

## GULBADAN BEGAM: THE ZENANA VIEW OF THE MUGHAL PERIOD

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Present paper pays a close attention to one significant forgotten historical personality, Gul Badan Begum, the first Mughal lady who left behind her, a work of literary and historical importance. Babur's daughter Gulbadan Begam, the literary pardanishin who broke the age old stereotyped image of women of medieval time Born in an age of court- historians, Gul Badan Begum, daughter of Babur the Mughal Padshah, through her explicit writing named "Humayun-Nama" the biography of her brother, exhibited an extraordinary side of herself as a writer. For the first time a women penned down the events and activities happening in the Mughal empire =in an explicit manner. Coming of such an enlightened women to the forefront, with her valuable literally work, definitely enable us to trace out the various developments in the Mughal state and society. Hence, this paper will not only assist us in shaping up of the historical records but will also enable us in the reconstruction of the women's perception and position in the literary world of Munhall period.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Gulbadan Begum, Zenana, Mughal Harem, Literary Contribution, Women Writers*

### **INTRODUCTION**

It was believed that the women have been awoken from deep slumber, a long period of stagnation and decline, to an idealized golden age, where women were supposedly held in high esteem. Apparently, many historians and scholars are quite divided over the issue. Nationalist's discourse tries to relate it with the emergence of Gandhi in Indian political arena, where as the subaltern discourse have tried to trace its growth and development in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although these discourses enabled us to locate women in history and history of women in the past, they are far from being biased. As these history and historiographies have always been dominated by the men, written through their perspectives and about themselves Women as subject seldom found any place in history. But fortunately, with the passage of time, there have been major achievements in the past half century of historical investigation, which has challenged and completely changed the earlier notion of women history. Now historiographies are not only directing their attention on the role of women as wives, sister and mothers but rather studying their every little contribution in a broader perspective. Now, a woman is not only present in history but also plays a major role in history writing.

Women history or pictography might have gain prominence in the late twentieth century but its presence could be very much felt during the medieval period. Although they have been not recognized as the mainstream history writers, but still their writings and accounts of various events are of great importance. Especially, when it comes to the reconstruction of the history of the Mughal royal family members, their relationship with the people and the harem Hence my paper pays a close attention to one such forgotten historical personality, Gul Badan Begum, the first Mughal lady who left behind her, a work of literary and historical importance. Babur's daughter Gulbadan Begam, the literary pardanishin broke the age old stereotyped image of women of medieval times. Born in an age of court- historians, Gul Badan Begum, daughter of Babur

the Mughal Padshah, through her explicit writing named “Humayun-Nama” the biography of her brother, exhibited an extraordinary side of herself as a writer. For the first time a women penned down the events and activities happenings in the Mughal empire in an explicit manner. Coming of such an enlightened women to the forefront, with her valuable literally work, definitely enable us to trace out the various developments in the Mughal state and society. Hence , this paper will not only assist us in shaping up of the historical records but will also enable us in the reconstruction of the women position in the literary world of Mughal period.

### **Discussion**

It is clear that Gulbadan Begum was born in an era when education was not meant for women. K.S. Lal too in one of his writings mentions – ‘when most of the nobles and even many kings were uneducated, and some even could not write their names and signed a document by an impression of the thumb or palm, education of harem-ladies was not considered of much consequences.’<sup>1</sup> However, there is always an exception. As in the case of the Mughal royal ladies we get to see a distinct picture, where ladies not only received education but also participated in the political activities and gave a tough fight to the male counterparts of the time. ‘Gulbadn Begum was the daughter of Babur by his wife Dildar Begum. She was born somewhere about 1523 A.D.’<sup>2</sup> Her education and her experience with several travelers from different parts of the world that she happened to meet enhanced her knowledge and outlook towards life. Her closeness with her father Babur and her royalty enabled her gain such recognition and access to the inner side of the Mughal life. Among the other princess, Gulbadan Begum was well versed in Persian and Turki languages. She was not only found of reading but rather was gifted with a poetic temperament and composed verses.<sup>3</sup> She also maintained a library of her own in the harem. She wrote the famous historical work Humayun-Nama at the request of the nephew, Emperor Akbar. Although it is present in the form of incomplete manuscript in the museum, its presence in itself is a revolution in the field of women history and women in history writing. It enables us to reconnect the missed links or gaps that has emerged in the history due to patriarchal dominance in the literary world. The disappearance of women from the history as scholars and writers could be easily erased if we pay our attention to these writings , as these writings not only focusses on the Mughal political and court activities but rather presents a different view or a different perspective altogether i.e. a zenana view of the world ,how the world has been viewed and experienced by a women and put into letters of great importance.

It is very unfortunate that throughout the medieval period due to the presence of orthodox and conservative ideology of patriarchy, women writing somehow remained subdued. Women were always considered to be the lustful domain of the patriarchal world, but the historical chronical by Gulbadan Begam widens the canvas of history. Moving away from king centric eulogies written down by the court historians Gul badan begam’s work diverts the attention to enlightened letters of women being used for historical writings.

Hence in order to get a clear picture, we must go through the ideological background of early authors and their writings of medieval period. It has been observed that the Early writings on the history of Mughal society, polity , culture and religion were actually an out product of the official records. As most of the authors were attached to the court as officials, and they put forward the official version of events , rather than a critical evaluation of the policies and events. However, there a few independent freelance writers and scholars who were not associated with any official position, but unfortunately number is very scanty. As a result, it is very rare that one come across any critical reference to the reigning Sultan or Emperor. Even the style used by these authors is very eulogizing and flattering to the sultan under whose it has been written.

The art of writing history or the concept of history definitely changed with the accession of Akbar. Since the history of a dynasty served as a memorial to the dynasty, Akbar proposed to have a written history of the Muslim rulers from the death of the prophet up to his own time on the completion of the first millennium of Islam, i.e., a history of one thousand years, called *Tarikh-i-alfi*. Hence for providing information about the lives and times of his predecessors, all the officials, the nobles, and the relatives were asked to write their reminiscences in book form. At Akbar's instance, Gul Badan Begum, the daughter of Babur, also puts down her reminiscences in book form. Her memoir entitled *Humayun Nama* is an important source as it not only enlightened us with the valuable insight of Humayun and his interactions with people but it also sheds light on the lives and culture of the royal harem. Many historians wrote about the harem but there is difference of approach to them between the male court historians of Akbar's time and that of later times. Abul Fazl's *Ain- I – Akbari* and *Akbar Nama* and Nizam-uddin- Ahmad's *Tabaqat-i- Akbari* give sober and succinct account of Akbar's harem, but mainly about its administration, both in the palace and the camp.<sup>4</sup> And if there is any description also on the Mughal royal harem, then it always remained as a subject of pleasure and submission.

However if we take a closure look at this historical venture, we find that it was not unbiased by any means. As the great emperor Akbar was not content with the account of his reign in 1589-1590, Akbar ordered Abul Fazl to compile the history of his reign. Hence *Akbarnama* was compiled by Abul Fazl. It may be said that Abul Fazl was selected for this task because he had identified himself with Akbar's views and religious temperament. He portrayed Akbar the way emperor himself wanted it to be. Therefore, in compiling the *Akbarnama*, Abul Fazl was able to come up to his royal patron's expectations. He presented Akbar as someone who was entrusted by the God himself as the representative sent upon earth to look after their children. Despite flattery, Abul Fazl was able to produce a history of Akbar's reign that is considered an important contribution to Indo-Persian historiography. Hence it was very clear that these chroniclers couldn't remain unbiased when it comes to historical writings. The reflection of their patron's wish always influences their mind and subsequently their writings. As in general, when we talk about the historical writings in true sense, they are supposed to be far from biasness. But the real picture in here is relatively conflicting.

Gulbadan begum's writings was based on her experience or that she learned from other members of the royal household. Her writings display her vision and meticulousness in writing the day-to-day events in the empire, right from the household activities to the court activities to the battlefields. The zenana view of this sort was something that was never seen. Her remarkable efforts enabled her to surpass all kind of conservative patriarchal representation of women of that time. She broke the submissive and uneducated image of the zenana in the Mughal period by putting forth her ideas on paper blatantly.

Since the task of writing or penning down the reminiscence from deep down the memory lane had been undertaken by Gul Badan Begum, under the command of the great emperor Akbar, who happened to be Gul badan Begum's nephew, it is very unlikely that she was under any pressure to produce any kind of official record or Emperor's eulogy. What she wrote came directly from her experience and the things that she witnessed in her surroundings. According to many historians "Gul badan begam's *Humayun Nama* is not considered to be a great literary achievement"<sup>5</sup> and her writings don't fall in the category of histories, or in other words it can be said that she was not a qualified historian. As a result ,Gulbadan Begum always had been sidelined by the mainstream historians. But recent studies have intervened in historical schools of thought that could not represent the history of Muslim India without celebrating the role of Emperor and praising his rule. This version of history discounted women contributions, and therefore now the postmodern studies sought to rectify this patriarchy biasness.

This perceptual change could be easily seen in the words of Rebecca Gould, “although best classed as historiography, the book of Humayun is a genre- crossing historiographic memoir. It dwells not on battles and royal genealogies, as did its male authored predecessors, but rather on domestic scenes of birth, death, anger, love and other aspects of daily life, especially as experienced by women.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the male court historians, she focused on the individual journey of the emperor, his interactions with near and dear ones, his journey as an emperor, emotional attachment with the family members of the Mughal empire. She definitely succeeded in mirroring the world in her writings and presented a world through the eyes of a women. These writings certainly reflect a different perspective, which could be utilized in framing and shaping up the women’s history and women in history. Another example that corroborates this view can be seen in the words of Soma Mukherjee, “This book is of great historical value, and is a first-rate authority on the domestic relations of the first two Mughal rulers, Babar and Humayun, with their wives, sons, daughters and other member of their family, and on their social and political life. The book is written in Persian with lot of Turki works and phrases. The only available Persian manuscript of Gulbadan’s Humayun Nama (preserved in British museum) is incomplete and ends with the blinding of “Mirza Kamran”.<sup>7</sup>

The writings of Gulbadan Begam, undoubtedly unravels the unexpected layers in the history of Mughals. It is very apparent that she was judicious and wise observer, well versed with the complexity of warfare, and the intrigues of royal deal making. She included many incidents and events gathered from the Mughal harem in her writings. She not only illustrated the different relationship of harem ladies with the emperor but also enlightened us with their emotional and sentimental sides. These emotional attachments among the members of the royal household, especially the women with the emperor, can be seen the following lines- “even the emperor (i.e., Humayun) travels and charted through the minds of the women in the house hold. “We watch with them from the ramparts as men ride away to war and anxiously scan the horizon for them to return”<sup>8</sup>

There are several instances in her work, which also enlighten us with the changing position of the women, and their ideological transformation in early Mughal period. A.S. Beveridge’s points out “it appears probable that there was no such complete seclusion of ‘Turk’ women from outside world as came to be the rule in Hindustan, but I think they received visitors more freely, and more in accordance with active life of much travelling people, then in the case in Hindu or Muslim houses in India as the present day”.<sup>9</sup> Beveridge, clearly indicates here, the cultural differences and power enjoyed by the ladies of the Mughal dynasty. In addition, to this, it also helps us to visualize the difference of position and rank associated with the ladies of the Mughal harem and their role in the royal household. It also simultaneously points out the difference in the position of women of Muslim and Hindu society respectively.

If we look back into the Muslim period, we find that it has always been considered as the darkest period by the historians for various reasons. Women’s history, portrayed as subservient, sexual and erotic, always remained secluded under veil. Women became the object of sex and sexuality during this period. Moreover, the continuous feudal conflicts and warfare also made them distressed and displaced. All these negated the individuality of women. Even the court historians who wrote eulogy of the emperor and the empire, restricted it to the administrative part only, and a descriptive insight into the women’s world is hard to find. However, Gulbadan Begam’s another description in her memoir of a pilgrimage,<sup>10</sup> that she undertook to Mecca along with Hamida Banu Begam in 1578 for Shah Akbar’s Harem somewhere unravels a different picture. Gulbadan as a leader of the pilgrimage, not only look after the women of harem but also conducted negotiation with Portuguese peoples engaged in these tasks. These descriptions in her memoir clearly shows that

the Women of Mughal dynasty were not only the ornamental beauty of the palace, rather they were achieving an important place both in the inside and the outside of the harem.

In another part of her memoir, Gulbadan Begam illuminates the story behind the marriage of Humayun and Begam Hamida Banu.<sup>11</sup> In this description she beautifully depicts the inner presence of consciousness of identity among the women and having a mind of their own. Unlike the court historians, Gulbadan did not focus on the emperor's marriage with Hamida Banu Begum alone, rather she lucidly describes the presence of 'confidence' and 'courage' in Hamida Banu Begum, when a thirteen-year old girl refuses to marry emperor, Humayun, or even meet him. An instance which would clearly depict the changing mind-sets of Muslim women of Mughal period. In Mughal period, the institution of marriage meant subjection of women. This institution confined women to the four walls of the family, transforming women as slaves. Hence this kind of information about the royal household and the real feelings and dilemma of a young girl could only be presented by someone who was indeed very close to the bride herself. Since no male court historians had the direct access to the harem, this kind of description is only possible from a person who has witnessed this herself. Even K.S.Lal words corroborates this – no nobleman, historians or scholars, not even an Allama like Abul Fazl, could enter the harem, meet with queen and princesses, discuss their problems and write about them.<sup>12</sup>

Besides, Gulbadan's memoir also made significant contribution by highlighting the emotional side of the great emperor Babur. A.S. Beveridge beautifully presents this inner side of the emperor -when Humayun was taken seriously ill.....he remembered his sisters most. "everytime he came to his senses," writes Gulbadan, "his pearl- dropping tongue asked for us and said: 'sisters, you are welcome! Come and let us embrace one another.....'. It might be three times that he raised his head and that his jewel- dropping tongue let fall these uplifting words.<sup>13</sup> This illustration definitely refutes the theory of Mughal women as the subject of submission. The beautiful bonding between the emperor and his sisters undoubtedly defies this myth. In another description she beautifully tells us about 'love' and 'fear' of a depressed father (Babur) for his son, who was seriously ill and dying. She tells us how, one of the great emperor of Mughal dynasty, stands helpless in front of "Allah", and praying and begging to take his life to the eternal world in his son's place. Here perhaps, the way Gulbadan Begam, being women, have succeeded in portraying Babur as a loving father figure, could have not been possible in the case of male authors.

Historically, the dominant role of patriarchy was evident until the close of the nineteenth century. The patriarchal representation of women as submissive and silent kept them aloof from the world, and never accepted them as a part of the mainstream literary world. Gulbadan Begum was no exception in this regard. Although writing women's historiography in medieval period did not exist, Gulbadan Begam's Humayunnama reveals un-expected layers in the history of Mughals, which focuses on the efforts of the women shaping the world we inherited. It also focuses on the women centered form of thinking and living in early Mughal period and offered opportunities to explore the injustice endured by them.

Unlike other chroniclers, Gulbadan Begam's 'Humayun Nama' is not an example of autobiography, and also does not emphasize on self-glorification. Instead of concentrating on herself she gave emphasis on narrating the passage of time through generations. According to historians "it was the most valuable contemporary record of the period". But unfortunately, in the colonial period the notion of contribution, of the veiled and enslaved women of medieval period, has fixed the colonial imagination and allowed it to cover complete exploitation as "civilizing mission". But the truth is that the presence of women history or history by women could be seen much earlier in the medieval period.

## CONCLUSIONS

At the end, one could say, that the writings by Gulbadan Begam has not only historical value but literary value as well. A new ethics was born along with Gulbadan's narrative representation. It is not based on the violent conquests that attracted male chroniclers, nor is premised on personal gain or glory. For many, Gulbadan's ideas were a revelation, which provided a separate piece of knowledge and experience that enable us to transform the world the way they saw it. Hence, the historians of recent times must give respect to such forgotten historical indigenous sources, as each historian's voice, whether male or female presents us, with the issues of great historical significance. Hence, there is need to broaden the canvas of history writing, which means greater attention towards perspective and voices of the people should be taken to consideration.

## NOTES

- K S Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, 1988, p-110
- Soma Mukherjee, *Royal Mughal ladies and their contributions*, 1997, p- 166
- K,S Lal, p- 110
- *ibid*, p-4
- *ibid*, p- 76
- Rebecca Gould, *How Gulbadan remembered; the book of Humayun as an act of representation (Early modern women; An interdisciplinary journal, 2011)*, Vol-6, p- 187-188
- Annette S Beveridge, *The History of Humayun (Royal Asiatic society, 1902)*, p- 51
- Susie J Tharu and K Latika, *Women's writing in India– 600 BC to the present, vol-1 (New York, the Feminist Press 1991)*, p- 99
- A S Beveridge, *The History of Humayun*, p- 7, and also pp -31,32
- *ibid*, p- 69, 70
- *ibid*, p- 150,151
- 12. K S Lal, p- 1
- 13. Beveridge, p- 104

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