not filthy like those of Mahomedans."⁶⁷ Manucci had further to add that as these ladies did not have any opportunity to meet any men except their husbands, some deliberately pretended to be ill so that they got the chance to meet the physicians, to converse with them and have their pulses felt. Manucci has then related what happened at such meetings:

The latter [the physician] stretches out his hand inside the curtain; they [the women] lay hold of it, kiss it, and softly bite it. Some, out of curiosity, apply it to their breast, which has happened to me several times; but I pretended not to notice, in order to conceal what was passing from the matrons and eunuchs then present, and not arouse their suspicions.⁶⁸

Europeans travellers have recorded that women in India, especially the Muslim women, observed strict *purdah*. English traveller, J. Ovington wrote that "all the Women of Fashion in *India* are close penn'd in by their jealous Husbands, who forbid them the very sight of all Strangers. However the Watch is neither so careful, nor their Modesty so blameless, but that they sometimes will look abroad for Variety, as well as their roving Husbands do."⁶⁹ Manucci contended that "the Mahomedans are very touchy in the matter of allowing their women to be seen, or even touched by the hand; above all, the lady being of the blood

royal, it could not be done without express permission from the king.⁷⁰ *Purdah* was no less strictly observed among Muslim ladies of other classes. Careri observed that "The Mohammedan women did not appear in public, except only the vulgar sort and the leud ones."⁷¹

Manucci has observed that "the chief doors of the *mahal* are closed at sunset, and the principal door of all is guarded by good sentinels posted for the purpose, and a seal is attached. Torches are kept burning all night."⁷² The women of the *harem* were "all closely guarded, not visible to any, but [to the King] himself".⁷³ As *harem* was a no-go area for the men except for the king and close relatives, the Europeans found it difficult, rather impossible, to give an authentic first hand account of its inmates. Italian adventurer, Pietro Della Valle, conceded its failure to describe the female apartments of the Mughal King. He wrote: "What 'tis with in side I know not, for I enter'd not into it . . ."⁷⁴ Mundy also wrote that *mahal* was the place "where his weomen are kept, and where noe man enters but himselfe, having Euenuches to looke to them."⁷⁵ Thomas Roe wrote: "No man enters his house but eunuchs; his women are never seene; . . ."⁷⁶ Edward Terry, chaplain to Thomas Roe, related that as "there lodge none in the King's house but his women and eunuchs, and some little boyes which hee keeps about him for a wicked use."⁷⁷ Francois Bernier, in spite of his twelve years' service with Mughal nobles, omitted the *harem* in his description of the fort at Delhi. He frankly admitted that "I wish I could lead you about in the *Seraglio*, as I have done in the rest of the Fortress: but who is the Traveller that can speak of that as an eye-witness?"⁷⁸

This observance of *purdah* by Muslim women was irksome especially for the traveller as it deprived him of his most important role as an observer and thus denied him "his customary masculine prerogative of visual (and implied sexual) possession of women." In this way, the traveller's sequestering naturally caused chimera and fantasizing.⁷⁹ The *harem* premises were even otherwise out of bounds for all strangers. In fact, this inability of

the travellers not to see the women was a severe setback to their authority as travellers as “the claim of being an eyewitness is crucial to the authority of a travel writer” and in this way, it was “an expression of authorial impotence”.⁸⁰

Some European travellers also took notice of the mode of travelling of Indian women in *purdah*. While describing the march of Roshanara Begum with her retinue, Manucci graphically described that “they seemed so many ghosts or spirits of the abyss, you could not tell if they were handsome or ugly, old or young, men or women; for, let alone the face, you could not see even the tips of their toes.” He related that in front of the Princess’s elephant, there marched “a number of bold and aggressive men on foot to drive away everybody, noble or pauper, with blows from sticks and pushes.”⁸¹ Mundy also figuratively described that before and after the women’s chandowlies and planquins, there walked “Capons [eunuchs] or gelded men on horseback, besides a garde of Gunners, sufferinge none to approach any thing neere them.”⁸² Manucci has also refuted the story told by Bernier that “he managed one day to get near enough to see a woman servant whisking away the flies from Roshan Ara Begam.”

For Manucci, this was an “impossibility” because “the princesses and nobles’ wives are shut up in such a manner that they cannot be seen, although they can observe the passers-by.”⁸³ In the opinion of Thomas Roe, the Muslims were so strict in their observance of *purdah* that a fight would ensue if “a stranger by force [was] to open in the streetes the close chayres {i.e. *doolies*} wherin their weomen are carried (which they take for a dishonor equall to a ravishment)?”⁸⁴ According to John Fryer, “When they [Muslim women] go abroad, they are carried in close *Palenkeens*, which if a Man offer to unveil it is present death; the meanest of them not permitting their Women to stir out uncovered; of whom they are allowed as many as they can keep . . .”⁸⁵ German traveller John Albert de Mandelslo, Manucci, Bernier, Thevenot and Careri have also frequently mentioned that like royal ladies, the women of the noble families both among the Hindus and the

Muslims, went out of their houses well-guarded in properly covered palanquins surrounded on all sides by servants and eunuchs.⁸⁶

European travellers have advanced a number of reasons for observance of *pardah* but for most of them, the real cause was the men's jealousy of other men and their distrust of their womanfolk. John Fryer wrote that "The *Moors* are by Nature plagued with Jealousy, cloistring their Wives up, and sequestering them the sight of any besides the *Capon* that watches them."⁸⁷ Manucci contended that "the reason is that Mahomedans are most extraordinarily distrustful upon this chapter; and what deserves mention is that some do not even trust their own brothers, and do not permit their women to appear before them, being jealous of them."⁸⁸

Despite the practice of strict *pardah*, the Europeans never concealed their wish to have a glimpse of Indian women. Roe related the incident how he saw two wives of the emperor watching him while standing in a window over which "a grate of reede" having "little holes" was hung. He himself first saw their fingers, then their eyes and some times "full proportion." Their complexion was fair and they had "smoothed up" black hair. Their diamonds and pearls shed enough light to "show them." They "were so merry" that they must have "laughed at me."⁸⁹ Roe was able to have a glimpse but Hawkins could only lament that "there are likewise private roomes made for his Queenes, most rich, where they sit and see all, but are not seene."⁹⁰ The same thing happened to the second English ambassador to the Mughal court, William Norris. The latter met on the road the daughter of the Governor of Surat. She herself was in a closed *palanquin*. According to Norris, "she pulled up ye side to looke out", but he could "discover neither her face nor dresse."⁹¹

This was "the furtive glimpse of harem life" in which Roe, though himself being watched, was also "surreptitiously observing the women in a kind of illicit game of peek-o-boo. The little holes

picked in the window screen afforded brief view of the riches of the harem." It could not be denied that in this incident, "normal visual relationships are overturned." Roe was hardly able to see the women while they saw him in full view. Thus, the women acquired a "dominant position, looking at the man; for once the travel writer, more observed than observing, is made aware of his own exoticism."⁹²

Fryer, who was official surgeon of the East India Company, went inside the *harem* to see an ailing lady. As was the normal routine, he was to feel the pulse of the patient from behind a curtain. But the curtain accidentally fell down. Fryer described the incident as if the door of an animal cage stood opened. He discovered "the whole Bevy, fluttering like so many Birds when a Net is cast over them; yet none of them sought to escape." He found them altogether busy in "good Houswifery such as "Needlework" or making "confection" or "*Achars*" [Pickles] with "no indecent decorum in managing their Cloystered way of living."⁹³ It was a great opportunity for Fryer to directly observe the women of the *harem* and their living conditions. However, what he was able to see was that the women were employed in just normal routine household work. It was a disappointment for Fryer and his readers who expected a place of debauchery which was a stereo-typed image of *harem*, popular in the west. He, therefore, referred immediately to *Odyssey* and tried to prove the wickedness of women who "are incontinent in their Desires, for which reason they debar them the sight of any thing Male, but their Lord."⁹⁴ This was, in a sense, denying his own authority as an eyewitness but Fryer's appeal to Homeric authority "reveals the framing perspective of the European debate about female morality."⁹⁵

European travellers believed that this custom of observing *purdah* negatively affected the women's minds. For Manucci, the harem life meant a veritable prison with its own drudgery and monotony.⁹⁶ He contended that "the women, being shut up with this closeness and constantly watched, and having neither liberty

nor occupation, think of nothing but adorning themselves, and their minds dwell on nothing but malice and lewdness." He has also told the readers that once the wife of Asad Khan, the *wazir*, confessed that "her only thoughts were to imagine something by which she could please her husband and hinder his going near other women."

Manucci then concluded that From this I can assert that they are all the same. If they have any other thought, it is to regale themselves with quantities of delicious stews; to adorn themselves magnificently, either with clothes or jewellery, pearls, *et cetera*; to perfume their bodies with odours and essences of every kind. To this must be added that they have permission to enjoy the pleasure of the comedy and the dance, to listen to tales and stories of love, to recline upon beds of flowers, to walk about in gardens, to listen to the murmur of the running waters, to hear singing, and other similar pastimes.⁹⁷

Teltsher has rightly dubbed it as "the language of imprisonment" which is being employed to describe the Muslim women in *pardah*.⁹⁸

Some travellers went on to compare the relative positions of Indian and European women and their conclusions generally favoured the Europeans. Pesaert concluded that "the ladies of our country should be able to realise from this description the good fortune of their birth, and the extent of their freedom when compared with the position of ladies like them in other lands."⁹⁹ Abbe Carre made a comparison with the Catholic nuns and found the latter highly superior in morality and living conditions. He pronounced: "women in seraglio worse off than nuns in France."¹⁰⁰

In the opinion of a few European travellers, the Indian women were though not allowed to go out without veil and were shut up in *harem*, they were mostly crafty and cunning and generally controlled their husbands. It was Thomas Roe who gave currency

to the notion that Nur Jahan and her junta—comprising her father, brother and son-in-law—wielded the real power of the Empire and Mughal Emperor Jahangir was a puppet in their hands.¹⁰¹ Roe contended that “Normahall fullfill [s] the observation that in all actions of consequence in a court, especially in faction, a woman is not only always an ingredient, but commonly a principall drugg and of most vertue; and shee showes that they are not incapable of conducting business, nor herselfe voyd of witt and subtiltye.”¹⁰² Pesaert seconded Roe when he wrote that the Emperor “disregarding his own person and position, has surrendered himself to a crafty wife of humble lineage, . . . he [Jahangir] is King in name only, while she and her brother Asaf Khan hold the kingdom firmly in their hands.”¹⁰³ In the power struggle between Prince Khurram and Prince Khusrau, when the latter wanted to visit the royal court, it was Nur Jahan who did not allow the king to see his son, even though “the King had fallen downe and taken his mistris [Nur Jahan] by the feete to obteyne her leave to see his sonne.”¹⁰⁴

Many have contested the above portrait of Nur Jahan, which was popularized by Thomas Roe and later sacrosanctly repeated by nearly all the later European travellers visiting India.¹⁰⁵ Shuja-ud-Din believed that “it appears to be a mistake to think that the Emperor was reduced to a cipher. All the rules of foreign and domestic policy laid down by him or his father were very seriously adhered to. All the institutions of Government were maintained. The dominant Junta studied the imperial temperament closely and sought to humour him. He was not blindly followed by them. In this period [1611-1622] he continued to take keen interest in State affairs. Many a time he interposed with vigour against them.” It was only in the later period when Jahangir’s health deteriorated that “gradually the whole of administration passed into the hands of Noor Jahan.”¹⁰⁶

During the war of succession among the sons of Shahjahan, the latter’s two daughters, Jahanara and Roshanara also played an important role. Bernier, while conceding their contribution in the

war, asserted that "the most momentous events are too often caused by the influence of the sex, although the people may be ignorant of this fact, and may indulge in vain speculations as to the cause of the agitation they deplore."¹⁰⁷

Meera Nanda, while analysing the information provided by European travellers, has concluded that "the travellers round off the portrait of women with detailed descriptions of the imperial as well as nobles harem and the common prostitutes, clearly establishing that women were largely treated as an object of pleasure and denied her dignity as an individual."¹⁰⁸ K. S. Lal, in his study of *The Mughal Harem*, quoting European travellers, has drawn the following portrait of the *harem*:

The atmosphere of the harem was artificial and sexy. The harem was a prison house for women says Manucci. It was a 'stable' for women established to satisfy the lust of kings and nobles. Craving for sex and homosexuality knew no limits, and young boys were kept for 'wicked use. (Terry in *Early Travels*, 311) Practice of incest was not unknown. "That filthy disease, the consequence of incontinence, was common amongst them." (Terry, 310) All kinds of drugs were taken for increasing potency. (Manucci, IV: 245) Still, excessive indulgence inflicted severe punishment. Many people became ineffective even in young age. "The king and his great men maintain their women," writes Edward Terry, "but little affect them after thirty years of their age." (327) Many of the princes and nobles destined to die of excessive use of wine actually died of excessive indulgence in sex. . . . In the harem-system sentiments of women were of no consequence, they were not supposed to have sentiments.¹⁰⁹

It was precisely because of this kind of remarks that Ruby Lal has called K. S. Lal's work as "the caricatured version of the Mughal harem."¹¹⁰

These European representations could be analysed by comparing them with the indigenous portrayals. However, the

problem was that one found a nearly total absence of information on *harem* during the seventeenth century. One major reason for this silence of the Persian chroniclers was that “in a society where women lived in seclusion, public references to their way of life were as far as possible avoided due both to a discreet sense of expediency and a false sense of decency.”¹¹¹ Though the paucity of indigenous information on regarding *harem* generally forced the researchers—as in the case of K.S. Lal—to accept European representations as authentic, we were lucky to have two accounts of *harem*, one before and the other after the seventeenth century. These accounts have been written by women themselves who were a part of *harem* life and spent most of their lives or major part of it in *harem* itself. One account belonged to early sixteenth century and the other to the beginning of the nineteenth century. If these two accounts are accepted as the real, genuine and true portrayals of *harem* life, these could be used for comparison with the European representations.

The most important local and first hand account was that of Gulbadan Begam.¹¹² Being daughter of Babur, sister of Humayun, and aunt of Akbar, she was in a privileged position of “giving intimate glimpses,”¹¹³ and to describe the real position of women in India. Her memoirs were very valuable as a “rare account of domestic life” and “takes us through the complex set of relations in which women of the nobility were involved in the domestic sphere.”¹¹⁴ Her representation of women and their complex and multidimensional roles where “many different kinds of duties and activities, bonds of solidarity, notions of sexuality, questions of reproduction and reproductive rights (and duties), varying states of celebration and joy, loss and grief, differing concepts of genealogy, and diverse traditions and practice come together.”¹¹⁵ A close reading of her narrative revealed an emphasis on conforming to the precise rules and *adab* in Mughal *harem*.¹¹⁶ Here the relationship of male relatives with the women of *harem* was based on love and respect.¹¹⁷ The mothers, sisters and elder female relations often managed to broker peace between warring brothers as it was considered a great mark of disrespect not to

accede to their request.¹¹⁸ When Prince Salim revolted against his father, Emperor Akbar, it was the Queen, Sultana Salima Begum, who interceded and reconciled the father and the son.¹¹⁹

Gulbadan has narrated the episode of Humayun's marriage to Hamida Banu Begum which provided a glimpse into the male female relationship of the time. She has recalled how on another day, he [Humayun] came to my mother, and said: 'Send someone to call Hamida-banu Begum here.' When she went, the begam did not come, but said: 'If it is to pay my respects, I was exalted by paying my respects the other day. Why should I come again?' Another time his Majesty sent Subhan Quli and said: 'Go to Mirza Hindal, and tell him to send the begam.' The mirza said: 'Whatever I may say, she will not go. Go yourself and tell her.' When Subhan Quli went and spoke, the begam replied: 'To see kings once is lawful; a second time it is forbidden. I shall not come.' On this Subhan Quli went and represented what she had said. His Majesty remarked: 'If she is not a consort (*na mahram*), we will make her a consort (*mahram*).' To cut the story short: For forty days the begam persisted and discussed and disagreed. At last her highness my mother, Dil-dar Begam, advised her, saying: 'After all you will marry someone. Better than a king, who is there?' The begam said: 'Oh yes, I shall marry someone; but he shall be a man whose collar my hand can touch, and not one whose skirt it does not reach.' Then my mother again gave her much advice.¹²⁰

In the light of Gulbadan's description of *harem* and women's activities therein, particularly Hamida Banu Begum's conduct so full of modesty and dignity, European travellers' sexually charged account of *harem* as a pleasure-house for men looked like a fanciful construction of their imagination. A close reading of Gulbadan's narrative also reveals that the public and the private were not separate, but rather "the private was perhaps used as a *via media* to resolve the problems of the public sphere. . . . the point of convergence of the public with the private was the women of the royal household."¹²¹

The second important work which provided a deep insight into the working of *harem* was Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali's *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India*.¹²² She was a British lady who married a Muslim, came to India and lived for twelve years, probably from 1816 to 1829, in the house of her father-in-law at Lucknow. The editor of the book has rightly commented that "the value of the book rests on the fact that it is a record of the first-hand experiences of an English lady who occupied the exceptional position of membership of a Musalman family. . . . she had free access to the houses of respectable Sayyids, and thus gained ample facilities for the study of the manners and customs of Musalman families."¹²³ She wrote her book in the form of "Letters as faithful sketches of the Manners, Customs and Habits of a people but little known to the European reader" after her return to England where she had gone to recoup her ill-health.¹²⁴ She had spent twelve years in the *harem* of a Muslim family where women observed strict *pardah*, remained in total seclusion and most of the men had more than one wife. Despite these social customs so condemnable in the eyes of European travellers, she was full of praise for those Muslims and challenged all the stereotype notions popular in Europe.

Mrs. Meer Hassan has described a women assembly in the following manner:

The buzz of human voices, the happy playfulness of the children, the chaste singing of the domenes fill up the animated picture. I have sometimes passed an hour or two in witnessing their innocent amusements, without any feeling of regret for the brief sacrifice of time I had made. I am free to confess, however, that I have returned to my tranquil home with increased delight after having witnessed the bustle of a zeenahnah assembly. At first I pitied the apparent monotony of their lives; but this feeling has worn away by intimacy with the people, who are thus precluded from mixing generally with the world. . . . So far as I have had any opportunity of making personal observations on their general

character they appear to me obedient wives, dutiful daughters, affectionate mothers, kind mistresses, sincere friends, and liberal benefactresses to the distressed poor. ¹²⁵

As far as *pardah* was concerned, she remarked that the women "who have any regard for the character or the honour of their house, seclude themselves from the eye of strangers". And this practice started at the age of four: "Little girls, when four years old, are kept strictly behind the *pardah*, and when they move abroad it is always in covered conveyances." However, this did not mean that women had no company to enjoy. According to Mrs. Meer Hasan, "the ladies of *zeenahnah* life are not restricted from the society of their own sex; they are . . . extravagantly fond of company, and equally as hospitable when entertainers. To be alone is a trial to which they are seldom exposed, every lady having companions amongst her dependents." She has added that "a well-filled *zeenahnah* is a mark of gentility; . . . the habit of association with numbers having grown up with infancy to maturity: 'to be alone' is considered, with women thus situated, a real calamity." As to the effects of *pardah*, she further observed that *pardah* observing ladies adapted to the practice from childhood did not find any cause of annoyance in it because they had their own means of diversions and merriments which though unlike Europeans must be equally enjoyable to them.

It could be presumed that they might have considered some of Europeans' manners of passing time as totally unprofitable. In fact, she found the Muslim ladies of her acquaintance fully at ease with themselves. She, no longer, felt sorry for them on account of their absence from certain activities which the Europeans found so essential for their happiness. The segregation of Muslim ladies from mixed parties had not affected their health adversely but it had rather saved them from different kind of "temptations" and opportunities of seduction including free socializing with strangers which they considered an act of disgrace. They had no desire to change their state of seclusion and were fully contented with the

large "female society" which they could relish "without restraint."¹²⁶ Her observations reminded one of the remarks of Leila Ahmad that "to believe that segregated societies are by definition more oppressive to women, or that women secluded from the company of men are women deprived, is only to allow ourselves to be servilely obedient to the constructs of men, Western or Middle Eastern"¹²⁷ As to the polygamy, Mrs. Meer Hasan's observations were equally important:

The good and forbearing wife, by this line of conduct, secures to herself the confidence of her husband; who, feeling assured that the amiable woman has an interest in his happiness, will consult her and take her advice in the domestic affairs of his children by other wives, and even arrange by her judgement all the settlements for their marriages, &c. He can speak of other wives without restraint,--for she knows he has others,--and her education has taught her, that they deserve her respect in proportion as they contribute to her husband's happiness. The children of her husband are admitted at all times and seasons, without restraint or prejudice; she loves them next to her own, because they are her husband's. She receives the mothers of such children without a shade of jealousy in her manner, and delights in distinguishing them by favours and presents according to their several merits. . . . This, they say, was the lesson taught them by their amiable mother, and this the example they would set for the imitation of their daughters.¹²⁸

In this way, both the works of Gulbadan Begum and Mrs. Meer Hassan depicted the *harem*, not a veritable prison house, but rather a happy home where women, excluded from the searching and lustful looks of men, spent a cheerful and contented life. For them, *harem* represented "women's homo-social world."¹²⁹

It would be, thus, wrong to assume that women were a marginal part of the Mughal Empire. Ruby Lal's challenging study of Mughal domesticity has shown how it occupied "the centrality of space in the Mughal imperial."¹³⁰ Even a cursory glance at the

orders issued by the women in the *harem*—queen-mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of the Emperor—makes it abundantly clear that though, living in *pardah* and *harem*, they were involved in every aspect of Mughal administration.¹³¹ Their seclusion did not, therefore, necessarily mean “isolation from and ignorance of the world.”¹³² On the other hand, European travellers, being all male, were outsiders and in fact strangers to this world of women and were probably unable to comprehend its real significance. Soba Mukherjee has rightly remarked that “almost all of them [European travellers] knew nothing of the women of the seraglio except a few stories of them popular with the common people living outside.”¹³³

To conclude, one may argue that the European travellers' inability to see women, particularly of upper classes, and to present an eye-witness account proved their greatest failing. They were made to rely on hearsay information and bazaar gossips to fill their travel accounts, which they felt was all the more necessary to make their narratives spicy and to add to their readability. European travellers had also come from a Western-Christian tradition which was significantly different—rather in some ways diametrically opposite—from the Indian tradition. Western ideals of celibacy and renunciation of flesh made them to represent Indians—who indulged in polygamy and concubinage—as sensual and pleasure-seekers. Thus, they viewed the things from the point of view of European civilization and were “easily tempted to misinterpret, exaggerate and scandalise.”¹³⁴

Notes and References

- 1 Here the term '*harem*' has been used, as by K. S. Lal, to depict “the harem of the Mughal emperor, the seraglios of royal princes and important nobles, but primarily the harem of the King.”

Idem, *Mughal Harem* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988), v.

- 2 Rana Kabbani has argued that *harem* had become an important feature of European writings about the East since the Renaissance. Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient* (1986; rpt London, 1988), 18. Her work is, however, largely related to the Middle East.
- 3 Leila Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of Harem," *Feminist Studies*, 8 (Fall 1982): 524. According to Kidwai, "since the beginning of relations between the West and the Islamic world, the *harem*—being the unfamiliar and exotic—had stirred the Western imagination . . . For the essential Oriental characteristics of sensuality and violence and its political aspect in terms of the oppression of women, the *harem* served in the West as a metaphor for tyranny and arbitrary rule in society." Abdur Raheem Kidwai, "Perceptions of Islam and Muslims in English Literature: A Historical Survey," in *Muslims and the West: Encounter and Dialogue*, ed. Zafar Ishaq Ansari and John L. Esposito (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, 2001), 71-72.
- 4 Indira Ghose, *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11.
- 5 Abul Fazl has given it another name—*Shabistan-i-Iqbal* or *Shabistan-i-Khas*, cited in Rekha Misra, *Women in Mughal India* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), 76. Also see, Mohammad

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- Azhar Ansari, "The Haram of the Great Mughals," *Islamic Culture*, 34 (January 1960): 3.
- 6 S. A. I. Tirmizi, "Introduction," in *Edicts of the Mughal Harem*, ed. S. A. I. Tirmizi (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1979), I. For the same meaning, see K. S. Lal, *Mughal Harem* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988), 1.
 - 7 R. Nath, *Private Life of the Mughals of India, 1526-1803 A.D.* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2005), 10-11.
 - 8 K. S. Lal, *Mughal Harem* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988), 1.
 - 9 Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of Harem," 524. For Abul Fazl's description and organisation of Mughal *harem* under Emperor Akbar, see Abul Fazl Allami, *The Ain-I-Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann, ed. D.C. Phillot 3 Vols in 2 (Delhi: LPP, 2006) [1927], I: 45-47.
 - 10 Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of Harem," 524.
 - 11 Niccolao Manucci, *Mogul India, 1653-1708 or Storia Do Mogor*, trans. William Irvine, 4 vols. (1907-1908; Reprint, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990), II: 319.
 - 12 J. Ovington, *A Voyage to Surat in the Year 1689*, ed. H. G. Rawlinson (London: Oxford University Press & Humphrey Milford, 1929;

reprint, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1994), 140.

- 13 John Marshal, *John Marshal in India: Notes and Observations in Bengal, 1668-1672*, ed. Shafaat Ahmad Khan (Oxford University Press, London: Humphrey Milford, 1927), 397. According to the author, the Muslims believed that when the devil first tempted Adam, he offered him many things but when he brought Eve, "hee [was] much pleased and accepted her." Ibid.
- 14 R. Nath, (ed.) *India as Seen by William Finch, 1608-1611* (Jaipur: The Historical Research Documentation Programme, 1990), 57.
- 15 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 308. See also Francois Catrou, *History of the Mogul Dynasty in India, from its Foundation by Tamerlane, in the Year 1399, to the Accession of Aurangzebe in the Year 1657, Translated from the French by F. Catrou, founded on the Memoirs of Signor Manouchi* (London: J.M. Richardson, 1826), 286.
- 16 Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615-19 as Narrated in his Journal and Correspondence*, ed. William Foster (Jalandhar: Asian Publishers, 1993 [1926]), 157. Strachan, who wrote an important biography of Thomas Roe, completed the picture of Emperor Jahangir when he added that "Besides some eighteen wives and numberless concubines he kept young boys around him." Idem. *Sir Thomas Roe, 1581-1644: A Life* (Wiltshire: Michael Russell, 1989), 81-82.

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- 17 Quoted in Michael Strachan, *The Life and Adventures of Thomas Coryate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 233.
 - 18 Robert Coverte, *A True and Almost Incredible Report of an Englishman* (London: Thomas Archer and Richard Redmer, 1612; reprint, Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum & New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 41.
 - 19 Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India: The Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert*, tr. W.H. Moreland and P.Geyl (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1925), 59.
 - 20 For details, see Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies and their Contributions* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2001), 16; and Nath, *Private Life of the Mughals*, 19. Abul Fazl recorded that there were five thousand women in Akbar's harem. Abul Fazl, *Ain-I-Akbari*, I: 46.
 - 21 Catrou, *History of the Mogul Dynasty*, 291.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, 287, 294.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, 287.
 - 24 Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India, 1600-1800* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 44.
 - 25 Account of William Hawkins, in William Foster, (ed.), *Early Travels in India 1583-1619* (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, First Indian Edition, 1985), 104.

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- 26 John Jourdain, *The Journal of John Jourdain, 1608-1617, Describing His Experiences in Arabia, India, and the Malay Archipelago*, ed. William Foster (Cambridge: The Hakluyt Society, 1905; reprint, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1992), 165.
- 27 Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656-1668*, ed. and tr. Archibald Constable (London: Archibald Constable and Company, 1791; reprint, Karachi: Indus Publications, n.d.), 222.
- 28 Manucci, *Mogul India*, III: 397.
- 29 Ibid., I: 188.
- 30 Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, 1608-1667*, ed. Richard Carnac Temple, 3 Vols. (Cambridge: The Hakluyt Society, 1907-1914), II: 238.
- 31 "Certain Observations of Thomas Coryat," in Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes, Contayning a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and Others*. 20 Vols. (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1905), IV: 491. Strachan, on the authority of Coryat, described how the "stock of concubines was renewed at an annual spring fair when all the tradesmen's wives, accompanied by their prettiest daughters, entered the Palace with merchandize for sale." Idem., *Life and Adventures of Thomas Coryate*, 233.
- 32 Manucci, *Mogul India*, I: 188.

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- 33 Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East-Indies Being the Observations and Remarks of Capt. Alexander Hamilton from the Year 1688-1723, Trading and Travelling, by Sea and Land, to Most of the Countries and Islands of Commerce and Navigation, Between the Cape of Good-Hope and the Island of Japan*, 2 Vols. (London: A. Bettesworth and C. Hitch, (2nd Ed.) 1739; reprint, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995), I: 166-69. For the description of fancy bazaar, also see, Coverté, *True and Almost Incredible Report*, 238.
- 34 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 319.
- 35 Ibid., II: 311. Also see, Catrou, *History of the Mogul Dynasty*, 287. One may clarify that the real word is not *be-gham*, 'devoid of care,' but rather *begam*, the Turkish feminine of *beg*, a lord, a noble.
- 36 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 319.
- 37 Catrou, *History of the Mogul Dynasty*, 328.
- 38 Mundy, *Travels*, II: 203.
- 39 Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 11. The same accusation has been made by Coverté, *True and Almost Incredible Report*, 203, and by John Francis Gemeli Careri who wrote that she had an influence over her father, "being his Wife and Daughter." Thevenot and Careri, *Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri: Being the Third Part of the Travels of M. De Thevenot into the Levant and the Third Part of a Voyage Round the World by Dr. John*

Francis Gemeli Careri, ed. Surendranath Sen (New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1949), 231.

- 40 Manucci, *Mogul India*, I: 208-09.
- 41 *Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India*, 289-90. There are also other stories of incestuous relationships of common people. Johan van Twist describes an incestuous relationship between father and daughter. W. H. Moreland, "Johan Van Twist's Description of India," *Journal of Indian History*, 16 (April 1937): 69.
- 42 Mundy, *Travels*, II: 202-03.
- 43 Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 12.
- 44 Mundy himself described the marriage of Sultan Pevaz' daughter with Dara Shikoh. Mundy, *Travels*, 201.
- 45 Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 12.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 12-14.
- 47 Manucci, *Mughal India*, I: 209.
- 48 *Ibid.*, I: 210-11.
- 49 Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 14.
- 50 Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 132.
- 51 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 31-32.
- 52 *Ibid.*, II: 177.

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- 53 Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 44. She had drawn a parallel between pornography and European travel writing to India and states that "the images of travel literature are re-presented as pornography. That the gap between the two genres is so easily bridged suggests that India has become a playground for sexual fantasy." (51)
- 54 K.S. Lal, *Mughal Harem*; Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1993] (Oxford India Paperbacks)).
- 55 Mukharjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies*, 58
- 56 Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India*, 68.
- 57 Thevenot and Careri, *Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri: Being the Third Part of the Travels of M. De Thevenot into the Levant and the Third Part of a Voyage Round the World by Dr. John Francis Gemeli Careri*, ed. Surendranath Sen (New Delhi: National Archives of India, 1949), 95. He also commented that but for the "wantonness" of Muslim women, chastity of Indians might have been an example for all the women of the East. *Ibid.* 66.
- 58 Manucci, II: 352? This view of Manucci has been corroborated by Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India*, 64, De Laet, *The Empire of the Great Mogoll*, a translation of De Laet's Description of India and Fragment of Indian History by J. S. Hoyland and S.N. Banerjee (1927; reprint, Delhi, 1975), 91-92.

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- 59 Quoted in Strachan, *Life and Adventures of Thomas Coryate*, 233.
- 60 Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 46-47. The author has described that in 1664 or 1665, Richard Head published a picaresque novel, *The English Rogue*, in which the hero, during his adventures, reached India and then the novel concentrated "almost exclusively on sexual encounters and strange sexual practices drawn from the repertoire of images provided by travel literature." *Ibid.*, 50-51.
- 61 Abul Fazl has related that "the inside of the Harem is guarded by sober and active women; the (p. 47) most trustworthy of them are placed about the apartments of his Majesty. Outside the enclosure the eunuchs are placed; and at a proper distance, there is a guard of faithful *Rajputs*, beyond whom are the porters of the gates. Besides, on all four sides, there are guards of Nobles, *Ahadis*, and other troops, according to their ranks. . . . Notwithstanding the great number of faithful guards, his Majesty does not dispense with his own vigilance, but keeps the whole in proper order." *Ain*, I: 46-47.
- 62 Ovington, *A Voyage to Surat*, 127
- 63 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 74.
- 64 *Ibid.*, II: 311-12.
- 65 Catrou, *History of the Mogul Dynasty*, 292-94.
- 66 Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 44-45.

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- 67 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 374-75.
- 68 Ibid., II: 328-31. John Marshall has related another method "for diagnosing the disease without seeing the patient's face or feeling her pulse. A handkerchief was rubbed all over the body of the patient and then put into a jar of water. By its smell the doctor judged the cause of illness and prescribed the medicine." *John Marshal in India*, 327.
- 69 Ovington, *A Voyage to Surat*, 127
- 70 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 195. He even records that he had seen that if a house caught fire, women preferred to be burnt alive "than merely to expose themselves to the view of strangers." (III: 259)
- 71 Careri, *Indian Travels*, 248. See also John Albert de Mandelslo, *Mandelslo's Travels in Western India, 1638-9*, ed. M.S. Commissariat (London: Humphrey Milford, 1931; reprint, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995), 66, Ovington, *Voyage to Surat*, 211, Hamilton, *New Account of the East-Indies*, I: 163, John Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia, Being Nine Years' Travels, 1672-1681*, ed. William Crooke, 3 Vols. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1909; reprint New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1992), II: 113, Thevenot, *Indian Travels*, 53; Pietro Della Valle, *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India*, trans. from Italian by G. Havers, ed. Edward Grey, 2 Vols. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1892; Reprint, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991), II: 40-41 for similar views.

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- 72 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 328.
- 73 Ovington, *Voyage to Surat*, 127
- 74 Valle, *Travels*, I: 97.
- 75 Mundy, *Travels*, 201.
- 76 *Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India*, 270.
- 77 Terry's Account in William Foster, *Early Travels in India 1583-1619* (New Delhi, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1985 [1921]), 311.
- 78 Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 49-50
- 79 Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 38-39.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 81 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 66-67.
- 82 Mundy, *Travels*, II: 191-192 & Illustration no. 12: Modes of transporting women in India.
- 83 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 66-67.
- 84 *Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India*, 327.
- 85 Fryer, *New Account of East India and Persia*, I: 88-89.
- 86 See for details, Mandelslo *Travels in Western India*, 51, Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 175, 188, III: 150, Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 372, Thevenot, *Indian Travels*, 76, Careri, *Indian Travels*, 246.

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- 87 Fryer, *New Account of East India and Persia*, I:88
 - 88 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 329.
 - 89 *Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India*, 282-83.
 - 90 Account of William Hawkins, in Foster, *Early Travels*, 118.
 - 91 Harihar Das, ed., *The Norris Embassy to Aurangzib, 1699-1702*, condensed and rearranged by S.C. Sarkar (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1959), 241.
 - 92 Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 42.
 - 93 Fryer, *New Account of East India and Persia*, I: 327-28.
 - 94 Ibid.
 - 95 Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 42-44.
 - 96 Manucci, *Mogul India*, II: 348-49.
 - 97 Ibid., II: 329-30.
 - 98 Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, 37-38.
 - 99 Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India*, 66?
 - 100 Abbe Carre, *The Travels of the Abbe Carre in India and the Near East, 1672 to 1674*, tr. Lady Fawcett, ed. Charles Fawcett, 3 Vols. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1947), I: 247-54.

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- 101 Shuja-ud-Din has identified many factors that have contributed to her becoming a subject of myth and fable. These are: "widow of a rebel official," after the death of her husband, "enters the royal household," "fascinates the mind of the Emperor" and thus "practically rules the Empire for about sixteen years as the most powerful personality." Mohammad Shujauddin and Razia Shujauddin, *The Life and Times of Noor Jahan* (Lahore: Caravan Book House, 1967), 4.
- 102 *Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India*, 235.
- 103 Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India*, 50.
- 104 *Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India*, 235. Mundy related the fanciful story that Nur Jahan was taken prisoner by the Mughals "whoe being brought before the Kinge and shewinge herselfe somewhat haughtie and stomakefull, it is reported hee commaunded shee should bee carried to the Common Stewes, there to bee abused by the baser sorte; but this was not put in execution. Rather hee became her prisoner by marryeing her, for in this tyme shee in a manner ruled all in ruling him." Mundy, *Travels*, II: 206.
- 105 There is no doubt that Jahangir in his memoirs has written that he has handed over the business of government over to Nur Jahan as he needed nothing beyond a *ser* of wine and half a *ser* of meat. Nur-ud-Din Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, tr., ed. & ann. Wheeler M. Thackston (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1999) and "Iqbalnama-i Jahangiri," in H.M. Elliot and John Dowson, eds.

The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians (reprint, Lahore: Islamic Book House, 1979 [1867]), VI: 405. However, Shujauddin feels that "Jahangir's remark was only casual and in a humorous vein." *Life and Times of Noor Jahan*, 29.

- 106 Shujauddin and Shujauddin, *Life and Times of Noor Jahan*, 29 & 36. Ellison Banks Findly, in her modern study of Nur Jahan, used European sources "more fully than they have been in the past" and has thus given a new touch to popular legends and myths. Idem., *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1993] (Oxford India Paperbacks)), see, page 7 for discussion of European travellers. "Nurjahan junta thesis" which mainly depended on the account of Thomas Roe was given a central place by Beni Prasad in his *History of Jahangir* (Allahabad: The Indian Press, 1940), 159-172, 271-278. For a deconstruction of this 'junta' thesis, and of the influence of Roe's account, see Colin Paul Mitchell, *Thomas Roe and the Mughal Empire* (Karachi: Area Study Centre for Europe, 2000), 205-22. Also see, Misra, *Women in Mughal India*, 33-35 and, Radhika Seshan, "The Public and the Private: Gulbadan Begum and Nur Jahan," in *Medieval India: Problems and Possibilities: Essays in Honour of Professor A.R. Kulkarni*, ed. Radhika Sessan (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2006).
- 107 Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, 16.
- 108 Meera Nanda, *European Travel Accounts during the Reigns of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb* (Kurukshetra: Nirmal Book Agency, 1994), 109.

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- 109 K. S. Lal, *Mughal Harem*, 204. Lal's overall assessment of European travellers' representation of Mughal *harem* is: "They [travellers] might be guilty of hasty generalizations, but not of wilful scandal mongering. The essentials in the picture of Mughal harem-life, as presented by them collectively, are interesting, informative, and by and large true. . . In short, European travellers in the Mughal empire have left a factual picture of the life in the Mughal harem. Their accounts are indeed very valuable in so far as they are not deliberate history. They do not try to make their records spectacular by meaningless rhetoric. They are often more sober in their narratives of love episodes of the elite when compared with the Persian chroniclers. These Europeans did not write to please or pamper the vanity of any sovereign, nor were they afraid of any ruler or Mansabdar. Hence, they wrote freely and fearlessly. Indeed, but for them, this study of the Mughal harem would have remained jejune and lifeless." (12-13)
- 110 Ruby Lal, "Rethinking Mughal India: Challenge of a Princess' Memoir," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38 No. 1 (January 4, 2003): 63.
- 111 Lal, *Mughal Harem*, 1.
- 112 Gul-Badan Begum, *Humayun-Nama: The History of Humayun*, trans. Annette S. Beveridge (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1987).
- 113 Yasmeen Murshed, "Talking Books: The Humayun Nama: Gulbadan Begum's forgotten

Chronicle," *The Daily Star* 5 no. 31 (June 27, 2004).

- 114 Ruby Lal, "Rethinking Mughal India: Challenge of a Princess' Memoir," 58.
- 115 Ibid.
- 116 Though incidents are scattered throughout *Humayun-Nama*, but particularly see the pages: 87, 101-02, 187.
- 117 Babur's deep regard for aunts, mothers, wives, sisters and other ladies has been recorded by Gulbadan. See, *Humayun-Nama*, 89, 94-95, 100-01, 103.
- 118 Gulbadan records in *Humayun-Nama* that at one time, Humayun asked Gulbadan and his mother to go to his brother Hindal and reconcile the latter to him. (139) At another time, an old aunt of Humayun worked for the peace between Kamran and Humayun. Also see 160-61 & 176.
- 119 Inayatu-Ila, *Takmila-I Akbar-Nama*, in Elliot and Dowson, VI: 108-09. The author reported that "The Sultana Salima Begam took her departure from Allahabad in order that she might by her influence bring to the Imperial Court the Prince Sultan Salim, . . . The Sultana Salima Begam having interceded between His Majesty and the young prince Salim, reconciled the monarch to the wonted exercise of paternal affection, while at the same time she also procured for Salim the pardon of Akbar's august mother." Ibid.

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- 120 Begum, *Humayun-Nama*, 150-51.
- 121 Radhika Seshan, "The Public and the Private: Gulbadan Begum and Nur Jahan," 285
- 122 Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India, Descriptive of their Manners, Customs, Habits and Religious Opinions, Made during a Twelve Years' Residence in Their Immediate Society*, ed. W. Crooke (London: Humphrey Milford, 1917; reprint, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1974). She can be easily compared with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu who accompanied her English ambassador husband to Turkey in 1716 and presented the true picture of Turkish baths and harem.
- 123 Crooke, 'Introduction,' to *Ibid.*, xv.
- 124 Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India*, Introductory Letter, xxvii.
- 125 *Ibid.*, 167-68.
- 126 *Ibid.*, 167-68, 172.
- 127 Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of Harem," 531.
- 128 Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India*, 182-83.
- 129 The term has been coined by Leila Ahmed in her article "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of Harem," 531.

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- 130 Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1. This important work only studies the domestic space of the early Mughal rulers—Babur, Humayun and Akbar—and does not discuss the later Emperors.
- 131 Such *farmans* have been collected in *Edicts from the Mughal Harem*, ed. S.A. I. Tirmizi (Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delli, 1979).
- 132 Seshan, "The Public and the Private: Gulbadan Begum and Nur Jahan," 283.
- 133 Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal Ladies*, 47.
- 134 Nath, *Private Life of the Mughals of India*, 7-8.