


LIVES IN THE SHADOWS OF EMPIRE: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE NARRATIVES OF JAHANARA BEGUM, NUR JAHAN AND ZEB-UN-NISSA

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ABSTRACT

This research offers an auto-ethnographical evaluation of life-writings by and about Mughal women, for it focuses on their autobiographies, biographies, also personal narratives within the socio-political context of the Mughal Empire (16th–18th centuries). Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, and Zeb-un-Nissa played meaningful roles for the shaping of imperial politics, culture, and also society. However, Mughal royal women were historically sidelined in mainstream historiography. The study seeks illumination of the agency, voices, and multidimensional experiences of these women, often muted in patriarchal historical records, through critical engagement with their life-writings. The research also uses an autoethnographic approach while incorporating the scholar's positionality with reflexive perceptions for deepening comprehension in how these women navigated complex intersections related to gender, power, and spirituality. This study examines how narratives mirror plus defy powerful socio-political dialogues during their era. Their narratives do reveal strategies for resistance, negotiation, and also influence within the Mughal court as well as beyond. This work improves the comprehension regarding women's roles in early modern South Asia, as well as contributes to feminist historiography by bridging personal life stories with broader historical frameworks. This project ultimately stresses that we should revisit historical sources with a gendered lens and encourages reimagining subtle Mughal history that centres female subjectivities and agency.

Keywords: Feminist Historiography, Life-Writings, Mughal Women, South Asian History, Gender and Power, Autoethnography

INTRODUCTION

The recovery and reinterpretation of women's voices within history have grown into important activities in feminist historiography. The Mughal era's women especially exemplify this because patriarchal structures and royal male chroniclers mediated their presence in records. Mughal women participated actively in cultural, religious, and courtly life yet customary histories of South Asia mostly put them in the background. Recent academic efforts, however, have begun to unearth and examine life-writings produced by or about Mughal women. These efforts offer a much-needed corrective to their historical invisibility (Lal, 2005; Findly, 1993), including autobiographies, biographies, as well as memoirs. Layered with political observation as well as spiritual reflection, these narratives reveal complex and multidimensional identities.

THIS IS A LIMITED PREVIEW OF THE CHAPTER.

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