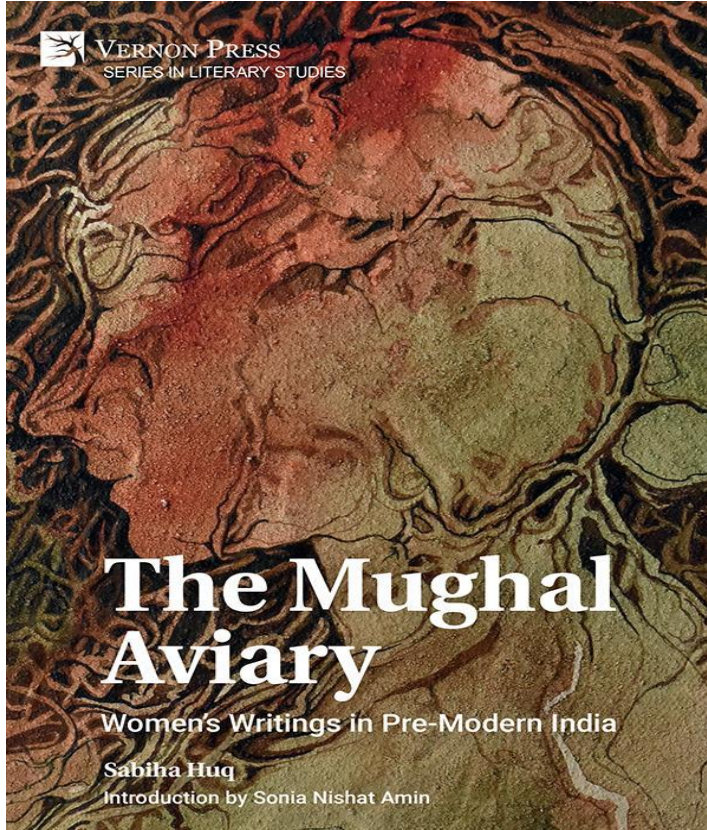


Sabiha Huq. *The Mughal Aviary: Women's Writings in Pre-Modern India*. Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2022. 204 pp. ISBN: 978-1-62273-852-6



The publication of Sabiha Huq's *The Mughal Aviary: Women's Writings in Pre-Modern India* (henceforth, *The Aviary*) coincides with the deletion of important chapters on early Islamic history from school syllabi in India. Huq's monograph stands between the interstices of parochial ramifications of such deletions and the general problem of mainstream history as a politicised field. As a response, Huq's thrust is on reading cultural texts by four women writers whose lives cumulatively spanned the heyday of Mughal rule in India in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Published under 'Series in Literary Studies', *The Aviary* attempts to triangulate the bias of historical claims and deliberate amnesia warping cultural understanding of the Middle Ages in the Indian subcontinent. Her stated prism of interrogating the double marginalisation of women subservient to patriarchy and left unchronicled by history, is that of New Historicism applied to

Subaltern Studies. Sonia Nishat Amin's "Introduction" to the volume attributes a two-pronged direction to Huq's work – initiating discussion of "past actions by women contained in almost forgotten and unevaluated writings by them" (xiii), and possible reclamation of their rightful place "in the production of meaning by chronicling contemporary times and interpreting them through their own lens" (xiii).

The pre-modern period of Indian history, which corresponds to the early modernity of European classification, is the temporal span of *The Aviary*. While the politico-philosophical modernity of Renaissance Europe did not replicate in southern Asia under the Mughals, their efforts at settling and the struggles to establish a unified empire in Hindustan are equivalent to the onset of European modernity. In Chapter One, "The Mughal Aviary and Women In/Out", Huq mentions experiments with statecraft and governance, blending Timurid-Mongol cultural traditions and Islamic rules with local customs, adapting to new ways of warfare, encouraging science and technology, and patronising art and architecture as obvious strides towards modernity. In the same vein, she concedes that palace intrigues and violent succession wars, despotic monarchies, and the permissive practice of polygamy are deterrents to recognising Mughal rule as 'civilised enough'. Contextually, the caveat that in most historical accounts whether by British writers or subsequently by Indian historians, Muslim women "were (either) not allowed to emerge as subjects per se, and when they did on rare occasions, the historian mostly depended on the records by travelers from Europe" (4), is revelatory. The conjectural accounts, warranted by the lack of access to domestic spaces, have largely abetted the construction of an Orientalist gaze whereby pre-modern Mughal women of the harem are broadly labeled as "backward, ignorant, sluggish, sexually charged, and licentious ..." (4).

This is precisely the point at which *The Aviary* intervenes. The central metaphor of 'aviary' to imply the harem/ *zenana* is crucial for understanding the positions of the four female authors discussed in the monograph. The monograph analyses the work of three inhabitants of the Mughal *zenana*, and one from the province of Kashmir at the point of its annexation to Mughal India. Through the sequential study of Mughal women authors Gulbadan Begam (1523-1603), Princess Jahanara (1614-1681), and Princess Zeb-un-Nissa (1638-1702), Huq unfolds the idea of aviary as shifting harems that remain but "an enigmatic liminal space of qualified autonomy and complex power equations" (17), within which literary output problematises home/world antinomies. These three writers visibly stand for successive generations of Mughal women. The increasing cultural-psychological distances from their land of origin and naturalisation on the soil of Hindustan are perceptible in the choice of genre and medium, their responses to patriarchy, and evolving creative persona. Huq's chapter titles display her understanding of this

evolution, with the epigrams at the beginning of the chapters being similarly evocative. The ‘aviary’ metaphor is extended by including Gulbadan’s contemporary, the Kashmiri poet Habba Khatoon (1554-1609) in this schema. As a common woman who entered royalty by virtue of her marriage to the last independent ruler of Kashmir, Khatoon was outside the Mughal fold per se. Nonetheless, her poetry of lament and suave protest depicts the aviary as a broad regulatory frame that could lead to literary output of a very different kind from her Mughal counterpart.

Chapter Two deals with Gulbadan’s sustained work in Mughal historiography. Her position in fashioning the genre of biography, and the influence on later practitioners like Abul Fazl and Jahanara are the high points. Gulbadan’s *Humayun-Nama* (Trans. Annette S. Beveridge, 2018) represents her half-brother and the second Mughal emperor Humayun as a mix of contraries – a man of flesh and blood with his open-handedness and strong sense of justice co-existing with the mould of a rather passive ruler. Huq painstakingly narrates the significance of Gulbadan’s work from different angles, highlighting her reticence and keen observation skills. If one gets past the occasional tedium of lengthy description of events in Gulbadan’s text, the diligent references to multiple trivial episodes of the biography are commendable for removing the third wall of the Mughal royal household for common readers.

The third chapter dedicated to Jahanara’s hagiographies reinforces the genre of ‘biography’ as an instrument of self-fashioning. Through her description of the illustrious lives of Sufi masters like Hadrat Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya in *Munis-ul-Arwah* (*The Master of Pure Souls*, Trans. Valiur Rahman & Mohammed Adil, 2015) and Mullah Shah Badakhshi in *Risala-i-Sahibiyah* (Trans. Sunil Sharma, 2020, unpublished), Jahanara emphasises the role of spirituality as soft power in spreading Mughal reign in India. This in turn coalesces with the advance of Islam in the subcontinent, and is thus positioned as the harbinger of a new civilisation. The princess’ visible role as a matriarch legitimising Mughal patriarchy has baffled romance writers across ages. This has resulted in umpteen pseudo-historical narratives infusing Jahanara’s life with sensational elements, none of which are corroborated by facts. *The Aviary* uses factual evidence to dismiss these works as creating only a palimpsest throwing no light either on Jahanara’s emancipated mind or on the contrapuntal readings of Mughal society that the hagiographies offer. Huq sees such attempts only as pandering to the Orientalist gaze. In this regard, her efforts at collecting translations of all these primary texts, and her intricate analyses of the masculine mode of the texts can be seen as contributing to new knowledge.

Chapter Four tells the story of Zeb-un-Nissa, one of the finest Indian poets to have written in Persian but never anthologised in any definitive volume. Beginning as the favourite of her father Aurangzeb for being a child prodigy, eventually his advisor in court matters, and finally incarcerated for life

in Salimgarh Fort for refusing to abide by royal diktats – the aviary metaphor assumes problematic dimensions with Zeb. Her collection of ghazals and a few ruba'is, *Divan-i-Makhlfi* (Trans. Lal & Westbrook, 1913; Trans. Smith, 2012), exudes passion and fervour hitherto unseen in the tradition. Simultaneously, Zeb-un-Nissa's experiments with poetic forms and her elevation of mundane longings to the level of the spiritual (Huq compares Zeb with the Bhakti poet Mirabai), all justify the "songbird" epithet that is used for her. In reception however, Zeb-un-Nissa remains truly doubly marginalised, both in dynastic politics and in her deserved claim to fame as poet.

The fifth chapter that deals with Habba Khatoon's songs and poetry is a challenge deftly handled within the rubric. In contrast to the other three writers as insiders of the harem albeit with varying degrees of challenges, Khatoon's widowhood and forlornness are a result of Mughal imperial ambitions. Of her impassioned life writing, Huq rightly notes that she presages the archetypal story of today's Kashmiri women whose lives are a protracted struggle at learning to live without their menfolk, who fall prey to either state terrorism or state 'action'. At a different philosophical level however, Khatoon's plaintive voice is often a mirror image of the Mughal women writers, for the safety net of privilege within the harem is at times no better than the vulnerability of being without. Khatoon's precarious existence and the resultant flow of sensuous poetry also echoes the lives and work of classical female poets of India who are glowing examples of resilience and hope. The oral tradition that has kept Habba's *lol* alive even in today's Kashmir embroiled in conflict, calls for sustained research on such traditions.

In concluding *The Aviary*, Huq argues for a position of ethnographic value to the texts she has taken up. This can proffer a position of postmodern alterity to much disinformation that prevails about these women writers. It can also contribute to a course-correction of the skewed cultural nationalist project that has besieged South Asia. It is important to note that the Islamic identity of these women, far from hindering their literary growth, actually gives variety to their thoughts and expressions. Finally, as a literary study that challenges mainstream history, the monograph has potential to redefine South Asian feminism by foregrounding the perseverance and autonomy that these authors exhibit. Their writings signal an unfaltering path to authentic representation of their characters.

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