

# **Imaging Women in Mughal India: Historical Narratives, Paintings and Medical Texts**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
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**Master of Philosophy**

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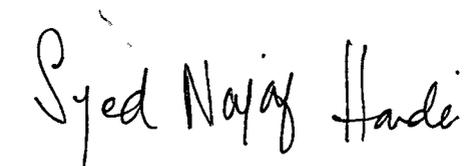
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## DECLARATION

Certified that the dissertation entitled **Imaging Women in Mughal India: Historical Narratives, Paintings and Medical Texts** submitted by Poonam Sheemar in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of **Master of Philosophy** of this university. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University and is her own work.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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**To my family!**

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## Introduction

The objective of the present study is to discern images of femininity, historical narratives discourses consisting of court chronicles and travel accounts, the visual medium of Mughal miniatures and finally medical texts. That these are most likely to be images consciously constructed by men needs to be noted. These are 'conscious' because the sources are mostly courtly in nature - mostly produced at the behest of Mughal emperors, princes and nobles and other members of the aristocracy urban class. In the imperial and aristocratic households prevailed a heightened sensibility towards the imaging of the court culture the purpose of which was to preserve its history in all its glory. As a result a clearly defined literary and artistic propriety was followed in the preparation of these narratives. Manuscript production and painting illustrations had led to the formation of libraries as separate entities in the Muslim world during the 10th and 12th centuries, a traditional institution taken seriously by the Mughals.<sup>1</sup>

Mughal literary and artistic activity was intended to produce and symbolize Mughal grandeur and among other subjects the women represented in it also became grand. Their social roles were particularly marked and they appeared as icons of perfection. The question of reality

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<sup>1</sup> For details see Michael Brand and Glenn D. Lowey, *Akbar's India : Art from the Mughal City of Victory*, The Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1985.

and representation i.e., to what extent are these images real is something which is not the central concern of this study. We rather interested in knowing where do these images ultimately come from and for what purpose? Are these images a ploy by men to present their women as happy while they chained them like chattel behind high thick walls of the harem? Or are they imaginations deliberately concocted by men catering to the Mughal sense of grandeur in which their women had to be portrayed as equally grand and happy?

If these are the images dictated by men, there is ground to question the feminist notions of men victimizing women; for women are here gazed upon by men not as mere chattels but as living bodies, exerting their energies variously. Notwithstanding the high walls of the harem, the veil and the jealous guard, one receives a perception that suggests that the women behind these strong thick walls of the harem were not cardboard figures, but living bodies. Images that we receive are of activity, of consciousness of the self and of needs of the self. And if one supposes that these are living bodies it is difficult to imagine that active energies of half the humanity were of no avail to them them in a perceptible or imperceptible process. Besides, not all women at all times are gazed upon by men as happy, such is the impression conveyed unconsciously and sometimes probably even consciously. In these representations women complain, nag, lie in swoon, yeam and persist with individual energies.

### **Texts and their Contexts:**

The sources utilized in this study are as follows. The *Humayun Namah*, which dates from about 1587 was written at the behest of Emperor Akbar by his aunt Gulbadan ('princess rose body'). Alette Beveridge has written about her work to be 'unique' and 'of a royal lady who lights up her women's world' and for all its simplicity it has a certain majesty, the sure and gentle manners which could control tactfully behind the scenes even headstrong emperors'.<sup>2</sup>

Further, the well-known *Akbarnamah*, the historical narrative of Akbar and his empire by Abul Fazl and *Tuzuk i Jahangiri*, the memoir of the Mughal Emperor, Jahangir have been utilized. The *Shah Jahan Nama* of Inayat Khan (the Royal Librarian of Shah Jahan) has also proved insightful. The language and metaphors used for the images of femininity reveal for us certain societal perceptions and men's perceptions, regarding femininity.

The above mentioned are official accounts ratified by ethics of Mughal court etiquette. The accounts sensitize us to what was considered proper or improper in the imaging of the court society. For the purpose of this study they reveal what was considered worthwhile to record about the women of the royal household. Gulbadan's *Humayun Namah* is especially significant for it comes, though within constraints of court etiquette, from a

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<sup>2</sup> See Rumer Godden, *Gulbadan: Portrait of a Rose Princess at the Mughal Court*, Macmillan London Ltd., 1980, p.12

Mughal princes herself. The meanings and images probably conceal as much as they reveal. Nevertheless, what they reveal - a gaze on femininity - convey images of femininity which in themselves are quite significant.

Sponsored by the court and closely supervised by Emperor's and princes, the Mughal miniature paintings which are especially significant for letting us directly gaze at the female body otherwise jealously guarded against the outsiders gaze except of those who actually possessed them. There are hardly any true to life paintings of women of the royal seraglio.

As pointed out by Niharranjan Ray, 'the art arose out of courtly and aristocratic connoisseurship and was intended throughout to satisfy the taste and curiosity of that connoisseurship'.<sup>3</sup> Men were the connoisseurs of these images and what we receive is 'men's' gaze', role of women in the production and formation of these images being far from clear. This kind of imaging provided through the visual medium of the paintings gives us an insight into the self-conscious, aristocratic, male gaze cast upon women perceived variously in her varied social roles and individual activities.

The role of women in the production and formation of these images is far from clear.<sup>4</sup> In all likelihood the artists seem to have relied on impressions conveyed by eunuchs employed in the royal harem, servants

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<sup>3</sup> Niharranjan Ray, *Mughal Court Painting, A Study in Social and Formal Analysis*, Delhi, 1975, p.117

<sup>4</sup> However that there were women painters in the royal and upper class zenanas seems plausible. See plate 60, 'Lady Painter in a Zenana', Mughal North India, 1635-1640. 19.2\*23.1cm., reproduced in Vishakha N Desai, *Life at Court: Art for India's Rulers, 16<sup>th</sup> - 17<sup>th</sup> centuries*, Museum of fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, 1985-86, p.76.

and physicians who were sometimes admitted to the harems, and lady officials of the harem, living in their own homes outside hours of duty, apart from his own experience, perception and intuition, within the larger framework of subjects, taste and events chosen by the male patron; the male patron. In all this the male patron was probably the most crucial factor. Thus, more or less, what the composition of these paintings reveals is the manner in which men perceived and defined femininity.

Visual representation may be read variously and the meanings interpreted may be easily contested. Nevertheless, the contention here is that while reflecting, being part of and voicing generalized notions of order and stability, these paintings also suggest existential complexities that contravened and subverted the rational and coherence of the normative ordering of society.

The production and circulation of this 'high art' form has been contextualized, to the extent that its nature was determined by and was part of larger socio-historical forces by Niharranjan Ray who sees in it a 'new approach to life', 'antithetic of the traditional Indian view of life of the times', 'first organized attempt to free art from the grip of monastic and hieratic religious control and bring it under that of the secular authorities which in the medieval feudal order of things were epitomized in the court.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Niharranjan Ray, *Mughal Court Painting, A Study in Social and Formal Analysis*, 1975, p.117.

According to him this art is secular aristocratic and urban given the character of the Mughal royalty, nobility and aristocracy.

One might raise here the question of the status of pictorial art in normative Islam and the often quoted tradition attributed to the prophet: "On the day of resurrection those who had been guilty of making pictures of animate objects would be ordered to breathe life into their handiwork, and those unable to do so would perish in torment."<sup>6</sup> Going through a variety of visual images in Mughal India, Percy Brown notes that it not only proves that law cannot restrain expression and that temperament is more powerful than belief but it also explains the severely secular character of its pictorial representations 'so that its patrons were guided by the spirit' rather than the letter of Muhammad's prohibition.<sup>7</sup>

'Secularism', 'individualism', 'urbanism', 'formal courtliness', 'aristocratic', are social values identified by Niharranjan Ray in these paintings which "howsoever alien to and somewhat against the grain of traditional Indian culture and Indian art, were not rejected outright by at least a section of the Indian people in other words by the urban and aristocratic feudal minority and to that extent these values contributed to the enrichment of what we call the medieval Indian culture."<sup>8</sup> Thus in the wake of this socio-cultural context also came a major shift in the way a

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<sup>6</sup> Cited in Percy Brown, *Indian Painting Under the Mughals, A.D. 1750*, Oxford 1924, p.23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.24

<sup>8</sup> Niharranjan Ray, *Mughal Court Painting*, p.19-20

woman is portrayed in art, 'a change' notes Vishakha N.Desai, 'traceable to Iranian prototypes of languid beauties engaged in secular activities such as drinking wine or writing poetry.'<sup>9</sup> This notes Desai, was a significant addition to the female images as symbols of fertility and embodying cosmic powers found in the earliest of India.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly 'men's gaze' and perception of femininity as reflected in the subject matter of the paintings is culturally informed being a fusion of Iranian, classical and early medieval Indian, contemporary Indian (i.e. both Mughal and Hindu traditions) and renaissance European traditions forming an identity of its own. The gaze that we receive through the paintings no doubt revolves around the preferences of the patron, the execution of the painting however naturally comes to be based on the artists' scheme of narrative in which one may discern a plurality of meanings intentionally or unintentionally produced in the structure of the composition.

The accounts left by foreign observers provide us images and meanings of femininity as it appeared specific to the thought process of men belonging to a different culture. The accounts utilized in this study are those of European travellers to the Mughal domain. Kate Teltscher has explored the 17th and early 18th century European 'tradition of writing' about India. She notes how travel accounts were frequently translated into

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<sup>9</sup> Vishakha N. Desai, *Life At Court : Art for India's Rulers, 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries*, Museum of fine Arts Boston, Massachusetts, 1985-86, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

several European languages and gathered into collection of voyages.<sup>11</sup> Tavernier's work for instance went through seventeen editions and reprints in French from 1675 to 1924, five English editions appeared between 1677 and 1688, two German editions, with Italian and Dutch translations too. Kate Teltscher makes the point that "India is frequently represented as antithesis, but occasionally as the analogue of Europe. Narrative devices are generally used to distance and subordinate India, but at times they diminish Indian strangeness and challenge European assumptions of superiority."<sup>12</sup>

The probing eyes of the European travellers gaze at the veiled body of the Muslim women, [a 'gaze' intensified for the very reason that it was meant to be averted attempting to discern, opines Kate Teltscher whether this concealment reveals chastity or is an attempt to prevent promiscuity.] Kate Teltscher notes that: "Indian women are typically represented as both dangerous and attractive" and the travellers are 'preoccupied with the question of Indian women's virtue or vice, the chastity and wifely submission or sexual appetite and depravity.'<sup>13</sup> The travellers are believed to have relied on 'bazaar gossip' among other things for their accounts. In this study we are not directly interested in questioning of the validity of

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<sup>11</sup> Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writings on India, 1600-1800*, Oxford Univ. Press, New Delhi, 1995, p.2

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13,37

their accounts but with the popular perceptions of those times that they somewhat reveal, their own as well as those of the Indians.

Somewhat later sources have also been utilized on the assumption that 'cultural time' which includes sexual mores, moves at an exceedingly slow pace. Thus Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali's, "Observations on the Mussulmauns of India (1832), W H Slæman's "Journey through the Kingdom of Oude in 1849-1850", and his, "Rambles and Recollections of an Indian official", (1844), have proved instructive.

The third type of sources used for this research are some Persian medieval medical manuscripts that I came across in the Hamdard Central Library, Hamdardnagar, New Delhi. These are: *Asrar un Nisa* (Secrets of Women) by Rustam Jurjani, A.D. (dated 1554 in the catalogue); *Khulasat ul 'Aysh i Alam Shahi* (Summary of Pleasure in the reign of Alam Shah) 1763 A.D. by Mazhar Bin Muzzafar and the anonymous *Risalah i Hifzzunnu' dar ilm i Tib* (Treatise on Medical Practices), 1858 A.D. The three texts that I have utilized span a period of three centuries, beginning from the mid- sixteenth century to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the two terminal points of the Mughal empire. Even though the three texts are separated by as many centuries, it is interesting to note the commonality of the substance as well as the form and the language.

The Persian medical texts belonging to the Mughal period are part of a long tradition of medicine traceable to the Arabic treatises. Treatises on sex and sexuality, on sexual hygiene and on 'secrets of women' that

formed part of this medical tradition were most often written for princes and designed for their initiation. More often than not, these texts included erotic stories or anecdotes aimed at sexual arousal.

The medical texts on sexuality are not a mere compilation of medicinal preparations and procedures of child - birth, dietary recommendations and other medical needs. These are also in the nature of a discourse on the 'regime of sexual pleasure' (a term borrowed from Foucault, which accords with the nature of the texts). They seem to recommend a sort of life style with regard to sexual life, and raise the question of sexual morality. The terminology used in the texts with regard to sexual acts is open and direct, something not expected from a prudent society that shielded women's sexuality behind the *parda* and the *harems* ostensibly to protect their honor.

It has to be stated at the outset that there is no attempt in this study towards a generalisation of the Indo- Islamic and Mughal medical traditions. Nevertheless these texts ratify and reinforce the contention that patriarchy (in its meaning of women's subordination and men's domination) does not merely perpetuate itself through suppression of feminine sexuality but also accommodates it in many ways. Patriarchy accommodates female sexuality in the institution of marriage. Surprisingly the statements made by the authors of these texts show that female sexuality can be accommodated per say, as an idea in itself even without institutional mediation of marriage. Even though the accommodation

cannot be taken to imply that it ratifies sexual mores outside the institution of marriage overtly. In the existential dynamics of the system of patriarchy one sees how patriarchal norms interacted with practice, and it is at this point that we may glean a celebration of feminine sexuality.

It is important to note that this image of female sexuality comes from a site of knowledge, which claimed veracity and authenticity and had a wide audience to communicate with, medicine being a daily requirement!<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless normative values attached to female chastity had a very wide reach in society. Medical knowledge still be specialized and its social diffusion would therefore be limited in relation to say, religious discourse. Yet in each kind of discourse there is an inherent tension, which makes a precise demarcation of societal impact of either of these extremely difficult and constantly suspect. This does not diminish the significance of the discourse in raising doubts over some of the feminist perceptions of men's discourse as constantly attempting to restrict and control female sexuality. And also there can be no doubt about the potentiality of medical discourse to influence everyday life and thinking.

The first chapter of the present study deals with images of 'ideal femininity' that pertain to women's 'morally right' behaviour which conform to 'high' standards of chastity. It has been argued that female sexuality was seen to be functional only in so far as it was supposed to achieve the

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<sup>14</sup> See S. Ali Nadeem Rezavi, 'Physicians as Professionals in Medieval India', in Deepak Kumar ed., *Disease and Medicine in India*, Indian History Congress, Tulika, 2001, pp. 40-65. He has demonstrated how physicians had emerged as an established professional middle class in the Mughal period.

noblest aims of motherhood, and operational only in so far as it worked for family honour, and the household. These images are received from the conventional or normative literature (court histories and travelogues) of the period. They convey how patriarchy restricted, controlled and channelized women's lives for its purpose in the face of grossest forms of transgressions of societal norms by women. Towards this end an attempt has been made to see how these images are reinforced time and again in these and popular narratives. And these two contradictory images also complete the picture of upper class women's lives.

The second chapter deals with images contained in the conventional narratives including Mughal miniature paintings, which are different from and even contradict the images of the 'ideal type' dealt with in the first chapter. Since these images too are gleaned from conventional discourses, they reflect how Mughal patriarchy was not based solely on the control and restriction on women's lives but also allowed vent to women's individual aspirations and desires in the existential dynamics of patriarchy and how recognised and celebrated female sexuality, covertly if not overtly.

The third chapter deals with the images of feminine sexuality received through the medical discourse. There appears to be little convergence between medieval Indo-Islamic Indian moral codes of behaviour for Muslim women as revealed in the 'ideal images' from conventional discourse and the images of their sexuality and sensuality

as revealed in the medical discourses, pitted against the 'free' or relatively 'free' male counterparts. Yet the two discourses cannot be seen in opposition to each other as they overlap at many points. For instance women's sexuality in the medical texts is constructed with an explicit empathy and sensitivity which can also be found in the conventional discourses. Conversely the fears of female sexuality (fears of transgression of sexual norms by women; norms on which a patriarchal system is based), which a patriarchal system holds is also contained within the medical discourse. The medical texts too are patriarchal texts. Therefore women's sexuality finds manifestation within the overarching patriarchy rather than in opposition to it. That is, patriarchy does not express itself merely in repressing female sexuality but also in celebrating it.

Before I begin it is imperative to define three terms that have been used repeatedly in the following chapters. The first term is 'men's gaze'. Vidya Dehejia notes that western scholarship on European art submits that woman is the object of the 'gaze' and that man is the bearer of that gaze'<sup>15</sup>. She quotes John Berger, "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at"<sup>16</sup>. True women are objects of an intense 'men's gaze' but Kate Teltscher has rightly pointed out (in the context of European travellers observing Indian women) that

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<sup>15</sup> Vidya Dehejia, ed., *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*, 1997, Delhi, p.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p.2

women themselves are no less curious to gaze at their observers.<sup>17</sup> But 'women's gaze' has hardly been recorded. Because the sources that I have utilized were mostly produced under male patronage and by men, so what gets reflected are men's perception and their world view, hence the term 'male gaze'. 'Gaze' provides images, and these images carry meanings which help us understand the lives of men and women of the Mughal period. The second term that needs to be defined is 'feminine sexuality'. This term has been referred to in three senses depending on the context that it is mentioned in. At many points it is mentioned as societal and men's perception of a woman or ideal womanhood which would include the perceptions of her chastity or sexual depravity. In other contexts it is mentioned in the sense of how women perceived themselves. And finally the term 'female sexuality' has been used in the biological sense of the female gender and the natural functions of a woman's body. The third term that needs to be qualified is 'medieval'. The term 'medieval' is simply used to denote the time period of the Mughal rule in India.

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<sup>17</sup> Kate, *India Inscribed: European and British Writings on India, 1600-1800*.

## Chapter 1

### **Idealized Femininity - Needed Mother and the Feared whore.**

Dominant among the images of 'ideal femininity' is the image of the 'sacred' mother provided by the men's narratives and the male gaze as placed on the highest moral pedestal. This imagery of the mother has no space for and is totally divorced from any other aspect of femininity. It almost seems, when narrowing one's gaze on the notion of mother, as if the body of the mother was born as a mother and remained so throughout her life. This male gaze at the mother finds itself unable to or probably chooses not to focus beyond what a mother stands for: a paragon of virtue, beyond reproach, a model for all women to aspire for. Yet along with this image there always lurks the image of the corrupt woman who can easily disrupt this tidy boundary of the society. These two contradicting images make the fluidity of women's life, belonging to the Mughal court, all too apparent. Ideal types are revealed more as notions that the society (which would of course include both men and women) attempted to approximate, rather than as being real.

Abul Fazl, official historian and a close companion of Akbar, delineating the emperor's descent, as Akbar wanted it to be seen, reveals for us the ideal of medieval femininity, an image idealized and exalted. Abul

Fazl traces Akbar's lineage back to the semi-mythical Mongol queen Alanquwa who, after having been widowed, "was reposing on her bed one night when a glorious light cast a ray into the tent and entered the mouth and throat of that fount of spiritual knowledge and glory. The cupola of chastity became pregnant by that light in the same way as did her Majesty.....Miriam (Mary)...".<sup>18</sup> Alanquwa is supposed to have given birth to triplets. The descendants of these three boys, according to Abul Fazl, were known as *nairun* i.e. light produced which was the purest<sup>19</sup> and hence the semi mythical Alanquwa and her offspring's become worthy of depiction in the miniature to the royal copy of the Chingiznma <sup>20</sup> (see Plate 1). It was through Buranjar Qaan the youngest of the triplets, that this hidden light was passed from Chengiz Khan to Timur and ultimately to Akbar.

Alanquwa also figures prominently in the genealogy of Timur given on the Jade sarcophagus of his tomb in Samarqand. Describing Timur's last paternal ancestor, the inscription says: "And no father was known to this glorious man, but his mother was Alanquwa. It is said that her

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<sup>18</sup> Abul Fazl, *Akbar Nama*, originally composed in 2 vols, edited by Maulavi Abd al-Rahim, in 3 vols, Calcutta, 1878-86. English tr. By H. Beveridge in 3 vols, Calcutta, 1902-39, New Delhi repr. 1989, vol.I, p.179.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.183

<sup>20</sup> See 'Alanquwa and her three sons'. From an imperial copy of Chingiznma ca. 1596. Opaque watercolor on paper, Los Angeles Country Museum of Art. Reproduced in Brand and Lowey, *Akbars India: Art from the Mughal City of Victory*, p.16. In the painting, it is noteworthy that the triplets are painted much maturer than their size which is that of small children. It brings into sharper relief the large, serene depiction of their mother. The smallness of Alanquwa's sons especially emphasizes the family hierarchy in which sons were always subordinate to their mothers at any age or position. Alanquwa's status and thus also of her children is exalted in composing lavish tray of dishes about them on a lavish carpet, attendants and other harem inmates being made busy about them.



character was righteous and chaste and that she was not an adulteress. She conceived him through a light which came into her from an upper part of a door and assumed for her the likeness of a perfect man."<sup>21</sup>. 'That day', according to Abul Fazl, 'was the beginning of the manifestation of his Majesty the king of Kings (Akbar) who after passing through diverse stages was revealed to the world from the holy counts of her Majesty Miryam - Makani for the accomplishment of things visible and invisible'.<sup>22</sup>

Akbar was fascinated with Alanquwa and Virgin Mary, after whose name he had devised titles for both his mother - Miryam Makani and wife- Mariyam Zamani magnifying for us the medieval notions of ideal femininity - 'righteous and chaste', 'cupola of chastity', 'fount of spiritual knowledge and glory' and pregnant to produce *nairun* in a pure manner like the goddess 'virgin' Mary.

The emphasis is on the purity of Alanquwa's character and the sacredness of the light that caused her pregnancy after the death of her first husband. On several occasions Abul Fazl compares her to Mary, thus elevating her offspring's to divine status.<sup>23</sup> The Alanquwa narrative, thus conveys an image of the then held ideal notion of feminine sexuality, informing us of the kind of norms that were set and exalted for women in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Mughal court.

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<sup>21</sup> Cited Brand and Lowey, *Akbar's India: Art from the Mughal city of Victory*, p.2

<sup>22</sup> Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, I, p.180

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol.I. pp.178-83

A similar analogy is made by Gulbadan in her *Humayun-nama*. She states: “ ...there came a letter from... Dilhi, saying: ‘Humayun Mirza is ill and in an extraordinary state. Her Highness the begam should come at once to Dilhi for the Mirza is much prostrated. My lady was much upset on hearing this news, and started for Dilhi, like one athirst who is far from the waters. They met in Mathura. To her experienced eye he seemed ten times weaker and more alarmingly ill than she had heard he was. From Mathura the two, mother and son, like Jesus and Mary, set out for Agra.”<sup>24</sup> Here again the same analogy is made where the mother is idealized as ‘(virgin) Mary’ and the son is idealized as ‘Jesus’ and the devotion of the mother is especially emphasized.

What was the purpose of the obsessive need to create a neat and tidy boundary around the women's role as a mother? One possible explanation for the Alanquwa narrative could be that this provided an honorable and divine ancestry to Akbar for the legitimization of his rule. Mughals were at the pinnacle of the society of their times and this pinnacle had to be honorable, or at least seem to be honorable. As the ruling house it naturally became the responsibility of the Mughal house and also its desire to at least appear honorable for the legitimacy of their rule. The idea was to exalt their lineage and this purpose was well served by the Alanquwa myth for Abul Fazl.

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<sup>24</sup>Gulbadan Begum, *Humayun Nama*, ed. A.S. Beveridge, English tr. A.S. Beveridge, London, 1902, Delhi repr. 1972, p.104

However as is often held, and as seems reasonable to assume, the nature of reality (which in the first place cannot be a fixed entity) and the nature of representation seldom coincide and it is in this gap that the fluidity of women's life is revealed. So Abul Fazl is careful and tries to quell any doubts about Alanquwa's virtue as a chaste woman and writes, "...they admit there was a child without a father or mother, *viz.* the first man or Adam, and they accept a child without a mother, whom they call Eve. Why then not admit a child without a father? Especially when they are fully assured of such an occurrence in the case of Jesus and Mary.<sup>25</sup> He further insists in a verse, "If you listen to the tale of Mary, Believe in the same of Alanquwa".<sup>26</sup> It almost appears, in this context, as if men's gaze willingly, deliberately or at times helplessly is forced to believe in and emote a sense of ordered society which at times might and at times might not have existed. For he further goes into explaining how the will of the creator works to fashion such happenings to give it divine legitimacy?<sup>27</sup> To further justify the Alanquwa myth he writes about how Alanquwa had herself got, 'several wakeful and prudent, keen sighted watchers' placed outside her tent on the momentous night to prevent 'darkness of suspicion and doubt'.<sup>28</sup>

This is an image perpetuated by the court literature of the times. Men's gaze narrows itself into a tight compartment when focusing on the

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<sup>25</sup> Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, Vol.I, p. 182

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.182-83

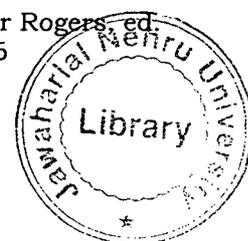
mother. Though it seems that what remains as the focus of attention and what is sought to be preserved is the notion rather than the mother herself. In fact the Mughal court literature is full of such images where ideal femininity is equivalent to 'chastity', 'purity', 'good' and 'right' only if fulfilling the roles of the pious mother, wife, daughter and sister. So Abul Fazal draws on the legitimacy of the popular Alanquwa myth and insists on the chastity of Alanquwa who was a widow when she conceived and not once but thrice, and believes it so much that he proudly traces Akbar's descent from her.

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Similar expectations define the normative character of the wife and she is highly regarded if she remains faithful. Jahangir writes about his wife, Man Bai : "What shall I write of her excellences and goodness? She had perfect intelligence, and her devotion to me was such that she would have sacrificed a thousand sons and brothers for one hair of mine, she constantly -----urged----- (Khusrav) to be sincere and affectionate to me (but) when she saw that it was of no use ----- she from the indignation and high spirit which are inherent in the Rajput character determined upon death"<sup>29</sup> Jahangir was deeply disturbed by her death and explains his feelings as follows, "I passed some days without any kind of pleasure in life or existence, and for four days----- I took nothing in the shape of food or drink"<sup>30</sup> Thus Man Bai is praised for her, 'devotion to Jahangir

<sup>29</sup> Nur al - Din Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Eng. tr. in two vols by Alexander Rogers, ed. by Henry Beveridge, London. 1909-14, repr. New Delhi 1989, I, pp.55-56

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



and her self sacrifice for him which makes her perfectly 'good', and 'excellent'. And this was ideal femininity; that a woman would rather die than be responsible for the disgrace of her husband, even taking upon herself the responsibility of her son's misconduct.

According to Kumkum Sangari, "Patriarchies are resilient not only because they are embedded in social stratification, division of labors, other political structures, religious cultural practices institutions and categories, but also because of the contractual and consensual element in them, which along with patriarchal systems is open to constant and consistent reformulation."<sup>31</sup> And further that, "unless certain distributions of power are made within patriarchal arrangements it is difficult to imagine how any degree of consent from women can be obtained."<sup>32</sup> True patriarchies are resilient because they are based on 'contract' and the 'consensual' element, which remain in the process of constant reformulation in a system of distribution and redistribution of power. Patriarchies may also be resilient because they succeed in perpetuating an image of being so in the face of grossest transgressions, thereby being able to incorporate women's 'consent' and 'agency'. Images conveyed and received become an important source of legitimization rendering insignificant what lies behind the image for the sake of order in society.

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<sup>31</sup> Kumkum Sangari, Consent, Agency and Rhetoric of Incitement, *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 1, 1993, p.868

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, Also see Michelle Perrot, ed., *Writing Women's History*, tr. Felicia Pheasant, Blackwell, 1992.

Thus, the very popular Anarkali legend is important and significant for its imagery in the popular perceptions of those times, rather than its reality. It was a story, then current, of Anarkali (pomegranate kernel) popular among the European travellers of Jahangir's times, according to which, Anarkali was Akbar's wife and the mother of his son Daniyal, Salim's half brother with whom she was involved in a dangerous liaison.<sup>33</sup> William Finch writes when describing the monuments at Lahore, "Passing the Sugar Gunge is a faire meskite built by Shecke Fereed; beyond it (without the towne, in the way to the gardens) is a faire monument for Don Shah his mother, one of the Acabar his wives, with whom it is said Sha Salim had to do (her name was Immacque Kelle, or Pomgranate kernel)..."<sup>34</sup> Edward Terry has also made a note of this story.<sup>35</sup>

In this story it seems are enacted the greatest fear of 'patriarchy' - that of the feared and sought to be kept in check, through diverse means, the aggressive sexual transgression by women and especially so by a mother and a wife. And here this fear is emphasized for the adulteress mother/wife in question is involved with a lover who is none else than her son. Naturally the offenders had to be dealt with severely to restore social order. Thus Finch records how Akbar had become very angry at the liaison between his wife and his son and had caused Anarkali, "...to be

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<sup>33</sup> See Ellison Banks Findley, *Nurjahan, Empress of Mughal India*, Oxford, 1993, p.123

<sup>34</sup> William Foster, ed., *Early Travels in India*, first pub., London, 1921, New Delhi repr. 1999, p.166.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.330

inclosed quicke within a wall in his moholl where shæ dyed"<sup>36</sup>. And as for prince Salim, Terry notes that Akbar had threatened to disinherit him and that he had repealed the order only on his death-bed.<sup>37</sup>

There is no historical corroboration of the Anarkali narrative as fact though it survives to this day. However what is significant is what the story tells us. It reflects patriarchal fears of a women's sexuality, magnified in this instance by making out the mother to be the sinner. It ends with a befitting punishment for the transgression within the framework of a patriarchal mindset that seeks to channelize women's sexuality within the framework of marriage and severely punishes any deviations from social norms to reinforce the ideal types. Anarkali has to pay the price of her deviation by death and Jahangir by the loss of throne though he is ultimately forgiven. But then Anarkali was the mother of Salim in the popular perception of those times. In the family hierarchy the mothers are always superior to their sons. Kumkum Sangari has demonstrated how 'consent' and 'agency' and 'compensations' are important constituents of and inherent in the working of a system. Furthering the same logic the likely explanation for this acceptance of greater punishment for the mother (for she has to pay the price of death) is that a corollary to a position of greater power is attached greater responsibility and therefore greater punishment on transgressing the societal norms set by men and women for themselves.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 166

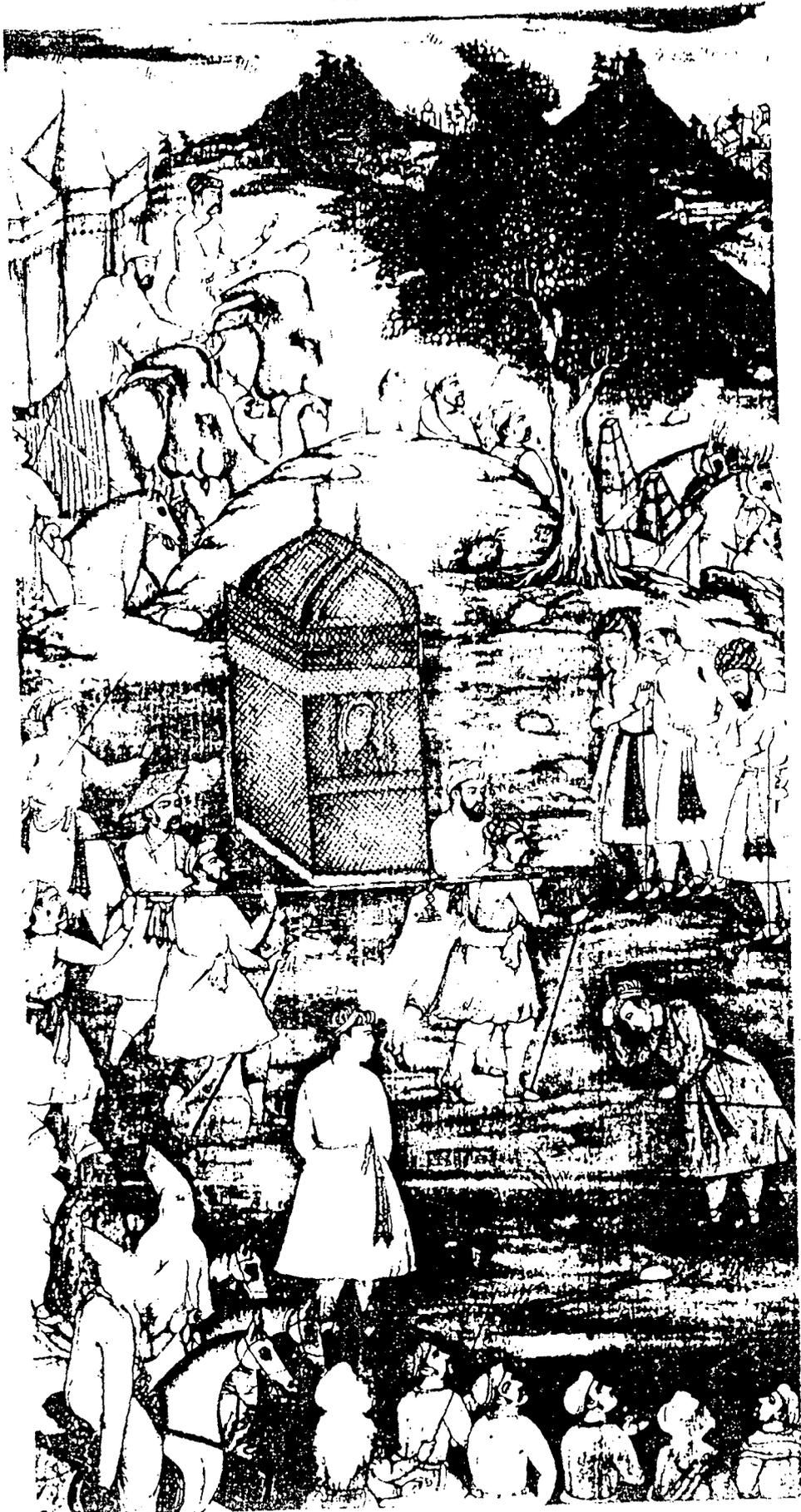
<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 330

The following evidence illustrates this family hierarchy in which the mother is always placed higher than the sons and appears to be immensely powerful. W.H.Sleeman notes "there is no part of the world, I believe where parents are so much revered by their sons... One is delighted to see in sons the habitual reverence for the mother..."<sup>38</sup> Plate 2 illustrates their hierarchy characteristically emphasizing the power women wielded in this social role as the mother in the 'public' and 'private' domains of society. Hamida Banu, her face screened yet visible through the fine matting at the center of her litter and emperor Akbar on foot with his head bent performing the traditional obeisance are focal points in the painting. Also depicted are, on the right side, three men, in all likelihood nobles, courtiers or members of the royal house similarly portrayed with bent heads and reverent gait welcoming the royal lady. Other harem women wearing tall hats and long veils are positioned on their horses in the left foreground lower than the Mother and the Emperor. Though Akbar is portrayed far older than his fourteen years, it is the symbolism contained within the narrative of the painting, which depicts the greatest Mughal emperor bending his head in front of his mother reverently characteristically exalting motherhood that is significant.

This painting (Plate 2) comes from an illustration to the Akbarnama, (1603-05). As already pointed out an obsessive sense of propriety guided the composition of official texts and paintings supervised by the emperor

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<sup>38</sup> W.H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, Edt. Vincent A. Smith, 1844, pp.254-255



'Akbar welcomes his Mother'

himself. Thus it is significant that everything about a mother's position and the emperor Akbar bowing to welcome her was considered natural, proper and worthy of depiction. But what also catches attention is the huge litter 'caging' Hamida Bano which seems analogous to the suggestion of her responsibility of maintaining the dignity of her role by accepting constraints placed on her - the 'litter' symbolically may be seen as 'constraints' - attendant upon which is the 'power' she is compensated with in her role as the mother.

As no power is absolute, nor is this one either. It is this authoritative position that demands 'death' for the transgression committed by the mother/wife in the Anarkali legend. In the popular perception, the suggestion that Anarkali was a step mother and probably much younger in age and probably not Akbar's wife but a concubine or a lover<sup>39</sup>, pales into insignificance in the popular memory of those times, in the face of her being in family relationship the mother. But for the mother's consent 'the sin' could not have been possible. And, besides, the situation here in consideration is such that would involve no contest between genders - 'inhuman' offense of incest would not be forgiven by either of the human genders. But the story also alludes to the immense power of women's sensuality, for despite everything Anarkali is immortalised by the

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<sup>39</sup> See Findley, *Nurjahan, Empress of Mughal India*, p.123

sumptuous tomb<sup>40</sup> supposedly built for her after she died by Jahangir and this love story is celebrated to this day.

Women's sexual conduct was symbolic of family honor and respect in society. Violation of a woman of the house whether with her consent or forced as for instance in times of war was regarded as the highest form of disgrace for the family and the community. The men preferred to have them dead, no matter how dearly related, or die protecting or avenging their honor rather than face such disgrace.

Gulbadan's record of the loss of one of the daughters of Humayun in the *Humayun Nama* is telling. Aqiqa was a daughter and a second child of Humayun and Bega Begam. Aqiqa (who was 8 years old at that time) was among several other women of the aristocracy who had disappeared at Chausa (1539). According to Gulbadan, "he (Humayun) never heard even a word, as to whether they were drowned or what became of them. In spite of all inquiry and search, what had become of them was never found out".<sup>41</sup> Gulbadan Begam records what emperor Humayun said to Mirza Hindal, his brother: 'Aqiqa Begam disappeared in the first interregnum (*fitrat* i.e. battle of Chausa), and I repented extremely', ... 'Why did I not kill her in my own presence? Now again it is difficult to convey women with us'...Mirza Hindal answered, 'what it would be for your majesty to kill a mother and a sister, speaks for itself! So long as there is life in me, I will

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<sup>40</sup> Foster in his *Early Travels* footnotes that, "The tomb, which is still one of the sights of Lahore, was not finished till 1615". Though there is no historical evidence that the tomb was in fact built for Anarkali but it is significant that it was thought so.

<sup>41</sup> *Humayun Nama*, p.137

fight in their service. I have hope in the most high God, that, - poor fellow as I am, - I may pour out my life's blood for my mother and my sister.<sup>42</sup> The point is that no matter how dear the woman was or how painful the sense of loss, death was preferred if it saved the family honor.

Similarly, if women were willing to go against or disregard the societal norms, death was seen as the only recourse to save the family honor. An anecdote narrated by Manucci about prince Mui'zz-uddin and his wife reveals how suspicion alone was enough for a husband to chastise his wife by poisoning her rather than face the disgrace of her betrayal: "...Sultan Mu'izz-ud-din conceived a ragging jealousy against his wife, for reasons that I cannot state. She was the most lovely and perfectly formed creature of all those in the mahal. This is why he poisoned her with his own hands in some betel he gave her"<sup>43</sup>. The woman was poisoned thrice, and Manucci cured her three everytime with antidotes. Yet the prince persisted and when Manucci went to Aurangabad he poisoned her again, finally causing her death.<sup>44</sup> The story is significant in alluding to the men's desperate fear of women's sexuality and sensuality.

The images of the ideal femininity received from the normative discourses as well as historically contingent evidence are that of the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p.143, Aqiqa was born in Agra in 1531. It is only from her aunt Gulbadan that anything is known of her. She went to Gwalior with her mother in c.1534; she was present at Hindal's feast in 1537, and she was lost at Chausa on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 1539.

<sup>43</sup> Niccalao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor or Mogul India*, Eng. tr. William Irvine, 4 vols., first pub. 1907, New Delhi repr. 1981, Part II, pp.384-385

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

pious mother, wife, daughter, and sister. These images are reinforced time and again by a constant and threatening reminder of the dire consequences that women faced if they did not follow the ideals set up for them and broke social-sexual norms. Thus juxtaposed to the 'pious' images is the image of women who were corrupt and were corruptor of men and the social system.

Manucci and other travellers record how in their perception the institutions of the *parda* and the confinement of the women in the haram were used to enforce a strict sexual code. These restrictions were imposed against the wishes of the women. One particular instance is Roshan Ara Begam's request for a palace outside the fortress where she wanted to pass her days as she pleased. But Aurangzeb, 'knowing well the meaning of the request' disliked the idea and denied his sister what she wanted<sup>45</sup>. The understanding was that Roshan Ara would get a bad name in the society for having the freedom to have male company in the palace outside the fortress. Pelsaert, similarly reflects on the unsatisfied passions of the women of the harem: "These ...women wear indeed the most expensive clothes, eat the daintiest food and enjoy all worldly pleasures except one, and for that one, they grieve saying they would willingly give everything in exchange for a beggars poverty".<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp.30-31.

<sup>46</sup> Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India: The Remonstratie of Francisco Pelsaert*, Eng. Tr. W.H. Moreland and P. Geyl, first pub. 1925, Delhi 2001, p. 66.

The image of the adulteress constantly haunts men's narratives and popular perceptions. Manucci records a story of the meeting of a group of men and women' in the royal garden (Dil-Kusha) at Lahore as follows: 'To it went for recreation twelve officials, and in lightness of heart, drunk as they were, they sent out in search of twelve women. One by one eleven appeared and one man was left without a lady. As the issue was setting, there appeared one at the entrance of the garden, who walked most gracefully. She was very lovely and well dressed, so that she roused envy in the whole company. Drawing to him to whom she was allotted, who had come forward to greet her, she perceived it was her husband! Vigorously hastening her pace and with demonstrations of rage, she fell upon him, tore his clothes, beat and abused him and said he must have lost his way out walking; the company he found himself in was not such as suited a person of gravity. She dragged him away and took him home, making him out the sinner, although she was an adulteress herself'.<sup>47</sup> All European travellers were preoccupied with Indian women's sexuality as Manucci seems to be in recording this story. This story also reflects Manucci's Christian conception of women as wicked by nature as Eve was who corrupted Adam; women as prone to give in to desires. But assuming that Manuccu was recording popular stories, it also indicates the freedom that women (an upper class woman in this case) could create for themselves even in the face of restrictions

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<sup>47</sup> Manucci, *History of the Mogul*, II, pp.435-436. Manucci calls it a 'story of twelve men and eleven women'.

and limitations of the harem. However, this is not to assume that all women deviated from societal norms. But those women who did not internalize societal values could flout them.

A painting in the *Baharistan* of Jami<sup>48</sup> (plate 3), which was copied for the imperial library in 1595, depicts the story of an unfaithful wife, Habza. Though the story is Iranian the painting illustration is Indian. Douglas Barret and Basil Gray have interpreted the narrative in the painting as follows: 'Habza can be seen in a romantic dalliance with her lover some distance away while her husband enraged at the discovery of her deception is wreaking his wrath on the young man whom Habza had persuaded to occupy her place in her tent. Habza's mother and sister are trying to protect the young man and trying to calm the raging husband.'<sup>49</sup> The situation is emotionally charged and the violent reaction it has produced in the husband is enhanced by the artist with lighting which spells the impending doom that awaits Habza now that her husband has discovered her deception.

The image of the adulteress and men's obsessive fear of the propensity of the mother or the wife to become one suggest how fragile the relations between men and women were. Men's perception of women transgressing all bounds reflect their deepest fear of women's sexuality

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<sup>48</sup> *Baharistan* translated as 'Spring Garden' is an Iranian work written in 1487 by the Iranian poet Jami.

<sup>49</sup> Douglas Barret and Basil Gray, *Treasures of Asia, Indian Painting*, first edition by Editions d'Art Albert Skira, Geneva, 1963, 1978 edition, Macmillan London, p.89



'Baharistan of Jami: The Story of the Unfaithful wife'

which was sought to be checked by an alternative image of the good and the dedicated, and the virtuous, a model for all to emulate. The alternative image brought in its wake immense social respect, prestige and power, hence accommodating women's aspirations and providing 'compensations' for their 'consent'. The image was powerfully backed by chastisement and a threatening reminder to women to adhere to social norms and practices or face annihilation. The two contradictory images of the virtuous and the corrupt reveal the fluidity of the women's life making patriarchy a fluid social system rather than a fixed entity.

## Chapter 2

### Daily Life – the Private and the Public

In an ideological construct that secluded women to the private domain, the imaging of the private lives of women in the official narratives and in the visual medium of paintings (though strictly edited) exalting all their activities sanctioned by the aristocracy is in itself significant. It is through the men's gaze in these narratives and paintings that women's experience of life somewhat unfolds before us. And interestingly it suggests itself that for men women were not mere 'possessions', but accomplished beings, greatly fascinating and to be held in great esteem. Each act of these women was envisioned as a pleasurable site. Harem was visualized around notions of social status and family honour. It was also a site for recreation, leisure, procreation, the rearing of children and above all privacy; the women's world as distinct from the men's. Yet the women's world mingled with the men's in many aspects. The ideology of confining women to the private domain seems to transform the harem at the practical level into a politically, socially, and economically active institution in a constant interaction (not always of tensions) between practice and the theoretical norms.

It is hard to adhere to the notion that men's gaze that we receive was entirely or merely an imagination or a concoction and it seems more reasonable to assume that if not entirely, then some part of this men's

gaze was informed by the experience of women in question. Thus probably what is revealed is not merely how women's bodies were perceived or imaged, but also to some extent how they were lived. Thus it may not be unreasonable to assume that in the men's gaze and in the images conveyed by men, women's 'agency' is revealed to some extent - that women were doing what men perceived them to be doing apart from doing other things. And this is not such an unreasonable assumption for dwelling upon the received discourse and men's gaze: what is revealed is not merely those acts of women that seem to blend with our received notions of patriarchy to which bastions of society would want them to adhere in domination subordination relationship but also those acts which contradict these notions if not explicitly then implicitly.

Rejoicing at Fatehpur Sikri is portrayed in Plate 4, on the birth of the emperor's second son Murad in 1570, celebrating motherhood, one of the major preoccupations of women. The energetic posture of maidservants and musicians all communicate a feeling of riotous *éclat* and dancing rhythm. The painting is multi compartmental and illustrates the various activities and celebrations including the confinement room at the right hand top corner and below in a room priests forecasting the child's fortune. Celebrations dance and music not only inside the harem but also outside it are depicted; in which men and women are participating together.

'Rejoicing at  
Fatehpur  
Sikri, on the  
birth of the  
Emperer  
Akbar's  
second son,  
Murad '



Manucci records that when a prince was born: 'all the court takes part in the rejoicing, which lasts several days, as the king may ordain. Instruments are played and music resounds; the nobles appear to offer their congratulations to the king, bringing presents, either in jewels, money, elephants or horses'<sup>50</sup>. Similarly, the first child of Babur to be born at Kabul was the son of Babur's chief wife Maham, (he called her 'my moon'}, whom the name of Humayun- fortune – was given, and Babur records that when his heir was 4 or 5 days old, 'I went out to the Four Gardens to hold the feast of his nativity. All the lords, great and small, brought their gifts. Such a mass of silver coins was heaped up as had never before been seen. It was a splendid feast'<sup>51</sup>. Men and women clearly associate together with the woman's function of childbirth.

There are also depictions of women and men's engagement in various ceremonies associated with childbirth as for instance in plate 5 that commemorates circumcision of Akbar's sons. Infants being placed in care of nurses is also commemorated, for instance as in plate 6 (the infant Akbar being placed in the care of his nurse). The nurse had a venerated social standing in the imperial household since they were the ones who really took care of the infants. Jahangir writes about the death of one of his nurses with considerable emotion: " in the month Zilqada the mother of Qutubddin Khan Koka, who had given me her milk and

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<sup>50</sup> Manucci, *History of the Mogul*, II, p. 320

<sup>51</sup> Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, *Babur Nama*, tr. from Turki into English by A.S. Beveridge in two vols., first pub. 1921, Delhi repr., 2003, p. 344.

'Cicumcisi  
n of Akbar's  
sons'





'The Infant Akbar Placed in the care of his Nurses'

was as a mother to me or even kinder than my own mother, and in whose lap I had been brought up from infancy, was committed to the mercy of God. I placed the feet of her corpse on my shoulders and carried her a part of the way (to her grave). Through extreme grief and sorrow I had no inclination for some days to eat and I did not change my clothes"<sup>52</sup>. The depiction of child bearing and rearing in the paintings reveals the importance attached to the role. It virtually became a site where women had the dominant role to play but with which men were equally concerned and central to. European observers note how personalities of emperors were totally a product of their upbringing in the harem and how influential harem was in so many of their decisions. This perception is reflected in court histories and other historical narratives as well and has been a bit subordinated to the structure of politics in modern historiography.

Several paintings depict the pleasure activities of the women inside the harem as for instance in plate 7. Festivals providing a major occasion, the women dance, drink and make music. The paintings depict them as having their own party, celebrating holy with vigour and excitement smearing each other with red powder and watercolours. The focal point in the painting are the two women in the centre fun frolicking, one making the other drink from a wine flask, while Jahangir in the background, somewhat worse for drink and drugs has his arm about a

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<sup>52</sup> *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, pp.84-85

woman and leans heavily upon her while holding the hands of a favourite consort and gazing at the latter. Manucci writes that they had permission to enjoy the pleasure of comedy and dance, to listen to stories of love, to recline upon beds of flowers, to walk about in gardens, to listen to the murmur of running water, to hear singing and other similar pastimes.<sup>53</sup> There are several paintings of groups of female musicians and scenes of music party in the garden, ladies playing chess, chaupar, colouring their feet, enjoying dance performances on festivals, women dancing individually or in groups.<sup>54</sup> There are paintings of love lorn ladies being comforted by matrons, princess's presenting garland of flowers to a prince or a prince receiving his beloved.<sup>55</sup> There are also paintings of princesses riding horses, playing polo, and hunting which with the reign of Jahangir was a pleasure sport of queens as well.<sup>56</sup> All these activities are exalted in celebration, a contention reinforced when Jahangir admires and records in his memoirs how his queen Nurjahan once killed four tigers in five gunshots while riding over an elephant.

Women shielded behind the screen observing the beheading of a treacherous servant in the house of Khwaja Muazzam in 1564 is shown in plate 8. The screen (*parda*) based on the understanding of femininity as fragile and delicate was meant to shield women from the harsh

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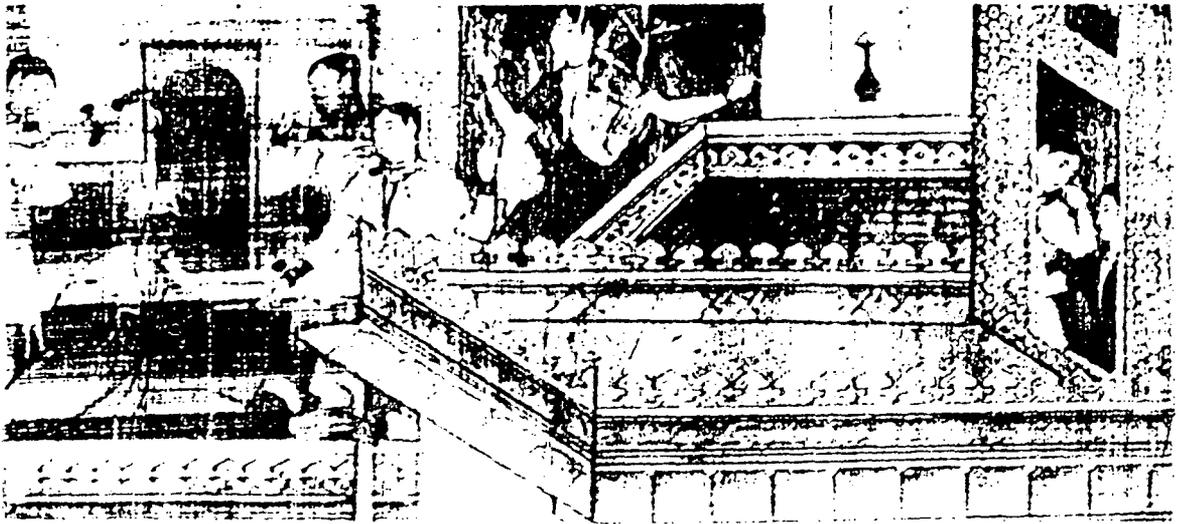
<sup>53</sup> Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, p.156

<sup>54</sup> See K.S. Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, Delhi, 1988, p.15

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Vishakha N. Desai, *Life At Court : Art for India's Rulers, 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries*, Museum of fine Arts Boston, Massachusetts, 1985-86, p. 86.

Platé VIII



The Béheading of a Treacherous Servant in the House of Khwaja M'uazzam

vicissitudes of public life. Yet their indulgences in sports such as hunting, riding horses, playing polo, requiring strength of body and was a reality as well showing how full of contradictions reality can be. Similarly witnessing beheading, a gory act, visualizing which would make anyone male or female shudder conveys an image of femininity as being strong and active qualities generally attributed to men. And that these activities were celebrated in the composition of paintings hardly gives the impression of women being conceived as weak and hardly brings to mind the models of the fragile, delicate and dependent female which had been the hackneyed characteristic of femininity. This is not to state that women did all that men did but that in the male perception as reflected through literary and visual narratives the aristocratic women hardly appear as weak and caged birds as characterized by some foreign observers such as Fryer.<sup>57</sup>

The evidence of plate 9 comprises the magnificence of their abode and recreates their socializing experience. The painting portrays a meeting between women of two aristocratic families. The host leaves no stone unturned in arranging hospitality, flowers are decorated in a pot at the centre, drinks and food are offered and gifts are carried a large trays by attendants to the left. Women embodied 'family honour' and social repute of the family. On exchange of impressions among them was dependent social prestige of the family.

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<sup>57</sup> See Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, New Delhi, 1995, pp.43.



'A Princess  
Showing  
her  
Thumb-  
Ring'

The composition of plate 10 brings to mind the perceptions regarding the harem as conveyed by the travel accounts that visualized the seraglio as an 'inverted world'.<sup>58</sup> Kate Teltscher notes that to the European mind, 'customary political and gender hierarchies are completely overturned in the seraglio: men sue for favours from the women; military power also lies in female hands'<sup>59</sup> Manucci refers to the kings and princes operating through the harem in which there were women officials appointed for communication with the outside world<sup>60</sup> Plate 10 depicts a subject that had become conventional. A woman entertains a prince with wine and fruit on a pavilion terrace overlooking a lake. Behind, a younger woman is being led out by an attendant, while in the foreground a woman kneels between garden beds preparing kebabs over a small fire that she fans. Yet one may attempt to glean from it a different meaning. The composition of the painting seems to be divided into unequal halves, the woman's world on the left scaled larger by the pillar in the background which to the man seated to the right of the viewer gives only one third of the total space in the painting. The faces of the women are stylised. The women appear in harmony with each other and their tasks. The prince here seems to stand not in ownership, not even reciprocity, but in the position of a receiver.

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<sup>58</sup> See, Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, p.44.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, II, pp.308-309



'A Woman Entertains a Prince'

Men's gaze at femininity, her body, living, within the harem informs us of a differential experience of women, and how within the common experience of the institution of the *parda* and the harem the women were a divided category – divided by class, aspirations and success at their aspirations- often involved in fierce intrigue among themselves (as also with men) revealing how femininity within the constraints of confinement exerted its energies, suggesting active women's agency that somehow succeeding in blurring the often held autonomy of the 'public' and 'private' spheres as segregating men's activities and world from that of women.

The boundaries defining a hierarchy of social status among women in accordance with their social station and sexuality alluding to the diversity in women's experience are revealed in plate 11 – 'Prince Salim greeting his mother'. In the painting prince Salim greets his mother by bending his head, as a mark of great respect and touches his turban in traditional obeisance to her. The focal point in the painting is Jahangir's mother to the extreme left mid- ground of the painting, her veil having been temporarily raised to permit encounter with her son. The composition characteristically emphasizes the power women wielded in their social and private role as the mother. The mother is placed the highest in the composition of the miniatures vis- a vis other ladies of the harem symbolizing the greatest social esteem she enjoyed over other ladies of the harem shown in the painting and who were most probably

Prince Salim, (the future Jahangir) greeting his mother



co-wives, sisters, daughters, concubines, and their attendants and entertainers. There are two palanquins, one tightly curtained and the other above it revealing the woman inside probably made visible for Jahangir on his arrival, her head bent (as she greets him) in the same angle as that of Jahangir who seems to be greeting her as well, as his mother. Her positioning in the painting and her visibility in youth and fine form suggests a category of women in the harem whose power within the hierarchy of in the harem was attendant upon her sensuality among other qualities emanating also from a close relationship with the prince or the emperor as the case may be. At the lowest level is emphasized the presence of an unveiled woman accompanying the party on foot, her plain apparel too emphasizing her low station in social hierarchy. The composition of the painting suggests class differences among women and also differences within the class of royal women themselves suggesting diversity of women's social experience at large and within the court society in particular.

There were women writes Manucci, 'in attendance on the king, his wives, his concubines<sup>61</sup>, and there were 'the matrons, the servants, female superintendents of music and their women players all having a fixed monthly allowance according to the dignity of the post they occupy<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup>Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, III, p.308

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

The social position of daughters and sisters in the Mughal court society was important and exalted. Jahangir writes of his many sisters with affection including those born of concubines. For instance he writes of his special affection for his sister Shakru-nisa born to Bibi Daulat Shad who was brought up under the care of Akbar and lauds the quality of compassion in her reiterating: “there can be few such relationships between brother and sister”.<sup>63</sup> Jahangir further comments that the first time when, according to the custom of pressing the breast of a child and a drop of milk is perceptible, they pressed my sister’s breast and a drop of milk appeared, my revered father (Akbar) said to me: Baba! drink this milk that in truth this sister may be to thee as a mother. God, the knower of secrets, knows that from that day forward, after I drank that drop of milk, I have felt love for my sister such as children have for their mothers.<sup>64</sup> Jahangir writes of another sister of his of whom Akbar was very fond despite the fact that ‘her disposition was on the whole inclined to excitement and heat’.<sup>65</sup> Akbar was so fond of her that he described her ‘impoliteness as politeness’, and said this to the prince: “Baba! For my sake be as kind as I am, after me (to her). Be affectionate to her and overlook her little impolitenesses and impudences”.<sup>66</sup>

The power and influence wielded by Princess Jahan Ara Begam, daughter of emperor ShahJahan and Mumtaz Mahal (Arjmand Banu

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<sup>63</sup> *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, pp.85-86

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

Begam) probably surpassed that of all other princesses and princes.<sup>67</sup> On the death of Empress Mumtaz Mahal, Shah Jahan had bestowed upon her the highest rank of the, “chief lady of the royal harem”<sup>68</sup> On every state or festive occasion he gave her presents in cash and kind, which were always superior in value even to those given to Prince Dara Shukuh, the heir apparent.<sup>69</sup> The emperor also built palaces for her and granted her gardens and estates. She accompanied her father in most of his journeys to various places in the country.<sup>70</sup> Much has been recorded of her illness, Shah Jahan’s personal attendance on her and the great rejoicing and celebrations on her recovery. On Jahan Ara’s recovery the ceremony of weighing her in gold was held, which was an innovation since the practice till then was reserved for the emperor.<sup>71</sup> The weighed amount of gold was distributed amongst the poor by way of thanksgiving to God for granting her recovery from illness<sup>72</sup>. Drums were ordered to be beaten, the emperor took up trays full of gems, rubies, pearls and emeralds, articles set with jewels, ornaments set with gold and silver, scattered them over his daughter’s head with his own hands and threw them amongst those present at the ceremony.<sup>73</sup> The celebrations are reported to have continued for several days, and throughout that period

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<sup>67</sup> See Qamar Jahan Begam, *Princess Jahan Ara Begam, Her Life and Works*, Pakistan, 1950, p.78

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.40

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.33

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

gold and silver were scattered over the princess and thrown amongst the people.<sup>74</sup>

Jahan Ara's role in support of Dara Shukoh and the emperor Shah Jahan as well as that of her sister Roshan Ara begum who seemed to have favoured Aurangzeb in the fratricidal wars that ensued is well established.<sup>75</sup> After his victory over Dara Shukoh, Aurangzeb her with much kindness and respect and maintained her allowance. In fact Aurangzeb's attachment to the princess can be gleaned from one of his letters in which he mentions that: "the nawab of the holy veil (i.e. Jahan Ara Begam) shows special favour to this person (i.e. the writer of this letter), and her attention to other side is merely by way of a prudent measure, otherwise it is not from her heart".<sup>76</sup>

Clearly all inmates of the harem stood a chance at wielding immense power and regard and each seemed to have vied with the other for her share. For instance aspirations to attain the position of motherhood inspired by the power and prestige and social status which it brought in its wake had become a source of fierce intrigue in the harem and women exercised their energies in every conceivable manner to attain motherhood and especially so to mother the first born. Sleeman observed that the despotic influence of the mother over the son, ‘

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> See Rekha Mishra, *Women in Mughal India (1526-1748)*, Delhi, 1967; Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, 1656-1668*, Eng. tr. Irving Brock, first pub. London 1891.

<sup>76</sup> Cited from Qamar Jahan Begam, *Princess Jahan Ara Begam*, p. 77

produced much mischief...in private families, but still more in sovereign ones<sup>77</sup>. Manucci claims to record a confession made to him by one of these ladies herself: "It was the wife of Asad Khan, the *wazir*...and she told me that her only thought were to imagine something by which she could please her husband and hinder his going near other women"<sup>78</sup>, and for this Manucci asserts that they all are the same.

The women were known to have gone to the extent of causing miscarriages to other co-wives. Tavernier remarks that, 'when the princesses in the imperial harem became aware that there is one among them with a child, they immediately use all conceivable methods to cause a miscarriage'.<sup>79</sup> Babur's beloved wife Bibi Mubarika could not bear any children due to the enmity of other wives who administered drugs to deprive her of motherhood and weaken her husbands (Babur's) affection.<sup>80</sup> Gulbadan Begam writes of a woman named Maywa Jan who was pregnant for eleven months but in the end everyone came to know that it was pretence and a fraud.<sup>81</sup>

Jealousy and vengefulness marked the harem squabbles and the co-wives generally never trusted each other.<sup>82</sup> For instance, Jahangir was greatly attached to Nur Jahan, so she was always a victim at the hands

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<sup>77</sup> W.H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, 1844, ed. Vincent A. Smith. p.309

<sup>78</sup> Manucci, p.329

<sup>79</sup> Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India (1640 - 67)*, Eng. tr.V. Ball, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, ed. William Crooke, first pub. London, 1889, p.313.

<sup>80</sup> Zinat Kausar, *Muslim Women in Mughal India*, Delhi, 1992,p.256.

<sup>81</sup> Gulbadan Begam, 'H N', pp.112-113

<sup>82</sup> See Zinat Kausar, *Muslim Women*, p.255

of Jagat Gosaini.<sup>83</sup> Two stories of the verbal duel between the two rivals has been preserved.<sup>84</sup> Once when both were in royal company, Nur Jahan remarked on Jagat Gosaini – that rustic Hindu woman was as usual clothed in gaudy rather than more sophisticated subtle tones, and Jagat Gosaini replied that while a married woman could wear clothes of all colours, a widow could only wear white, a reference to Nur Jahan's previous marriage and the rigidly upheld Hindu ban on remarriage<sup>85</sup>. In another story once when Jahangir had mentioned to Jagat Gosaini that Nur Jahan remarked on the sweetness of his breath, she told him that, 'only a woman who had been around many other men could judge the sweetness or sourness of any one man's breath'<sup>86</sup>.

Similarly Aurangzeb's special liking for Udaipuri Mahal was a source of displeasure for his co-wives. Pelseart rightly remarked that their food comes from one kitchen but each wife takes it in her own apartment for they hate each other secretly; though they seldom or never allow it to be seen because of their desire to retain the favour of their husband whom they fear, honour, worship, as God rather than as man<sup>87</sup>

In the execution of plate 12 the painter has subtly captured the power struggle and intrigue within the harem and the way in which women experienced it. Plate 12 belonging to the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century is

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<sup>83</sup> Jagat Gosaini was married to Jahangir in 1586 and in 1592 gave birth in Lahore to Jahangir's third son Khurram the future emperor Shah Jahan.

<sup>84</sup> See Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India*, p.125.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Pelseart, *Jahangir's India: The Remonstratie of Francisco Pelseart*, p. 65



'Prince and Ladies celebrating the Spring Festival'

based on an earlier original executed in Shah Jahan's reign. It is a scene of excitement on *Holi* and portrays indulgences connected with the Mughal ways of courtly life to which women were central and which the emperor and the princes sought to exalt. The prince, enamoured of one of the ladies, showers all his attention upon her. Other ladies carouse, make music, and revel in the spring. Two ladies one portrayed on the right foreground and the one above her have fallen asleep or fainted as much due to intoxication it seems as due to heart burning and displeasure and jealousy at not being the centre of the prince's attention. The ladies on the right side of the painting betray no negative emotion while the three ladies behind the back of the prince, apart from the musicians, are depicted in a scheming stance.

Clearly not all women shared a similar position or had similar experiences, but all of them seemed to aspire to the same position in the structure i.e. of the favourite wife or the first lady of the harem. This position could be attained in youth through the power of sensuality that would transform at some point into motherhood and extend her power and influence into her old age and even more so if she had been able to mother the first born.

The space within which women exercised their individuality to gain access to their field of power guaranteed by the relationship between the man and the woman seems to have been an experience where there hardly existed any set patterns or rules. Motherhood, was of course

permanently repositied with 'power', yet the structure was rendered flexible wherein each lady of the harem stood a chance given the exercise of her personal intelligence, charm, wit, and sensuality. For instance Babur's truly loved wife was Maham who bore him just one child (Humayun) while Gulrukh and Dildar who had several children were disregarded by Babur when writing his memoir, so much so that Babur allowed Maham to adopt Dildar's daughter (Gulbadan) and a son (Hindal) as her own giving no thought to Dildar's love and pride<sup>88</sup>. Rumer Godden observes, "Maham was powerful, moody and spoilt and it seems Babur denied her nothing"<sup>89</sup>. Inayat Khan has recorded about Mumtaz Mahal that his (Shah Jahan's) delight was centred in this illustrious lady to such an extent that he did not feel towards the others one-thousandth part of the affection that he did for her late Majesty; and he never allowed that light of the imperial chamber to be separated from him whether at home or abroad.<sup>90</sup>

The space within which women attempted to satisfy their individual aspirations was so flexible and fluid that they could even subvert, contravene and invert the rationale and coherence of the criterion defining their different social roles in the normative ordering of society. Findly illustrates this point by the case of Nur Jahan. According

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<sup>88</sup> *Babur Nama*, p. 374, also see, Rumer Godden, *Gulbadan, Portrait of a rose princess at the Mughal court*, London, 1980, pp.28-32.

<sup>89</sup> Rumer Godden, *Gulbadan*, p.29

<sup>90</sup> Inayat Khan, *Shah Jahan Nama*, Eng. Tr by A.R. Fuller, ed. and completed by W.E. Begley and Z.A. Desai, Delhi, 1990, p.71.

to her there were no readily available models in Indian culture of the middle aged woman who happened in this case also to be Muslim, a widow, and at the same time decidedly a public figure.<sup>91</sup> Widowed already a mother of a daughter, bearing no child of Jahangir's and as his consort being not only the 'marriage partner supreme but also one who, had to praise and scold, nurse and protect as well', and as reflected in the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* being praiseworthy and exalted in all her activities by Jahangir.<sup>92</sup> Nur Jahan's power, private and public, surpasses our imagination of what might be appropriate to our received notions of the normative structure of gender relations in the Mughal court culture.

European travellers' accounts visualized, the Mughal aristocratic society from the vantage point of a structure of thought specific to their cultures. The Europeans saw in the functioning of the court society a complete overturn of what to them were customary political and gender hierarchies. Della Valle's assessment of NurJahan's role in the harem is therefore singularly critical.<sup>93</sup> Findly nevertheless notes that these comments show the ease with which Nur Jahan could, 'take the structure of power offered by the harem and reshape them without violation to their dignity, thus giving them life for purposes entirely her own'.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> See Findley, *Nurjahan*, p.5.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

Manucci mentions how the female superintendents of the harem also had important state functions whereby each was paired with a minister at court, shared his official title, supervised his work and reported to the emperor<sup>95</sup>: “For just as the king has his officers outside, he has the same among the fair sex within the mahal. Among these ladies are some who occupy the same offices that are held by grandees outside; and it is by the mouth of these illustrious persons, when the king does not come forth, that the officials outside receive the orders sent them from within.... they have much wit and judgement and know all that is passing in the empire. For the officials outside are required to send written reports into the mahal of all that the king out to know. To these reports the women officials reply as directed by that prince.... news letters [sent by waqi’ah-navis and khufiyah-navis] are commonly read in the king’s presence by the women of the mahal....”<sup>96</sup> Manucci further states; “They, not the male nobles are the real sources of power. All intrigues of state are carry’d on, war and peace are made, Vice Royships and Governments obtained by their Means: In fact they have the principal distribution of the Courts Favours.... They are properly speaking the cabinet council of the Mogol...’Tis easily conceived that the principle care of each great officer of the Emperor ’is to keep himself in the good Graces of his Court lady. The least rupture with her is attended with inevitable Ruin: Happy is the man whose lot has not condemn’d him

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<sup>95</sup> See Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, p.45.

<sup>96</sup> Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, II, pp.308-309.

to a dependence on a capricious Correspondant!”<sup>97</sup> This shows how women of the royal harem exercised considerable influence in political matters and happenings at the court.

Bernier’s statement further illustrates the influence of women in political matters: “In the Indies, as well as Constantinople and other places, the most momentous events are too often caused by the influence of the sex, although people may be ignorant of this fact, and may indulge in vague speculation as to the cause of the agitation they deplore”<sup>98</sup> Thomas Roe has dwelt upon how women of the royal harem persisted in saving Khusrau when he revolted against his father Jhangir in 1606. He writes that, “Jahangir’s sister and divers weomen in the seraglia mourne, refuse their meate, crye out of the kinges dotage and crueltye, and profess that if hee dye ther will hundred of his kindred burn for him in memorye of the kinges bloudiness to his woorthyest sonne.”<sup>99</sup> Bernier in tracing the accession of Aurangazeb gives a similar account of the active participation of the women of the harem<sup>100</sup>.

It is not without reason that these travellers carried these impressions in which women through various social and private roles, with ease transgressed the private boundaries to play public roles. Plate 13 somewhat proves this point. It is a large painting in the *Akbar Nama*

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<sup>97</sup> Cited from Teltscher, *India Inscribed*, p.45.

<sup>98</sup> Bernier, *Travels*, p.16.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615-19, as Narrated in his Journal and Correspondence*, ed. William Foster, London 1926, p.206

<sup>100</sup> Bernier, *Travels*, pp.12,14



'Maham Anaga', The Marriage of Baqi Muhammad Khan, Eldest Son of Maham Anaga

with Maham Anaga as its central figure, her robust face, stocky mien, impressive white and yellow robes and her authoritarian demeanour almost making it seem like a life like depiction of her personality by an artist who had seen her. Maham Anaga was Akbar's chief nurse and she loved Akbar so much that she happily agreed to expose her very life at Kabul for him in 1547.<sup>101</sup> Consequently Akbar reposed great confidence in her. Akbar also made major concessions to her son Adham Khan's impudence on her accord.<sup>102</sup> Adham Khan had however persisted in his ways and was finally ordered to be thrown down the terrace, Maham Anaga dying of grief in 1562 A.D.<sup>103</sup> And when Akbar himself went to her with the news, what she said recorded in Bayazid Bayat's *Tazkira-i Humayun-o-Akbar* tells of her undying loyalty to Akbar. She said: "Your Majesty has done well. I and my other sons belong to you. He had committed an offence. You have done justice; and he has received punishment."<sup>104</sup> That she remained worthy of depiction in an illustration to the *Akbarnama* and is shown in a public gathering on the marriage of her eldest son, Baqi Muhammad Khan, among men's audience is very significant, since women were always seated behind the screens on every kind of public occasion. That she is the only woman among the party of men alludes to her special status.

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<sup>101</sup> Mishra, *Women in Mughal India*, pp.25- 29

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*; *Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe*.

<sup>103</sup> Mishra, *Women in Mughal India*, pp.25- 29

<sup>104</sup> Shireen Moosvi, *Episodes in the Life of Akbar*, first edition 1994, repr., 2002, p.34

Structural fluidity of the hierarchy among women often resulted in a free wife and a slave girl standing practically on the same level. Zinat Kauser notes that by the very nature of polygamous households, how the senior wife was sometimes neglected, while the maidservants rose to the status of legal wives.<sup>105</sup> For instance Udham Bai, formerly a public dancer, had so fascinated the emperor Muhammad Shah that he had elevated her to the status of a queen and she subsequently became a major political force.<sup>106</sup> Plate 14 depicts a night entertainment scene whereby Udham Bai smokes from a hubble bubble poised in an authoritarian stance, seated on a high pavilion while her equally elegantly dressed attendants, stand behind her, one sitting next to her. In the front, women dressed in European costumes perform a dance drama, in all likeness to the way in which the emperor himself would hold an entertainment party. Udham Bai is said to have fallen out of favour when Muhammad Shah became enamoured of Koki or Rahim - un - Nissa, his favourite concubine until 1732 who herself came to wield tremendous power in concert with two other Mughal officials.<sup>107</sup> But in the 1740's, after giving birth to Ahmed Shah, Udham Bai once again gained ascendancy, and it is said that she even rivalled Nur Jahan in this respect.<sup>108</sup> It is said that officials of the court waited at her palace

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<sup>105</sup> Kauser, *Muslim Women in Mughal India*, p.257.

<sup>106</sup> Desai, *Life at Court*, p. 82

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, p.88

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*.



'Queen being entertained by ladies in European Constumes'

daily to receive instructions after she had read all the state petitions directed to Muhammad Shah<sup>109</sup>.

The instances described above reveal how women exercised their energies internal to the field of power relations between men and women manifesting itself in various forms, managing to subvert norms while not rejecting them, making the world of men and women the, private and the public domains, overlap in many ways at many points and presumably as many times in tension as in harmony.

Plate 15 somewhat illustrates this contention. A prince tenderly raises a cup to the lips of his favourite. Besides the couple, a courtesan lies in swoon who seems to have fainted than fallen asleep against a pillow in the lap of one of the two-seated women. It brings to mind the generalized stylized type of a pair and also the jealousies, conflict, intrigue and hierarchy among the women of the harem. To the left of the prince, an elderly *mulla* with a long white beard, a courtier and a military officer are seated whose faces and forms are much more individualized. The group though partly sheltered by a red tent, whose flaps are drawn back, is mostly out of doors in an enclosure, which is part of a large army camp seen in the distance. Three soldiers maintain guard at the edge of the drinking party. To take the composition of the painting at face value would be too reductive. The narrative is open and the title does not anchor or contextualize the depiction sufficiently. In other words there

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.



'A Prince and his Mistress in a Camp'

can hardly be any certainty in its reading. Metaphorically, the composition juxtaposes two different worlds – the private and the public in a pyramid at the pinnacle of which is the prince. The image seems to blur the autonomy of the ‘private’ and the ‘public’, which is so easy to assume in the face of normative division of gender roles and hierarchy. It is also significant that such a realization consciously or unconsciously characterized the medieval mind implicated in the very act of the execution of the subject matter contained within the painting.

These images seem to embrace femininity in all its roles, even those roles that go beyond the limits set up by contemporary norms. The neat boundaries that patriarchy draws for women’s social roles do not appear to be as neat, blurring the difference between norm and practice.

Concentration on the female body, the manner in which it is rendered operational living in the aristocratic court culture, perceived or real, reveals a men's imaging of female sexuality. For these women to let themselves be gazed at was the grossest form of breach of social order possible. Thus it is fortunate that much has been revealed for us through the strictly edited Mughal Court Paintings and histories, as much must have been concealed.

Male gaze at the female body reposit it with sensuality. The woman’s body was concealed behind the *parda* and the institution of the harem restrained her sexuality, yet her body is explored and depicted in the Mughal miniature paintings though any true to life depictions of

specific female personalities was consciously avoided. For this gaze the women's body holds a strange fascination and is venerated despite men's abundant access to it in the aristocratic culture.

An empathetic men's gaze is reflected in Plate 16 which is a copy of a miniature painting entitled 'A Princess'<sup>110</sup>, dated 1605-1610. It is one among the single miniatures attributed to Mansur 'A princess', describes Linda York Leach, 'in a transparent veil and yellow skirt reclines on a bed between two maid servants, one massaging her feet as she listens to a female *vina* player kneeling beside her on a flowered maroon carpet. The back wall of the room has a painted mural surrounding a door which shows a man and a woman seated beneath saplings with angels flying overhead; a trellis design filled with birds, trees and flowers alluding to spring time. The composition of the painting in light colours, lack of harsh outlining and relaxed flow of movement from one woman to another all convey an atmosphere of a pleasant boudoir, emoting a dream like quality'.<sup>111</sup>

The composition is resplendent with the physicality of feminine form, the transparent garments revealing the princess's bust and waist. The calm postural stance of the princess suggesting her pride in her perfect form- her vanity, perceived as such by the painter and his patron, suggests how women were perceived and imaged. Being adorned and

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<sup>110</sup> Reproduced from Linda York Leach, *Mughal and other Indian Paintings from the Chester Beatty Library*, Scorpion Cavendish, London, 1995, p.342

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

massaged 'as an icon being made ready for worship,' placing the beholder of the painting in place of the worshipper, venerating her perfection. The composition while revels in her perfection also suggests the pathos of her confinement contrasting it with the mural at the back wall symbolizing probably the alteration in her circumstances that a princess would desire or probably a reverie that the princess might dwell upon or a tryst that she prepares herself for in anxious anticipation; the birds and the peacock above symbolizing surging sexual desire in spring time.<sup>112</sup>

The composition in question here is in all aspects a celebration of the feminine sexual form and feminine sexual desire. The title of the composition merely states "A Princess". The gaze reveals not even a subtle hint of sinner/saint, respectable/fallen or virgin/whore dichotomy attempting to lay down the ideal code of conduct for women. If one goes by the title of the painting, she is not a mere lover, or a concubine or a dancing girl, but a princess. The conduct of princesses had to be above reproach as to them was tied the image of the royal house, which was, being royal under greater popular and historical scrutiny of the contemporary sense of right or wrong, good or bad. It is important to remember that the imperial claim to legitimacy was tied to its acceptance of normative ordering of society among other things.

Implicating this suggestion is the account of Manucci which records a report which was given to him by a Portuguese woman called

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<sup>112</sup> In Indian art the peacock has often been taken to symbolize surging sexual desires

Thomazia Martens, 'who was in charge of the royal stable and much liked by Roshan Ara and was according to the practice of soldiers wives living in the royal palace, was allowed once a month to stay seven days in her husbands house and at those periods...informed me (Manucci) of what passed inside the palace'.<sup>113</sup> Clearly there would have been others like her who narrated what transpired in the royal harem for the outside world. Manucci's account clearly suggests how activities in the harem were under constant public eye and interest.

Manucci records how the guards 'seized in the garden two youths, whom Roshan Ara Begam had just dismissed after they had complied with her will. They were taken off to the king, who at once understanding why they had gone there gave an order without any inquiry that the prisoners must go out by the way they came in. One said he entered by the door and by the door he was allowed to go out. The other was so incautious as to say that he had climbed over the garden wall. The head eunuch, whose only anxiety was to wreak vengeance, for having been convicted of carelessness, had him thrown over the garden wall, and he was killed. Aurangzeb was much disturbed at the eunuch's act because he held it expedient to conceal a matter so greatly affecting the good name of the princess. Therefore the eunuch was removed from office for some days, the reason given being that he was too severe to the servants working in the palace. Thus the eunuch had to take upon him the sins of

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<sup>113</sup> Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, II, pp. 30-31.

Roshan Ara Begam',<sup>114</sup> Bernier has also recorded scandalous stories about princess Jahanara. These accounts reveal how stories and happenings connected with the royal harem ladies were being talked about.

Seen in this light Plate 16 is indeed a bold representation of a princess. It suggests itself as a simple recognition of 'the feminine', no attempt to garb it or hide it, or condemn it, and seems unusual to our received notions emerging out of men's domination and women's subordination discourse according to which feminine sexuality is restricted in all its forms and especially so in the case of Muslim women who were concealed behind the *parda* and jealously guarded in the harems.

The nature of the paintings used as evidence for understanding the contemporary perceptions has to be explained. One explanation that suggests itself is that the viewership of these royal paintings was strictly for its patron. The Emperor or princes or those they chose to depict, as well as the painting itself in no endangered the status quo of the society. More likely than not then this painting was meant to be a secret and is a reflection on merely secretly held notions. But secretly held notions often seem to make a mockery of and render redundant in the informal realm of activities and thought the publicly and formally adhered to norms. Further the denial of marriage to imperial princesses, had become the

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

norm once the Mughal rule reached the heights of its power. This was so to prevent rival claimants to power to emerge and also because of impossibility of finding matches whose social standing would match up to the Mughal house. This phenomenon of denial of sexual gratification through marriage that princesses were subjected to finds empathetic recognition in this Mughal miniature (plate 16) making to men's gaze sensitive to women's expectations.

Sudhir Kakar and John M. Ross in their psychoanalytic work, *Tales of Love, Sex, and Danger* have rightly reflected on the Perso-Islamic world in the following terms: "Today the Islamic world tends to be perceived by many as a barbarous bastion of misogyny, of the *chador* – the veil obscuring woman's beauty, curtailing her freedom and denying her humanity. In counterpoint it is salutary to remember that the Perso-Islamic world has produced the some of the larger human universe's finest love stories. These tales are characterised by tenderness, by mutuality and by the adoration of the woman, who figures as no mere object of men's wants nor slave to his needs, but rather as a subject herself in the enterprise of love."<sup>115</sup> The Mughal period seems to have been no exception in this regard and there were numerous stories of reciprocal love like that of Laila and Majnu<sup>116</sup>, Heer and Ranjha popular then.

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<sup>115</sup> Sudhir Kakar and John M. Ross, *Tales of Love, Sex and Danger*, Oxford, 1986, Oxford India paperbacks third impression, 1999, pp.43-44.

<sup>116</sup> Laila and Majnu is a Middle Eastern story, but it had traveled to the Mghal domain

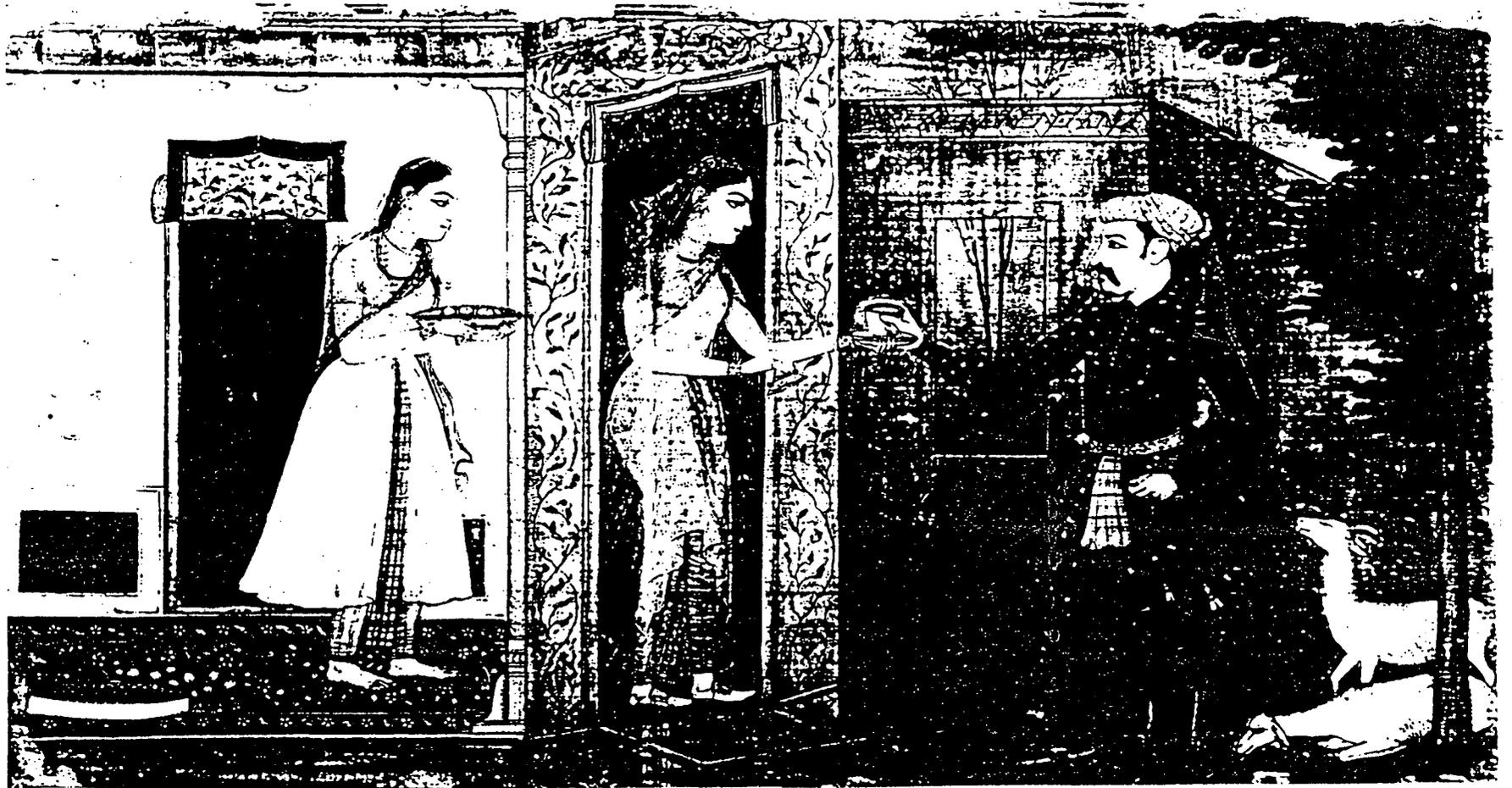
Reciprocal love is similarly portrayed in plate 17 'Sadi is Refreshed'. The painting and Sa'dis's verse also suggests fascination with the female form and immense power of woman's sensuality for Sa'di is totally mesmerised by the woman. Sa'di is depicted as a vigorous young Mughal who has emerged onto the veranda. According to Linda York Leach this is one of the episodes related in the first person by Sa'di who, as an older man, recalls the incident of his youth with remarkable passion and lyricism in his *Gulistan*, describing the woman who offers him refreshment thus: "All of a sudden, from the dark portico... I beheld a bright form appear... she came forth as morn succeeding a dark night, as the waters of life issuing from the gloom. She held in her hand a cup of snow water in which she had mixed sugar and juice of the grapes I know not whether she had perfumed it with her own roses, or distilled into it some drops from the bloom of her countenance. In short, I took the cup from her fair hand-----and received new life"<sup>117</sup> The artist has placed her central to the composition of the painting making the cup the focal point of the painting by rendering it in bright yellow light emphasizing the contact point between the young woman and Sa'di. She gives while he seeks and receives subjugating the normative gender hierarchy. But it is equally important that she has chosen to give. Sa'adi is depicted as a young attractive Mughal his 'Masquerade' clearly matching that of the young high-class woman and the relationship

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as well and is popular even today.

<sup>117</sup> Cited in Linda York Leach, *Mughal and Other Indian Paintings*, p. 371

Plate XVII



'Sadi is Referred'

appears to be reciprocal. Sa'adi's attractive depiction also suggests men's self-construction of men's virility. The woman herself is shown as the end of masculine regard attracting through her innocent sensuality and exquisite glamour stressing her power to love than be loved writes Linda York Leach.

The potency of female sexuality is also depicted in plate 18 and the story attached with it suggests how women's 'sexuality' was conceived of as a potent tool that could easily be employed to corrupt even a 'holy man'. Linda York Leach describes the story in the painting as follows: 'The holy man in a white robe and turban with his rosary on his knee sits in comfort in the beautiful garden conversing with the king, who passes him a dish of fruit, and the minister. Young attendants including the beautiful concubine and her maid and the young slave who stands behind the hermit with a peacock feather fan surround them. This graceful picture of the palace garden and the tempting woman is appropriate for Sa'dis' narrative about the seductions of luxury. The colours are mainly delicate pastels combined with large areas of white and few rich, dark contrasts. The concubine, with a transparent scarf loosely crossed over her bare breasts and a filmy Muslin skirt, is suitably lissom and provocative. According to the story attached, a king who was travelling encountered a hermit in the desert and invited him to his palace so that others could be inspired by his piety. The holy man at first refused but assented when the kings' attendants said he need only try



'The Corrupted Hermit'

the new environment for a few days. The king installed the hermit in his garden and sent him a beautiful woman and an attractive male slave. Soon the hermit was corrupted by tempting delicacies and by his companions. When the king and a minister came to visit him, the minister lamented the fall of the pious'.<sup>118</sup>

Women are perceived and imaged as constantly endeavouring to enhance their sensuality and emphasizing their sexuality. Manucci for instance notes when dwelling upon women's cosmetics: "on their fingers are rich rings, and on the right thumb there is always a ring, where in place of a stone, there is mounted a little round mirror, having pearls around it. This mirror they use to look at themselves, an act of which they are very fond, at any and every moment"<sup>119</sup>. Pelsaert for instance records in his 'Jahangir's India': "By means of attractive and fascinating' presentation' they sometimes gained the special favours of their masters.... Each concubine tried her best to win the favour of her master. For this they not only adorned themselves beautifully but also used the best available perfumes and sweet scented ointments of the time. In the evening they used a composition of pearl, gold, opium, amber and other stimulants as these produced a pleasant elevation of the spirit. In order to excite the lust of their masters they also encouraged them to use these intoxicants"<sup>120</sup>. Clearly, as also recognized

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<sup>118</sup> Cited from Linda York Leach, *Mughal and other Indian Paintings*, pp.370

<sup>119</sup> Manucci, *History of the Mogul*, partII, p.317

<sup>120</sup> Cited from Zinat Kausar, *Muslim Women in Medieval India*, p.254

by 'male gaze', women appear to be enhancing men's notions regarding women's sexuality than dispelling it, and seem to be conscious of employing sexuality as a power tool and also conscious of its efficacy. But not only are women conscious of it, even men perceive this as is clear from plate 18 and the attendant story employ the power of female sexuality to corrupt a holy man.

Thus one sees how women internalised social roles and how they also accommodated their individual aspirations and energies and enlarged the spaces earmarked for them within the structure of personal and social relations. We also saw that personal and social relations also get interlinked and women appear to be playing significant public roles beyond their private domains. Besides men themselves are at the centre of women's private domains. This reflects how the separation between the public and the private spheres of the lives of Mughal aristocratic women cannot be assumed at all times. Besides many of the Mughal miniatures and other literature affirm the celebration of female sexuality and the recognition of the potency of female sexuality, that women were themselves also conscious of, and did employ to gain their ends.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Carnal life and the Regime of Pleasure**

The construction of feminine sexuality in the medical discourse of the Mughal period is important in shedding light on aspects of social mentality and sexual mores and practices prevalent among the aristocratic and urban social groups. The submission here is that while the medical discourse (which is in the nature of discourse on the 'regime of sexual pleasure') is part of the larger structure of patriarchal stability and control, it also suggests existential complexities in which both patriarchal affirmation and restriction of feminine sexuality may be found - bringing forth the dynamics of the patriarchal institutions to light. Thus the medical discourse is effective in making us empathetic to meanings attached to femininity in the Mughal society. In this chapter there is an attempt to study how some of the ethical questions that characterised the medieval mind with regard to female sexuality were settled, if at all.

There appears to be little, readily apparent convergence between the two paradoxical images of medieval Muslim aristocratic women - images of moral righteousness (high level of sexual chastity on one hand and the images of feminine sexuality and sensuality received through the medical discourse under consideration on the other. The question of the relationship between men and women, is a matter of grave concern and it is problematized by this medical discourse, suggesting a few ethical

concerns and offering a few solutions – in the form of injunctions on how to behave with one's mate, somewhat revealing the themes and anxieties that marked the ethics and morality of medieval society with regard to sexual behaviour. The degree of empathy and sensitivity towards women's sexuality shown by this 'regime of sexual pleasure', particularly the behaviour suggested by this 'regime' which men 'must' adopt towards women is different from and at times even contradictory to the impressions conveyed by the normative or conventional literature of the period. Nevertheless the two discourses revealing the two extremes of the thought do appear at times to overlap, blurring the readily apparent differences in the mentality of their authors as will be seen in the last part of this chapter.

First of all in the terminology used in the medical discourse under consideration, there is little attempt to garb terms related to sexual practices and sexual organs under more prudent terms as would be expected of a society that appears to restrict sexuality under prudential norms. For instance, the term applied for sexual intercourse is *jamain* or *mubasharat* etc which are its exact equivalents in Persian. For ejaculation or orgasm both for men and women the term used is *inzal*, for vagina it is usually *farj*, although sometimes it is also referred to as 'the place of sexual desire'. For penis the term is *quzeeb*, and for sperm it is *mani*.

The medical texts are direct and forthright in their discussion of the pleasure derived during sexual intercourse. Mazhar bin Muzaffar, begins with the praise for God, alludes to His creation of the earth, the sky and the universe.<sup>121</sup> Further he notes of His creation of the 'pleasure of the body', thus delineating for us the *raison d'être* of sexual pleasure both for men and women, "God created in nature the pleasure of the body in continued sexual intercourse. He gave gifts in abundance [referring to offsprings] so that with this stratagem and means are ensured the survival of the human race and increase in procreation".<sup>122</sup> Thus from the outset there is nothing sinful about the pleasure in sexual intercourse. For both men and women the purpose of intercourse is pleasure as well as procreation and survival of human race. Sexual pleasure is not an end in itself here; the end is the pragmatic one of procreation. It is important to note that in medieval Christian tradition the act of procreation is predicated upon the denial of pleasure.<sup>123</sup> Whereas here the two are harmoniously combined. Indeed according to Rustam Jurjani, pleasure is also for the general well being of an individual.<sup>124</sup> Thus he writes that the benefits of sexual intercourse are that both have good health. It increases strength, enjoyment, happiness,

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<sup>121</sup> Mazhar bin Muzaffar, *Khulasat ul 'Aysh i Alam Shahi*, 1177 A.H.(1763 A.D.), Persian, MS No. 184, Central Library, Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi, f. 1

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, tr. Matthew Adamson, Polity Press, Basil Blackwell, UK, 1988.

<sup>124</sup> Rustam Jurjani, *Asrar-un-Nisa*, 1554?, Persian, MS No. 350, Central Library, Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi, f. 2a

calms temper, removes ill thoughts, sadness etc., and also removes unnecessary, unpleasant thoughts from the thought process.<sup>125</sup>

The author anonymous of the *Risalah i Hifzzunnu' dar ilm i Tib* too makes the same point: “ basically there are two motives of sexual intercourse – cleaning of the body and continuation of the human race. The author also brings out the significance of foreplay when he says that ‘in order to achieve this goal it is an essential condition that *inzal* (which may be translated both as ejaculation and orgasm) must take place in both the man and the woman. This leads to pregnancy. Therefore before intercourse the woman must be sexually excited (by the man) by kissing, hugging and even touching her place of sexual desire (*maqam i shahwat*)’.<sup>126</sup> The sexual pleasure of the women was made an essential condition for intercourse and procreation itself was made dependent on their enjoyment of it. The author of *Risalah* states this position again in the chapter on protection of womb and pregnancy: “Ejaculation from both partners together gives immense pleasure to both and leads to pregnancy.”<sup>127</sup> Further on the protection of the womb he says that “sexual intercourse without kissing and hugging and separation without satisfying the woman causes disorder to the womb and illness to her”<sup>128</sup> This endangers procreation and the authors therefore suggest sexual

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Anonymous, *Risalah i Hifzzunnu' dar ilm i Tib*, 1858, Persian, MS No. 488, Central Library, Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi, f. 17a

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., f. 33b

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., f. 34a

foreplay, one of them suggesting a sexual foreplay of one hour for the arousal of the woman.

In the chapter dealing with the protection of the womb the author of the Risalah says that, “ if a woman always thinks of an imaginary sex and if she fails to meet up with her imaginary partner then she suffers from the disorder of the womb including the choking of the womb”<sup>129</sup> Contrary to our expectations of medieval gender relations, what appears in projection here in the medical discourse, a very potent site of knowledge, are not the patriarchal societal fears of sexual indulgences by women. Rather they appear as fears regarding what might happen if women are denied sexual pleasure. Quite surprisingly this statement goes to the extent of propagating the satisfaction of sexual desires of women even without alluding to the necessity of marriage (though not explicitly), as the author does not qualify the ‘imaginary partner’ for the ‘protection of the womb’.

All in all, in these medical texts the woman is supposed to have ‘pleasure in abundance in sexual intercourse’, and is not necessarily required or commanded to be sexually chaste, in that utilising/exercising sexuality only for procreation and not pleasure. Indeed, this view seems to state assertively that if there was no sexual pleasure for women there was to be no procreation.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

Since the sexual desire in women was considered healthy and imperative, whole lists of medicinal preparations and physiotherapy treatment were available to sexually stimulate the woman for enhanced pleasure.<sup>130</sup> Mazhar bin Muzaffar repeatedly describes medicinal preparations in his work which would, “sexually stimulate the woman...so that her desire increases so much that her shyness goes away and she becomes mad with sexual desire.”<sup>131</sup> The authors also discuss men and women’s anatomy in great detail to pair them for pleasure and procreation.

It is surprising to discover such untrammelled indulgence in sexual pleasure for women in this discourse which is after all part of a society that conceals women’s bodies behind the *parda* and confines them into impregnable harems ostensibly shielding and restricting their sexuality. The ‘site of medical knowledge’ reveals not even a subtle hint of sinner saint, respectable-fallen, dichotomy (a dichotomy apparent in Christian sexual norms)<sup>132</sup> to lay down the ideal code of conduct for woman (as in the Alanquva myth or the Anarkali legend discussed in chapter 1), reaffirming that satisfaction of woman’s sexuality is sanctioned by Islam in the Mughal period.<sup>133</sup> This particular discourse produced by men does

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., f. 58b

<sup>131</sup> Mazhar bin Muzaffar, *Khulasat ul ‘Aysh i Alam Shahi*, 1177 A.H.(1763 A.D.), f. 132

<sup>132</sup> See Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*.

<sup>133</sup> For a discussion of sexual mores and practices sanctioned in Islamic Jurisprudence see, B.F. Musallam, *Sex and Society in Islam*, Cambridge University Press, U.K., 1983. Also see, Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, Tr. Mary Jo Lakeland, Blackwell, U.K., 1991, Kali, New Delhi, 1993.

not attempt to restrict feminine sexuality but rather propagates it; the *parda* and jealously guarded harems begin to lose their severity.

The ethics of sexual behaviour set up for men in the medical discourse breaks down the concepts of complete sexual freedom and liberty that is attributed to men in a patriarchal polygamous household vis a vis women. No doubt men were relatively free to indulge their sexual appetites as compared to women, for they could enjoy the company of their wives, their concubines and courtesans. But the practice of this liberty definitely does not appear as absolute in the science of medicine. For instance, men's sexual enjoyment depended on the sexual satisfaction that was provided to women. Mazhar bin Muzaffar reminds his readers, "until the woman ejaculates she is not satisfied and does not enjoy. So enjoyment of intercourse depends on the ejaculation of woman. Conscious man tries a lot in this regard and this is very appreciable and proper. This I will explain in details further."<sup>134</sup> The author describes what gives pleasure to women so much so that the pleasure in sexual intercourse for both depends on it and a conscious man understands this.<sup>135</sup> It naturally follows that sexual constraints on women too were not absolute; to the minds of the practitioners of medieval medicine there was nothing wrong or sinful about sexual enjoyment of women. Indeed it was both beneficial and essential.

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<sup>134</sup> Mazhar bin Muzaffar, *Khulasat ul Ay'sh i Alam Shahi*, f. 99

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 99.

Further revealing the medieval Indian Islamic medical mentality on practice of men's sexual liberty Mazhar bin Muzaffar first records a statement by a woman and then contradicts. The statement runs as follows: " the Hajib comes on to the stage and says oh God/king the good thing is that whenever one feels like indulging in sexual intercourse, every time one should have it with new women. The use of many vaginas increases sexual strength."<sup>136</sup> Mazhar contradicts this logic by saying that " this is like a joke (*latifa*). It implies weakness [when the man is] with the mistress of the house and strength when he is with women outside the house".<sup>137</sup> The author lists medicinal preparations, food items to be consumed and physiotherapy treatments for enhancing sexual performance of men. For according to him being promiscuous cannot be a remedy for the lack of sexual prowess. It is in this context that he mocks this remedy, also reflecting that undue sexual indulgences by men were not argued for by any sort of medical, religious, moral or social justification.

When one thinks of the Indian medieval Islamic society one thinks of men's sexual liberty and the relative constraints put on ' respectable' women. So it appears, but what becomes interesting to investigate is the reflection (in medical discourse) on the practice of this liberty enjoyed by men, the things men were concerned with and the behaviour as suggested to them in this science of medicine.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., f. 185.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

On sexual behaviour, pertaining to chastity, Mazher bin Muzaffar makes the following statement: “ some persons chastity/purity is preserved because they do not get an opportunity for wrongdoing. Goodness and badness depend on the company company one keeps. In this regard men and women are equal. Originally, God has created all persons pure. If a young woman is brought up among bad people then she will catch on to bad habits. Some girls in order to make money indulge in bad activities.”<sup>138</sup> Here purity of sexual behavior is a reference common to men and women and applies equally to both as “originally all have been created equal by God”. Mazhar is also trying to justify or explain a woman’s sexual transgression as circumstantial, probably to rid the reader of any sort of misogynistic thinking, though he is himself not completely free from it as the following statement reveals: “ Because men’s brain is complete they preserve their chastity more than women who due to lack of intelligence are not careful about fornication/adultery/debauchery”.<sup>139</sup> Though the above two statements are contradictory, as the first one makes men and women equal and the second one makes men wise and women brainless because of which women become adulterous and men much less adulterous compared to them, it is significant that chastity was a virtue applicable and appreciable not merely in women but men as well. But one wonders how was it possible for women to be more adulterous than men with all the

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., f. 193

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., f. 192

traditional interdictions and practical restraints and how was it possible for men to be chaste with all the sexual freedom that is ostensibly attributed to men in the medieval Islamic upper class society? It probably smacks of the same attitude as revealed in many instances where a woman's sexuality is perceived as dangerous by patriarchal discourses. But that the question of chastity arises at all for men in the first place is in itself significant.

At another point Mazhar bin Muzaffar records a story narrated by a woman in which Socrates remarked when he saw an adulterous woman being taken to be stoned: " Why do they take this wrong decision? [lacuna in the manuscript] Chastity is a very strange thing. Sexual desire is a very natural thing and it overpowers".<sup>140</sup> It is significant that adultery is almost justified in the case of an adulterous woman here in spite of the fact that adultery is severely punished in Islamic law. In reproducing Socrates' dictum without objection, while at most points he is wont to giving his opinions, the authors approval gets strongly implicated.

And similar stream of thought in the science of medicine relating to sexuality reflects upon the relationship between men and women in sexual behaviour from which other aspects of gender relationship emerges. The forms of interpretation that are offered in this discourse are extremely insightful in breaking some of our received notions about

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., f. 180

power in gender relationships evincing a rather complex interplay of relations between the two sexes where neither men appear absolute masters of women, nor are women seen as mere sexual slaves engaged in harems.

The general drift of the above mentioned statement is that a woman's sexual desire was considered as a most natural phenomenon and the man was expected to be aware of this. It is in this context that Mazhar bin Muzaffar explains women's behaviour and the manner in which she communicates her feelings, under the title: "Signals of disenchantment of women with man and cause of disobedience". It is stated that "there are many signals. Her eyes are devoid of love when she looks at a man, she does not respond to his questions properly, if he gives her something she does not take and returns it. During sexual intercourse she does not respond."<sup>141</sup> The reasons for the woman going astray (*bad kar i zan*) are explained as follows: "First, frequent travelling (by the man), infertility of the man or the woman, widowhood at an early age, man's ill-behaviour, if the man is of immature age or if he is too old and the woman is young, if the man is weak and ugly and the woman is strong, delicate and beautiful and if the man is always ill and illiterate and the woman is neat and clean and literate. The worst cause is if the man has less sexual desire and the woman more."<sup>142</sup> Mazhar clearly makes the man who was unmindful or unaware of the woman's needs and

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., f f.82-83

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., f.83

expectations the culprit in the relationship between the two sexes. The woman's lack of response or her 'improper' behaviour is explicable in terms of her sexual desires rising past the man's and it makes the man deficient for her in this and other ways. Mazhar advances the argument further by offering the following warning: "Know that till the woman gets in the sexual intercourse abundant pleasure, she will not take interest in you and would hate the act. [While concluding the chapter dealing with food items to be consumed to increase sexual strength]".<sup>143</sup> It is important to note that a major portion of these medical texts is devoted to increasing sexual prowess of men. Men therefore are not always sexually virile, a stereotype of the male gender nor are women sexually passive. The social recognition of this phenomenon is amply reflected in medical texts.

It is significant that questions and matters regarding sexual needs of women and women's expectations in the relationship between the two genders characterised the medieval mind. This is in sharp contrast to the impressions of sexual denial that medieval normative literature provides, a perception, which most European travellers accounts also reflect. But that such literature formed a site of medical knowledge which has the authority to influence day to day behaviour is extremely significant. Undoubtedly, medical discourse must have had a large audience

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., f.57

implicated by the fact that medicine is a daily requirement. We saw that men were urged to make themselves pleasing to women and match up to them in every way. Men were also made the man responsible for the 'bad deeds' of the women. These positions do not appear to emanate from a system of thought, characteristic of a society, which made women look like a commodity, which was available in abundance for sensual use. In addition, they were shown as intriguing among themselves for the attention of the man of the harem. The positions taken in the medical discourse make it an exaggeration to imagine women as mere chattels or caged birds as characterised by some European travellers in Mughal period and men as their absolute masters. Men were not the owners of women and there seems to have existed a relationship of reciprocity between men and women.

This can be elucidated further with reference to the medical texts which revolve around an appeal to the individual's consciousness of not only the self but also the other, being a thinking or a feeling entity, as a desiring person with regard to sexual pleasure –in a relationship with themselves and their partners. Mazhar bin Muzaffar quotes suggestions given by a woman to men on how to make women incline towards them: "Firdausi has also referred to this point. Maqulah said, oh Zubair know that if you want to be close to a woman the first thing is that you should be of good morals and good habits. Women will incline towards you. First

be honest and keep your promise. Second be polite. Third be brave, smiling player, like playing, be patient, and do not be ill tempered. Fourth do not abuse her and do not harm her and do not mentally burden her. Fifth do not cause her pain with your habits and talk and do not break her heart. If you observe these good habits then the woman will become docile/tame/gentle/obedient/domesticated/submissive and will become enamoured of you and will feel comfortable with you.”<sup>144</sup>

As already stated a woman’s desire is considered as a most natural phenomenon in the ‘regime of sexual pleasure’. This regime thus makes essential the knowledge of sexual desire in women, where and when it occurs and the way her body language conveys it.<sup>145</sup> Thus Rustam Jurjani notes the, “knowledge of sexually sensitive places on the body. First day of the month on the big finger, second day on the sole, third day also on the sole, fourth day on thighs, fifth day on the head, sixth day [lacuna in the manuscript], seventh day chest, eighth day on the breast...15<sup>th</sup> day on the big finger (of the foot)”.<sup>146</sup> The followup suggestions are regarding foreplay to sexual intercourse: “ if her sensitivity lies on her head then hold her hair and pull her hair slightly so that the woman gets aroused and ready for intercourse.”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., f.206

<sup>145</sup> It is noteworthy how the three different medical texts viz., *Khulasat ul Ay’sh i Alam Shahi*, *Risalah -i Hifzunnun’ dar ilm i Tib* and *Asrar-un-Nisa* separated by almost a century each have given almost identical notion of the ‘movement of sperm on a woman’s body’. It is possible that a tradition of copying from one text to another was quite prevalent.

<sup>146</sup>Rustam Jurjani, *Asrar-un-Nisa* 1554?, f. 8b

<sup>147</sup>Ibid.

The author of the *Risalah i Hifzzunnu*, too goes into the same matter and in a similar fashion under the subheading “Periods of sexual desire of a woman”: “the first day of the moon (or first day of the month) the woman ‘s sperm remains in her left foot. Thereafter with the ascending of the moon the sperm ascends towards the upper portion...During full moon, the 13th of the month called *puṛnima* in Hindi, the sperm of the woman reaches her head and one should therefore caress her head...On the 14<sup>th</sup> of the month called *pariwana* in Hindi, the sperm descends towards right side from her hair. At the end of the month the sperm reaches the toes of her right leg...”<sup>148</sup>

In the *Khulasat ul ‘Aysh* too the same suggestions have been made under the heading: “ the movement of sperm on the woman’s body...”: “a clever man should caress those sensitive parts... The man should make use of the sensitive parts so that the woman gets aroused...since the man is aware of the movement of the woman’s sperm, he must continue sexual intercourse as long as the beloved desires.”<sup>149</sup>

Mazhar bin Muzaffar also writes about the method to discern sexual desire in women through her body language. In other words the text delineate for men’s understanding the way a woman ideally communicates her feelings: “You should know that the sexual desire of women has many symptoms. She looks at the man with kindness, covers and uncovers her face again and again. She comes to the window and

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<sup>148</sup> *Risalah*, ff. 17a-18b

<sup>149</sup> *Khulasat*, ff. 100-101

peeps out and leans out to reveal her chest and breasts. She lets her hair loose and lets them fall on her face in front of the man. Without any apparent reason she opens and fastens the buttons on her bodice, the sound of which reaches the man's ears. She scratches her breast, keeps her hands on her head and heaves a sigh. Sometimes in front of man, she hugs small children..., chews on her lips, stops on the way if she sees a man and does not return. She looks at the mirror quite often. And finally looking at pictures of sexual intercourse she feels scared. All these indicate sexual desire in a woman."<sup>150</sup> It can be seen that the author here goes into the vague details of the woman's demeanour to detect the hidden desires and in the process reflects an obsession with understanding feminity in a particular way.

While reconstructing the regime of pleasure from the medical discourse it becomes apparent that even though women were supposed to have (and they did have) enormous sexual desire it was not something that could be taken for granted. It was only after the visible signs and proper timings had been properly comprehended that she could be approached. It is possible to argue that the need for a comprehension of women's inner feelings contradict the conventional image that she was 'abundantly available for men's sexual abuse,' an image, that is often implied by the discourse of women's subordination and men's domination.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., f. 82.

Mazhar bin Muzaffar further writes of the times when a woman is ready for sexual intercourse: “ her sexual desire becomes dominant. And during these times she is ready for sexual intercourse or is inclined towards sexual intercourse: After menstruation is just over, after two months of pregnancy, when meeting a man after a long gap of time, after looking at the picture of a very bold young person, clouds, lightning, rain, peacocks dancing, the voice of birds singing. Her sexual desire increases after walking in the garden, after boating, sitting alone on the roof top, during moon lit nights, after listening to love stories, after hearing about the beauty of a man’.<sup>151</sup>

Seen in the light of the discussion we had in the first chapter that suggests that the virtues of chastity and ‘sexual purity’ are emphasised and enforced by a constant and threatening reminder to women to conform, the images provided by these medical texts appear to be quite different and extremely bold. They also seem to be at odds with the received notions of men’s discourse as constantly attempting to restrict feminine sexuality in all its forms and especially so in the case of Muslim women.

The Medical knowledge under consideration is also part of a patriarchal society. Therefore in the medical discourse as well there are very many instances, which reveal the medieval mental attitudes where women’s sexuality is perceived as dangerous. For instance, Mazhar bin

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

Muzaffar at one place lists, “ medicines to prevent the other man, (other than the husband) from being influential/potent over a woman”<sup>152</sup>. He lists names of medicines and physiotherapy treatment for this purpose.<sup>153</sup> Clearly, in the midst of celebrating woman’s sexuality, social and cultural mores of restraint also find a place. Though the reasons for the need of such medical treatment are nowhere stated they could range from the perturbations of a jealous husband to the worries of a respectable householder or housemistress. But this attitude also stems from the fact that despite traditional institutional restraints and interdictions, a woman’s sexuality was seen as dangerous and something that needed to be restrained in as many ways as possible in a patriarchal society. Among many precautions needed to preserve or enforce her sexual fidelity medicine provided one of them in addition to confinement of the harems and the *parda*. This fear of woman’s ‘dangerous sexuality’ also shows how precarious patriarchal control really was.

In the *Risalah i hifzzunnu’ dar ilm i Tib* it is stated that, “Intercourse with an aged woman, who has crossed forty, is as dangerous as having poison. Intercourse with older women (older than man) and a woman who has given up sexual activity (or has not experienced sexual intercourse) for some time is harmful.”<sup>154</sup> This could possibly be a warning probably attempting to counter any advantage or

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.,f.200

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.,f.200

<sup>154</sup> *Risalah i Hifzzunnu’ dar ilm i Tib*, ff.11b – 11a

control that seniority in years might bring to a woman over a man's sexuality.<sup>155</sup> On the other hand the question of a man's age was never raised, an older man's control over a woman's sexuality being something in the natural order of things.

Further, in an adjunct to the *Khulasat ul 'Aysh i Alam Shahi* there are certain stories in the nature of pornography. This section comes to be a part of the medical text or the medical discourse for the reason that listening to amorous and pornographic stories was considered to be a remedy for impotency and lack of sexual desire. In these sexual fantasies women are mostly projected to have insatiable, even diabolic sexual desire, in which they indulge, and in some of these pornographic stories their sexuality is magnified as being extremely potent and dangerous, an attitude which seems to be so characteristic of patriarchy, reinforcing the patriarchal fear of women's uncontrolled sexuality which could demolish men's patriarchal hold over life's various parameters, including women's sexuality. Thus in one of the stories a father kills his daughter for having cheated on her husband by taking another lover to satisfy her sexual passion.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Badauni in his *Muntakhab ut Tawarikh*, has recorded Akbar's prohibition of sexual contacts between husbands and wives if the latter were twelve years older for medieval medical reasons. See Abd al-Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, 3 vols, eds Maulavi Ahmad Ali and W.N. Lees, Calcutta, 1865-9, II, p.405.

<sup>156</sup> *Khulasat*, f.176

In another story which Mazhar bin Muzaffar records, the patriarchal distrust of women gets magnified. The story goes: "Badshah said, (to two women who were supposedly experts in the art of erotics and were narrating pornographic stories for him) 'narrate those stories, which are related to the sexual strength and sexual desire of women. Barjan came ahead, kissed the feet of the throne and began to narrate!<sup>157</sup> In the past in Misr (Egypt) there was a man who used to hire his donkey. If a woman wanted to hire his donkey he used to refuse. Once a person wanted the donkey to carry his wife from old Egypt to new Egypt. That man didn't accept even after repeated requests. He went to the governor with his case. When governor asked the donkey man the reason then he said that he does not lend his donkeys to women. He replied that a few years before a beautiful woman had hired his donkey, she used to take it every day and return it back in the evening. (After that) Whenever the donkey sees a woman he runs after her with its penis out. That woman looking at the donkey used to say that I am your *chara* (fodder). After sometime that woman requested me to sell the donkey to her at whatever price I pleased. But I didn't accept. Whenever that donkey looks at women, he goes out of control. Otherwise I used to give donkey on hire

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<sup>157</sup> Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali has observed how 'Many of the Mussulmaun ladies entertain women companions, whose chief business is to tell stories and fables to their employer, while she is composing herself to sleep'. "Amongst the higher classes the males also indulge in the same practice of being talked to sleep by their men slaves; and it is a certain introduction with either sex to the favour of their employer, when one of these dependants has acquired the happy art of "telling the khaunie"(fable)with an agreeable voice and manner. The more they embellish a tale by flights of their versatile imaginations, so much greater the merit of the rehearser in the opinion of the listners." Mrs.Meer Hassan Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India*, II, pp. 81 - 82.

to women also’.”<sup>158</sup> Clearly the story reflects a misogynistic attitude, which characterises women as wanton, insatiable and cunning. Also Linda Nochlin has rightly pointed out that, “imagery of sexual delight as provocation has always been created about women for men’s enjoyment by men”<sup>159</sup> The same attitude gets reflected in another anecdote that Mazhar records: “A charming young man married a beautiful woman after a long love affair. After marriage when they met, the girls’ thirst (sexual desire) was not quenched and she did not enjoy. She left him and went home.”<sup>160</sup> Similarly at another point he recounts, “A woman belonging to a rich family married a man belonging to a poor/ignoble family. People asked her, ‘what have you done?’ you have ruined the reputation of your family. The woman replied, ‘honour for me lies in an erect penis’.”<sup>161</sup> Thus these anecdotes also, allude to patriarchal distrust of women. But the author here is attaching such a high premium to sexual satisfaction of women that he is only amused by his own recounting of the above two incidents, and by stating these two incidents he is only trying to prove how important was sexual satisfaction of a woman to a man, giving no moral condemnation of these women.

There is however a paradox here. While on the one hand woman’s uncontrolled sexuality is feared<sup>162</sup>, on the other hand it is this dangerous

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<sup>158</sup> *Khulasat- ul – Ay’sh –e – Alam Shahit*, f.169

<sup>159</sup> Cited in Vidya Dehejia, *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*, p.18

<sup>160</sup> *Khulasat- ul – Ay’sh –e – Alam Shahi*, f.193.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, f.193

<sup>162</sup> At one point in the *Khulasat- ul – Ay’sh –e – Alam Shahi*, (f.74) the author gives a remedy to control excessive sexual desire in a woman, and also describes physical

sexuality that is magnified for men's sexual arousal. It is here that one may discern a part of the process of patriarchy, the dynamics of which could not have been based on simple and static principles of control and restraint on female sexuality. The concern with the need to satisfy women's sexuality is reflected by the following discourse, which an emperor is holding with women who were supposedly experts in the science of erotics. Mazhar bin Muzzafar records, "One king once upon a time asked one wise woman, is sexual desire more in woman or in men. She said that it is more in women compared to men. The king asked for a reason. The woman said that a woman can bear sexual intercourse with a lot of men..... on the contrary the man does not have energy to even make one woman happy."<sup>163</sup> At another point the king asked, "What is that enjoyment which a woman considers better than all other worldly enjoyments?" To which a woman named Hajib replied, "there should be no hindrance to her desire for sexual intercourse. Whenever she wants & whichever man, her desire should be fulfilled."<sup>164</sup> Badshah asked both Barjan and Hajib, "What thing generates love in women from the heart?" They said, "A lot of foreplay before sexual intercourse, strong sexual intercourse followed by soft activities."<sup>165</sup> Then the Badshah asked, "What

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features of women which show their excessive sexual desire.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., f.198

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., f.180

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., f.169

causes women to stop loving?” They said, “the weakness...during sexual intercourse”.<sup>166</sup>

The explanation for these perception of insatiable diabolic female sexual appetite, for the satisfaction of which the woman will go to any extent not even fearing death, also lies somewhere between ‘vengeful feminity’ and ‘male misogyny’. Rationale of ‘male misogyny’ lies in the fear of uncontrolled female sexuality heightened by the desire to and impracticality of enforcing complete female submission to a sexually restrained life. According to Sudhir Kakkar: “...fantasy of the treacherous female- animated exclusively by her sexual passions has certainly been an important theme in the established relationship between the sexes in Islam. For that matter, in most cultures, exaggerated male attempts at dominance have served to defend against and provoke vengeful female sexual rapacity.”<sup>167</sup>

Clearly the images provided by these medical discourses on ‘regime of sexual pleasure’ speak to us of a type of medieval mentality, which was concerned with an ethics of sexual behaviour. The domains of sexual relationship, were the locus of an inquiry, reflection, anxiety, and a discussion on how were men supposed to behave and what their style

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Sudhir Kakkar and John M.Ross, *Tales of Love, Sex and Danger*, Oxford University Press, 1986, India paperback, third impression, 1999, p.54.

ought to be. Men in medieval (Islamic) society have been conceived as being free to govern their sexual activities without any traditional interdictions or practical restraint. But according to this mentality, *marde aarif* i.e. 'a man who knows' was expected to know everything about the sexual desire of women and satisfy her; warning him that not only his own pleasure but procreation itself was dependent on sexual satisfaction of women. And more significantly men were exhorted to make women desiring persons with regard to sexual pleasure. This suggestion celebrating sexual desire of women however had the potential of endangering patriarchy. This is more so because marriage as a precondition for sexual gratification of women is hardly ever even mentioned, let alone emphasising it. Though from this it can hardly be concluded that there was a social ratification of extramarital satisfaction of women's sexual passions. But celebration of female sexuality gets strongly suggested. Thus the paradox that on the one hand patriarchy seeks to control and channelize female sexuality within the framework of marriage<sup>168</sup> and fears it if uncontrolled, and on the other hand that these medical texts (which are after all patriarchal texts) magnify female sexual desires even beyond matrimony for sexual arousal of men becomes the point of existential dynamics of the system of patriarchy where strict definitions loose meaning. And paradoxical as the two images of femininity are – the sexually chaste on the one hand and the sensual and sexually

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<sup>168</sup> In Christian philosophy there is no gratification of women's sexual passions even within the framework of marriage, as there is in Islam.

active or even sexually debauched on the other, they do complete the picture of the lives of the women of the aristocracy of the Mughal period.

## **Conclusion**

We began with the intention of investigating the lives of the women of Mughal aristocracy and the Muslim upper classes through the images, and perceptions provided by the 'men's gaze' in the historical narratives, paintings and the medical texts on sexuality. We saw that all images from the Alanquava narrative, to the Anarkali narrative to Habza and adulterous wives, woman corrupting an ascetic show how men's gaze incorporated them. A negotiation and crisscrossing of norms and ethics is reflected. Men's and women's individuality at times attains a firm assertion and at others is at a complete loss. Men are at times helpless; at others they chastise their women for their social and sexual transgressions. The image of the ideal pure and chaste has the shadow of the corrupt and the corruptor lurking behind it. There are also times when men and women fulfilled each others' and their individual expectations. The world as revealed in 'men's gaze' and perceptions seems so fluid that the question of men's domination and women's subordination' seems somewhat too absolute. The overarching image of patriarchal stability seems existentially very unstable.

Images and meanings attributed to femininity in the Mughal court culture revealed that there were diverse incentives and a wide space that accommodated the diversity of personal power aspirations of women. Even in the sphere of Mughal 'public life' one is able to question the often

emphasized autonomy of the so called 'private' and the 'public' domains of life. The meanings conveyed through these images are multidimensional, in constant flux and exerting to reconcile forever irreconcilable contradictions. Relations of power between men and women in these images are constantly altered and transformed, negating any sort of fixed hierarchy. Power is reproduced and redeployed at every moment, and women's sexuality itself is revealed as a potent tool to gain individual ends. There were women in the Mughal court who were as powerful as the emperor himself. Nur Jahan stands out among them. Femininity is revealed as a subject in its own right, not necessarily and merely defined in relation to men. And men themselves appear empathetic to women's sexuality and relations between the sexes appears reciprocal. What it meant to be a woman belonging to the Mughal court society was not merely an appropriation by men.

Further we also saw how femininity was not merely produced around restrictions and limitation of their sexual pleasures but also actively produced around definitions of pleasure. In the Mughal period medical opinion would have been an authoritative sector of public opinion given the emergence of physicians as an established and important professional class. The authority of medical opinion has the potential to shape public opinion at large. And even more importantly it influences everyday lives since medicine is a daily requirement in almost every household. The set of ideas that are reflected in the medical texts

about male and female sexuality, on sexual desire, sexual satisfaction, chastity, on the degree of women's and men's libidinal instincts reflect that to these authors women were not merely made for a man's pleasure but that they were equally entitled to sexual pleasure as well. The texts reflect the dynamics of patriarchal mentality.

The issue of sexuality appears to be at the heart of the gender discourse<sup>169</sup> and the discourse on patriarchy. Patriarchy has been viewed as being based on the control and 'coercive' channelization of women's sexuality. At the level of abstraction, intellectual consensus holds this largely true. But on viewing the existential dynamics of the system of patriarchy one is forced to doubt such definite characterization of a social system. The sexual 'depravity' of women, a result of coercing their sexuality into restrictions of the harems and the *parda* is revealed as such a recurrent phenomenon that one begins to question the all pervasive existence of patriarchal order or at least to redefine it. Relationship between men and women seems to be based on perpetual variations, deviations, contradictions and also mutuality. Compensations and empathies are never enough for either gender. Thus within the overall patriarchy of Mughal aristocratic social order and social organization of sexuality the space for the assertion of individual assertion of female sexuality and femininity nuances the structure considerably as the actual functioning of the structure evolves. At the

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<sup>169</sup> Though recent scholarship sees sexuality and gender as two different things, with the increasing recognition and legitimisation of the third gender.

functional level, the structure retains enough flexibility to allow a redefining at all times.

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