

The Exhibition Of Life And Culture Of Mughal Era Women In The Museums

Dr. Deepa Shivnani, Kartikeya Bhardwaj

Ph.D. (History), DAVV Indore

Senior Research Fellow (History), DAVV Indore

Abstract

This paper explores the nuanced representation of Mughal-era women through the lens of select paintings preserved in museums worldwide, with a focus on their bold and multifaceted portrayal. Contrary to conventional historiography that often reduces Mughal women to symbols of imperial seclusion or political pawns, this study examines visual evidence revealing their engagement in diverse spheres of life—ranging from leisure and pleasure to authority and labour. The analysis centers on a curated corpus of Mughal miniatures housed in prominent institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), and the National Museum, New Delhi. These paintings, produced between the 16th and 18th centuries, depict women in unconventional roles: sipping wine, participating in musical soirées, riding horses, and even intimating homoerotic desires—motifs rare in contemporaneous European or Persian art.

The research employs an interdisciplinary methodology, integrating art historical analysis, gender studies, and postcolonial theory to interrogate how these visual narratives challenge established narratives of female subjugation. By contextualizing the paintings within the socio-political milieu of the Mughal court, the study argues that such depictions reflect not only the aristocratic women's agency but also the patron's deliberate aesthetic choices to project power, luxury, and cultural syncretism. For instance, scenes of women enjoying wine or engaging in homosocial bonds may be interpreted as expressions of elite identity, courtly pleasure, and the fluidity of gendered spaces within zenana confines.

The findings underscore two key arguments: (1) Mughal paintings offer a visual counter-narrative to textual sources that marginalize women, foregrounding their active participation in cultural and political life; (2) The bold motifs such as wine consumption, horseback riding, musical performance, and homoerotic undertones function as deliberate artistic choices reflecting courtly aesthetics rather than mere realism.

This research contributes to ongoing debates in art history, gender studies, and museum studies by repositioning Mughal women from peripheral subjects to central agents of visual culture. It advocates for inclusive exhibition practices that honour the multiplicity of women's experiences in the Mughal era, thereby enriching global understanding of premodern South Asian societies.

Keywords: Mughal paintings, women, museum exhibitions, gender studies, courtly culture, zenana, art historical analysis.

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I. Research Methodology

The sources for this research are Museum collections belonging to Mughal period such as Mughal paintings, Mughal coins, illustrated manuscripts, etc. The data has been collected from the digitalised exhibition of Museums which are available on their official websites and from the publications showcasing the museum exhibits. This research employs Inductive and deductive reasoning in order to reach the conclusion.

Leisure activities of Women

Mughal paintings showcase women enjoying leisure activities. It is certain that royal women and common women had different lifestyles and hence their leisure activities were also different. Historical sources are silent on the forms of entertainment available for women. Museum collections show women of Mughal period engaged in variety of leisure activities for fun and entertainment. These leisure activities differed according to class and status of women. Royal women engaged in barbecue parties, wines, Horse riding, Polo, Music concerts, etc. Common women used to swim in ponds, fly kites, swing on trees, etc.



← →

Women at Night on a Terrace.; Delhi ; c. 1700–1720
; Opaque watercolour and gold on paper; 29.1 ×
18.9 cm; Philadelphia Museum of Art

Fig.1. Royal women enjoying their night in terrace (c. 1700-1720), Philadelphia Museum of Art



Fig. 2. Women playing the game of Polo, Marwar School (1750), National Museum Delhi¹



Fig. 3. Ladies playing Chaupar, Bundi School (Circa 1725-30), National Museum Delhi²



Fig. 4. Women enjoying Barbeque party (17th century), National Museum Delhi³

Women enjoying wine and music



WOMEN ON THE TERRACE, ENJOYING WINE AND MUSIC!

Fig. 5. Women drinking wine and enjoying music (17th Century), National Museum Delhi

Fig. 1. to Fig. 5. are Mughal era paintings belonging to various schools and are now in different museums. These painting shows leisure activities which could only be afforded by the women belonging to royal families. These activities include women playing sports such as Horse polo and Chaupar, women drinking wine and enjoying barbecue parties and enjoying their night on terrace with music.



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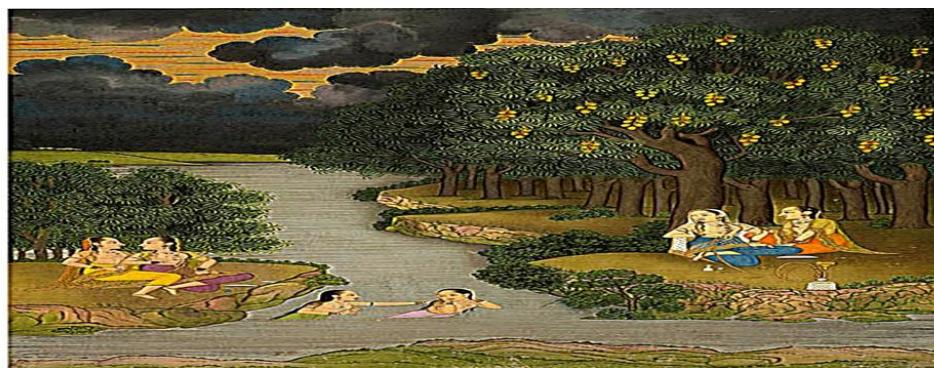
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Woman on a Swing.; Manohar, Mewar, Rajasthan;

c. 1680–1700; Opaque watercolour on paper;

British Museum

Fig. 6. Women on Swing (c. 1680-1700), Mewar School, Artist – Manohar, British Museum



Women Enjoying the River at the Forest's Edge,

ca. 1765. Mughal, Murshidabad or Lucknow.

Opaque watercolor and gold on paper; 33.1 × 24.9 cm (The Cleveland Museum of Art, 2013.351).

Fig. 7. Women enjoying the river at the forest's edge, c. 1765, Cleveland Museum of Art



Fig. 8. Ladies flying kites, Kullu School (c. 1750), National Museum Delhi⁴

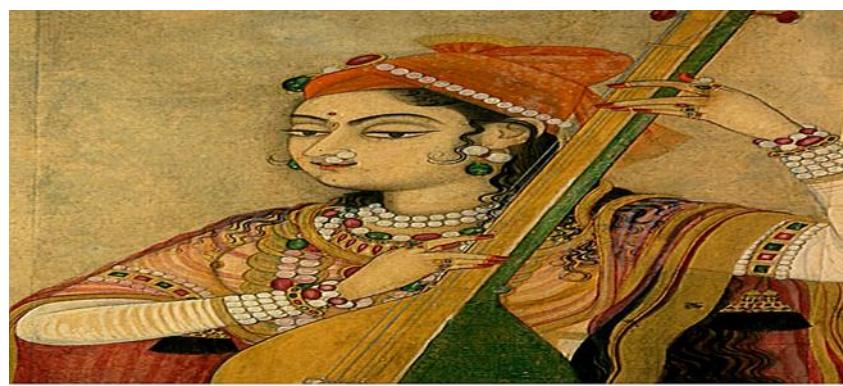


Fig. 9. Women celebrating Diwali (18th century), San Diego Museum of Arts⁵

Fig. 6. to Fig. 9. are the Mughal era paintings present in various museums around the world. They showcase the leisure activities of common women such as kite flying, celebrating festivals, playing on swing, bathing in rivers, etc. These were fun and entertainment activities of common women who lived in Mughal India.

Women and Art

Women were also involved in artistic endeavors during the Mughal Period. Several literary sources confirm the ban on Music by Aurangzeb describing the same as unislamic. Museum collections on the other hand paint a completely different picture of the Mughal Durbar. During Mughal Period, women were engaged in both fine arts and performing arts. Mughal paintings showcase women engaged in instrumental music. Several Mughal paintings preserved in museums were created by Women painters of Mughal period.



← →
A Lady Playing the Tanpura.; Kishangarh,
Rajasthan; c. 1735; Ink, opaque and transparent
watercolour and gold on paper; 47 x 33.7 cm; The
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fig. 10. Lady playing Tanpura, 1735, Kishangarh school, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 11. 'The Son who mourned his father' by Sahifa Bano (1620), Aga Khan Museum⁶



Fig. 12 Two elephants in combat by Khurshid Bano (1600-50), Metropolitan Museum of art⁷

Fig. 10. shows a woman playing Tanpura. Fig. 11. and Fig. 12. are Mughal era paintings which are works of women artists. This clearly shows the involvement of women in various arts.

Women and Literature

The literature produced in Mughal Period was in form of illustrated manuscripts which are now preserved in Museums. It provides a glimpse of artistic and literary portrayal of Women during the Mughal Period. Given below is an illustrated manuscript of Padmavat which shows conversation of Queen Nagmati with a parrot.



Fig. 13. An Illustrated manuscript of Padmavat, 1750, Kishangarh Museum and Art Gallary

Women doing work: The portrayal of 'working women' by Mughal artists

The showcasing of 'working woman' was very prominent in Mughal paintings. Women were shown as operating wells, carrying water, riding horses, buying and selling goods, etc. This portrayal of women emphasizes on the inherent gender equality in the Mughal period.

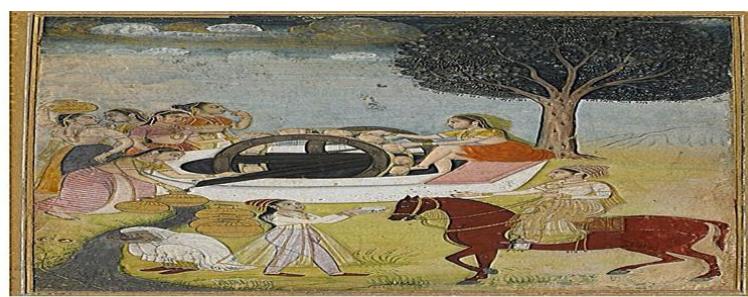
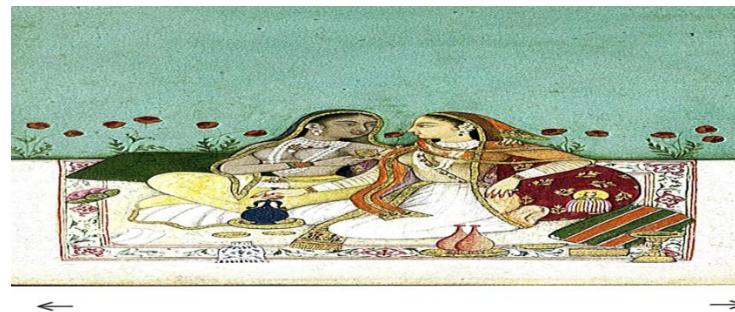


Fig. 14. A group of women at well, 17th century, Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art

Queers in Mughal Period

Several Mughal paintings showcase the prevalence of Homosexuality in Mughal Period. Although the written texts such as Fatawa-i-Alamgiri criminalizes and penalizes Homosexuality, the museum collections envisage a completely different picture.



Two Women on a Terrace.; Rajasthan; after 1700;
Opaque watercolour and gold on paper; 20.3 x
19.7 cm; Brooklyn Museum

Fig. 15. Two women on a Terrace (c. 1700), Brooklyn Museum

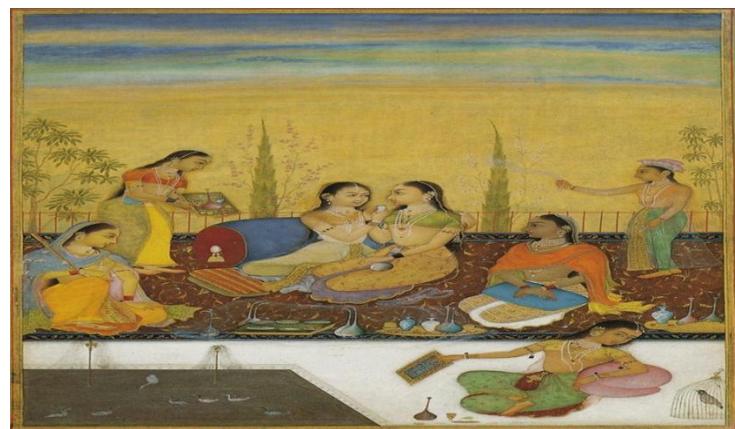


Fig. 16. Ladies of Zenana on roof terrace, Metropolitan Museum of Art⁸



Fig. 17. Princess sleeping beneath a night sky, eunuch in attendance, Late 17th century Mughal Painting,
National Museum Delhi



Fig. 18. Senior wives playing Chaupar in the court of Zenana in the security of Eunuchs, Metropolitan Museum
of Art

Fig. 15 and Fig. 16 are the Mughal era paintings which clearly indicates homosexual relationship between two women. This representation was very bold especially by the artists patronized by the Mughal dynasty. Fig. 17 and Fig. 18 shows the significance of transgenders particularly Eunuchs in the Zenana. The Eunuchs provided security as well as comfort to the women of the Zenana.

II. Conclusion

Several important facts can be inferred from the museum objects under study. Indian Women engaged in various forms of art and entertainment during the Mughal Period. The portrayal of leisure activities of women – both royal and common indicates the importance given to the desire and happiness of women during this period. The pursuit of instrumental music, horse riding, Polo, etc. by women indicates that the women were extremely skilled in Mughal Period. Women also pursued the skills that are traditionally labeled as masculine skills such as horse riding. Paintings such as women drinking wine and two women on terrace shows that even alcoholism and homosexuality were not considered a taboo for women. The general image of Mughal era women that people get from the literary sources is contradicted by those inferred via Museum objects. The literary sources give impression of purdah system, Male chauvinist society based on militarism, relative irrelevance of women, abhorrence of desires and artforms, etc. On the other hand, museum objects indicate absence of purdah, acknowledgement of desires, appreciation for artforms, importance of women evident from their presence in numerous paintings and their name inscribed on coins.

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