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A Critical Feminist Analysis of Humayunama

KANAKSHA KATARIA¹

ABSTRACT

Through this paper, the author seeks to bring out the essentiality of Humayunama as a source of Mughal history. In the process, the source's impact on the contemporary world will also be analyzed. The author would also use a feministic lens to review the source's content and Gul Badan's status as the only female writer of sixteenth-century Mughal India and utilize such analysis to shed light on the fact that Humayunama was one of the most non-conventional sources of the period as mentioned above.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Humayunama or “Ahwal Humayun Padshah Jamah Kardom Gul Badan Begum bint Babur Padshah Amma Akbar Padshah”², as it was officially called, was penned down by Gul Badan Begum in the sixteenth century in Persian. She began writing it in her sixties, on her nephew Akbar's command³. It is one of the most important sources used in the imperfect reconstruction of Mughal history, albeit it has been pushed to the periphery as an ancillary source by many in the field of history. It chronicles the lives of the most famous Mughal trinity comprising Babar, Humayun, and Akbar. We do not get to know much of Babar's rule as Gul Badan Begum was eight years old when he died, and most of what has been written by the Begum was based on what she remembered from her childhood days and what she heard from the people around her. In the context of Humayun, however, we find detailed descriptions of not just political, military, and economic turn pages of the Mughal history but also the mundane intricacies of the mysterious and ever-elusive domestic royal life. Certain parts of this memoir have not survived the test of time, and thus, we will never know the entire extent of what Gul Badan penned down. The two cardinal reasons for us believing in the same are: the memoir ends mid-sentence, in an abrupt fashion, indicating that what we have as the end of Humayunama does not include all of what was written and the memoir ends, approximately in 1552 which is four years prior to the end of Humayun's reign⁴. If Gul Badan was tasked with chronicling Humayun's reign (which

¹ Author is a Student at NALSAR University of Law, Hyderabad, India.

² *Gulbadan Begum*, Wikipedia (AUG. 1, 2022), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulbadan_Begum

³ Ruby Lal, *Rethinking Mughal India: Challenge of a Princess' memoir*, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, Jan. 4, 2003, at 53.

⁴ *Gulbadan Begum*, WIKIPEDIA (AUG. 1, 2022), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulbadan_Begum

she apparently was, considering the opening text of the book), then the year in which the current manuscript ends i.e., 1552, is not logically consistent with the text of the manuscript itself, therefore, it is valid to conclude that some pages of the memoir were lost and could not withstand the currents of the time.

Gul badan Begum was the sister of Humayun and aunt to Akbar. She was born to Babar and Dildar Begum in the year 1523 in Afghanistan. Although we do not have solid proof of her being the recipient of formal education, we can conclude that she was in fact, educated and possessed literary calibre of an appreciable standard due to her achievements in the written world. Another fact that acts as a testament to this is her fluency in both, Turkic and Persian. Persian was Gul Badan's second language. Her account, Humayunama is the only surviving history written by a woman in 16th century Mughal India ⁵which, in my opinion, awards it a peculiar position in history because this account gives a refreshing glimpse into the royal Mughal household and the daily lives of its inhabitants, which is missing from other 'conventional' accounts of this age.

Allegedly, Akbar chose Gul Badan Begum out of all prospective candidates for this task because he had a close relationship with his aunt and was thoroughly aware of what a great storyteller she was. In fact, the begum starts the memoir by stating the following:

"There had been an order issued, 'Write down whatever you know of the doings of Firdaus-makani and Jannat-ashyani'." (AB's translation, 1902, page 83)

This tells us that the Begum decided to write the Humayunama as it was an official order by the sovereign. This was a common practice, back in the day, especially in the Mughal era, where accounts, etc. were commissioned by the emperor, examples include ain-i-Akbari by Abul Fazl and Badshah Nama written by Abdul Hamid Lahori.

The text is broadly divided into two categories, the first part deals with Babar's reign in great depth, covering almost all aspects of his rule ranging from his daily life to his colossal conquests and feats. The second leg describes in minute detail the Mughal empire under Humayun, tracing his coronation, his exile, and his achievements as a ruler. However, the memoir ends suddenly, mid-sentence in the year 1556 which means we have no idea as to what Gul Badan wrote about the last four years of Humayun's reign. That part of history stands suspended forevermore. ⁶

⁵ Dr. Neria H. Hebbbar, *Humayun-Nama: Gulbadan Begum's Forgotten Manuscript*, BOLOJI, (AUG. 14, 2022), <https://www.boloji.com/articles/703/humayun-nama>.

⁶ Dr. Neria H. Hebbbar, *Humayun-Nama: Gulbadan Begum's Forgotten Manuscript*, BOLOJI, (AUG. 14, 2022), <https://www.boloji.com/articles/703/humayun-nama>.

II. REASON FOR CHOOSING THE AFOREMENTIONED TOPIC

As a student of History, I am aware of the unfortunate and unfavorable power dynamic that exists between men and women. The first appeal that Humayunama had was that it is the only surviving text related to the Mughal period written by a woman in the sixteenth century. Works of renowned men such as Abul Fazl and Lahori etc. are well-explored and popularised as cardinal and sometimes, the only institutional sources of the Mughal rule. On the contrary, Humayunama was pushed aside as an ancillary source and one can't help but look at the possible patriarchal reasons behind the same. In an age, where women were expected to be seen and not heard, Gul Badan begum penned down the history of the three most famous kings of the Mughal empire. We get to see everything, from battles characterized by bloodshed to births in the royal household, through the eyes of a woman. This is of importance to me as it challenges the extreme "masculinization" of history and offers, for the first time in the vast Mughal history, the perspective of a woman who has not just seen it all but also immortalised it.

The reason behind choosing this particular period of history was because the Mughal rule was one of the most important time periods in Indian history. More than that, it characterized the last time that India held her own reigns before the British came and took over, this relation which puts the Mughal rule as the final empire which existed before India's history would be changed forever, piqued my interest.

Through this project, I shall attempt to briefly analyze the Humayunama and bring out the observations which engrossed me, my own interpretation of the same and what I, in my capacity, can conclude from the same.

III. STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF HUMAYUNAMA

The tone of the text is not panegyric, unlike the other texts written about kings, rulers, emperors, etc. Gul Badan writes in detail about the tensions among the members of the royal family. Ranging from the tensions between Babar, Mirza Khan, and Mirza Mohammad Hussain to the blinding of Humayun's younger brother, Karnam. This, however, does not mean that the Begum did not laud the achievements of the emperors. She expresses her awe at Babar seizing Samarqand twice in his lifetime. The following from Anne Beveridge's translation portrays the same,

"The toils and the perils which in the ruling of kingdoms, befell our prince, have been measured out to a few and of few have been recorded the manliness, endurance, and courage which he

showed in battlefields and dangers. Twice he took Samarqand by the force of his sword."⁷(AB's translation page 84)

It is of interest to note that the first juzu (chapter) of the Humayun Nama is actually about Babar. Gul Badan writes about Babar as a way to invoke benediction for her work. This leads us to conclude that ancestral homage in terms of patriliney was of importance at least to Gul Badan, not as a princess of the Mughal empire but as a royal chronicler. The following lines from the text make us believe the same:

"First of all, by way of invoking a blessing (on my work) and in pious commemoration, a chapter (juzu) is written about my royal father's deeds, although these are told in his memoirs." (AB's translation, 1902, pg. 83)

The original account is written in Persian, the official language of the Mughal court. Persian was the Begum's second language, her first language being Turkic. The influence of Safavids in terms of popularising Persian on Humayun can be seen in his biographical account as well. Gul Badan, according to linguists, used uncomplicated and lucid language in the memoir which was not the norm back in the day. Writers, including chroniclers, often used complex language which was not something Gul Badan followed.

Her deviance from this norm might just be because Persian was her second language and she lacked the proficiency to use complex language in the same. Another possible explanation is that since she was adept at storytelling, and often narrated tales to children, using simple language came as second nature to her. Whatever may be the reason, this fact makes her work an outlier in the sea of Mughal chronicles.

We must keep in mind that this account was reconstructed by Gul Badan primarily on the basis of her memory and stories she'd heard throughout her life, therefore, we don't have an objective account of the content. What we have instead is an intricately woven tale that shows us not just the ways in which the image of the emperor was presented but also what went along behind the closely guarded walls of the royal frontiers.

Gul Badan deals with the concept of Mughal sovereignty in a different manner than other chroniclers do. Instead of raving about the greatness of Mughal institutions, military feats, and conquests, she focuses on the mundane. She uses familial relations and domesticity to foster the concept of state sovereignty. An example of the same could be when Babar died and the key of the kingdom was to be given to Humayun, how every member in the Harem despite their

⁷ ANNETTE BEVERIDGE, THE HISTORY OF HUMAYUN BY GULBADAN BEGUM, 83 (Royal Asiatic Society, 1902)

overpowering grief had the sensibility to keep his death a secret because doing otherwise would threaten the stability of the state and cause panic among its people⁸.

The text narrates another incident that displayed the role of domesticity in maintaining the absoluteness of the state. Humayun, after being crowned as the emperor visited the common folk to ask about their health⁹ and so on and so forth, the first act of Humayun as an emperor was being concerned about the well-being of his people, this application of soft power was a step further in consolidating his hold as a new emperor

Another example comes to mind, during one of Humayun's wars- when he was in Kabul, he sent a letter to Haram Begam asking for immediate military aid. The begam competently got a thousand men armed and ready for battle. She spearheaded the entire process and led the contingent to the needed pass itself.

Thus, there were direct and indirect ways in which domesticity facilitated the consolidation of the Mughal state, Humayunama is a testament to this very fact.

Matrimony was more often than not, a means to strengthen the political, social, and military standing of the emperor and other nobles. It was not seen as the union between two people but rather, as a strategic alliance between kingdoms, empires, and families. One incident from the Humayunama which illustrates this fact is the marriage between Shah Beg Khan and Babar's sister Khanzada Begum. The foundation of this was laid when Babar was held hostage in Samarqand for six months and after exhausting all means of potential aid, he got an offer from Shah Beg Khan who promised two hundred men armed with clubs in exchange for Khanzada begum's hand.¹⁰ This is indicative of the role played by marriage in fostering alliances.

Some light is shed on the status of royal women in the Mughal empire. We know that they enjoyed some sense of agency even though it was at the behest of the emperor who was always, a man. Women also owned land which was given to them as grants, an example is the places and holdings granted to Babar's maternal aunts by him¹¹. This grant was obviously given on the basis of the alleged affection he had for them. There was, however, a clear hierarchy that existed among women in the Mughal household. Besides the obvious supremacy of the "begums" and "female relatives" of the emperor over slaves, servants, etc. in the harem, there existed a very clear power dynamic among the most elite of the pecking order. An instance from the memoir

⁸ ANNETTE BEVERIDGE, *THE HISTORY OF HUMAYUN BY GULBADAN BEGUM*, 109 (Royal Asiatic Society, 1902)

⁹ ANNETTE BEVERIDGE, *THE HISTORY OF HUMAYUN BY GULBADAN BEGUM*, 110 (Royal Asiatic Society, 1902)

¹⁰ ANNETTE BEVERIDGE, *THE HISTORY OF HUMAYUN BY GULBADAN BEGUM*, 85 (Royal Asiatic Society, 1902)

¹¹ ANNETTE BEVERIDGE, *THE HISTORY OF HUMAYUN BY GULBADAN BEGUM*, 89 (Royal Asiatic Society, 1902)

which showcases the same is the clear description of the immense power exercised by Maham Begum, who was the “first lady” of Babar’s Harem. She held great authority over other members of the Harem. Even though it was common practice for Begums bereft of children to adopt from slaves and those on the periphery of the social structure, Maham Begum adopted two children (Hindal and Gulbadan) who were birthed by Dildar Begum, an aristocratic figure¹². The reason for this adoption is not known, it might’ve been because she was fond of children, but this still does not explain why she adopted from another royal, it might be plausible to assume that this was a way to exercise soft authority and strengthen her stance as the chief lady. This was uncustomary for the Harem. The system of power was, however, not static or rigid, one had the option of being “upgraded” at the emperor’s discretion of course. This implies that there was a complex relationship in terms of authority not just between the emperor and the Harem but also amongst the inhabitants of the Harem themselves.

There are many instances to denote the influence of religion on the Mughal household. The very titles awarded to Babar and Humayun- “*Firdaus-makani* and *Jannat-ashyani*”¹³. Firdaus Makani literally means "resident of paradise" and Jannat-ashyani means 'He who lives in heaven.' If they believed in the existence of a “heaven” then it is prudent to assume that for them, a “hell” existed too. Therefore, this leads us to conclude that Mughals believed in the concept of an afterlife.

One cannot help but question whether there existed a relationship between the concept of a “divine authority” and the legitimacy of the emperor’s rule. The answer is affirmative. An instance to support this could be the way Gul Badan described the fateful battle of Chausa which took place on 30th October 1540. She calls it the “Day of Resurrection”, this terminology obviously hints toward religious connotations. It lays the foundation for the establishment of Humayun’s glorious return as an act of rebirth, an act of a new yet divine beginning.

Another example could be the siege of Kabul from Mirza Khan by Babar. In the memoir, when the begum talks about this altercation, she does not give credit of the siege to Babar but to God. She states that it was God who liberated Kabul from the clutches of Mirza and put it in Babar’s “capable” hands.¹⁴

We do not get to know a lot about Gul Badan’s life from the memoir this implies that she did

¹² Ruby Lal, *Rethinking Mughal India: Challenge of a Princess’ memoir*, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, Jan. 4, 2003, at 53.

¹³ ANNETTE BEVERIDGE, THE HISTORY OF HUMAYUN BY GULBADAN BEGUM, 83 (Royal Asiatic Society, 1902)

¹⁴ ANNETTE BEVERIDGE, THE HISTORY OF HUMAYUN BY GULBADAN BEGUM, 89 (Royal Asiatic Society, 1902)

her job as a biographical writer quite splendidly. There are hardly any instances that tell us about what was going on in Gul Badan's personal life.

One instance was when her adoptive mother, Maham Begum passed away. We can see her expressing grief from her own perspective. This is perhaps because she was so overcome by emotion at that moment. Another instance is when she talks about how she convinced her husband, Khizr Khan to not join a brewing conspiracy against Humayun.

Other than these, she has very tastefully, separated herself from her work. This might also be indicative of the conclusion that the identity of women was and to this date, continues to be seen in relation to men. This concept of relational identity can be, in my humble opinion, traced in Gul Badan's work.

IV. LIMITATIONS OF THE ANALYSIS AND SAID WORK

The original text, being written in Persian, was translated by Anne Beveridge in 1902¹⁵ and therefore, the original essence of what was written cannot be known unless one learns the language and tries to understand the text in depth until then, all we can rely on is a second-hand Europeanised interpretation of what the Begum wrote, therefore, it is safe to assume that the precise emotions, feelings, thoughts, and heart of what was written centuries ago cannot be known just by analysing an interpretation of the same.

The close relationship between the one who commissioned the writing of this historiography and the one who wrote it implies that the account is not completely unbiased and free from the fault of complaisance. It is held in common consensus that Akbar held his aunt in high regard to the extent that he actually carried her bier during her funeral albeit for a short distance. Moreover, Humayun and Gul Badan had a positive relationship so it is possible that she, unconsciously got her judgment as a chronicler clouded by the deep affection she held for her brother. Hence, one must always keep in mind this possible bias whilst studying the text in question.

Gul Badan begum was a woman with immense social, political, and economic privileges. It is important to analyse the interpretation of the text keeping this fact in mind because Gul Badan's privilege meant that she was restricted to palatial comforts and could not perhaps, understand the perception of royal trinity held by those who lived beyond the marble walls but comprised an important component of the colossal Mughal state.

¹⁵ *GULBADAN BEGUM*, WIKIPEDIA (AUG. 1, 2022), [HTTPS://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/GULBADAN_BEGUM](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulbadan_Begum)

V. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

How can a text, written centuries ago claim relevance in today's day and age? Should we as students of History in the current epoch distance ourselves from a substantive and revolutionary piece of writing simply because it was penned down long back? I would like to answer that in the negative.

If History is an imperfect reconstruction of the past, then this textual source becomes of great importance because it offers to us a new take on the famous rulers of the Mughal empire. It also describes in detail certain traditions that were followed e.g.; the gifts sent by Babar to his family members back in his homeland. It tells us how the rulers' temperament was without glorifying the same, which is absent from other accounts.

The relevance of Humayunama lies in the fact that it allows us to gaze into the lives of not just the kings who were at the forefront but also the women who stood behind them, it helps us to get an idea of what the people who formed the bedrock of the great Mughal institutions, were like.

VI. CONCLUSION

What started as a conformist tradition ended as a most non-conformist piece of Mughal history. The work, as expounded above, did not fulfil the criteria of a conventional chronicle. It was sensational in its approach and remains one of the few, if not the only source which gives us such glimpses into the mundane of the Mughals.

While there is little written about the Begum herself, from what one can infer, she did not think of herself at par with the emperor and his relatives. An instance to strengthen this claim could be the fact that she referred to herself as, the "*Insignificant one*" and the "*Lowly one*" throughout the text. While this specific example cannot be a broad generalisation of how all women thought of themselves, it nonetheless, gives us some food for thought.

Whilst the text does not dwell on the complexities of institutional importance, it allows us to decipher the emotions, feelings, and thought processes that went behind making those institutions. For instance, we could sense the worry of Babar, not as the emperor of India but as a father when Humayun fell ill and whether he would live was a question at best. All of this tells us that, across centuries, the primary nature and basic instincts of humans remain constant. This reaffirms the fact that the human condition revolves around the core pillars of love, hate, power, grief, birth, death, and the innate tendency to immortalize oneself.
