

Women as Observers and Participants in Mughal Narrative Paintings

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Abstract: This study examines Mughal narrative paintings produced under imperial patronage, particularly during the reign of Akbar, as visual forms of storytelling that blend Persian, Indian, and Central Asian artistic traditions. While these works have been widely studied for their aesthetic and political significance, the representation of women has often been overlooked or limited to decorative roles. This research investigates the presence of women as both spectators and active participants within these visual narratives. Using a qualitative approach, it applies visual and iconographic analysis to selected Mughal manuscript paintings, including the Akbarnama. The study focuses on spatial positioning- such as balconies, interiors, and central scenes- along with gestures, gaze, and costume to interpret women's roles. It highlights how these elements suggest meaningful narrative functions rather than passive presence. The analysis is grounded in historical and cultural context, identifying recurring motifs and their symbolic relevance within the sociopolitical framework of the Mughal period. Hence, whether in ritual settings, festive scenarios or romantic narratives, the involvement of women in the Mughal paintings ensures that women serve as active participants in the narrative. Such an active role played by women in the scenes presented indicates clearly that their roles in such paintings were far from passive but rather served as a vital component of such scenes. By exploring varied settings such as courtly life, private spaces, and ceremonial scenes, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender, power, and representation in Mughal art.

Keywords: Court culture, gender representation, Mughal miniature painting, narrative painting, visual storytelling, and women in Mughal art

1. Introduction

Mughal miniature painting, which developed between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, could be considered one of the most complicated and intellectually challenging forms of art in early modern South Asia. The name "Mughal" derives from "Mongol" (30). Its creation was greatly facilitated by the patronage of the imperial court, which included rulers such as Akbar; his workshop included Persian painters and native artists whose cooperation created a unique blend of the artistic traditions of Persia, India, and Central Asia. It is known for its detailed execution and colorful palette, as well as complicated techniques of rendering space and perspective. Mughal painting has become a highly efficient form of India, which is narrated through various images. Scholars of Indian art supported the idea that courtesans served as prototypes for paintings because they were accessible to artists (25).





Figure 1 Women Watching Court Scenes from Balconies

Source: *Akbarnama* (1590–1595) (3)

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/mughal-paintings>

In (Figure 1), the women are portrayed watching the court scene from the raised balcony (jharokha). This establishes the dichotomy between the private world and the public one, but at the same time, it keeps the story alive. This positioning helps them become internal observers of the main event. Women are often portrayed either as peripheral figures, who do nothing more than look from their balconies at the event unfolding below, or as symbols of refinement and luxury. The partitioning of men and women within South Asian society was a sign of class and wealth from the nineteenth century (1).

Narrative paintings occupy an important place within the Mughal artistic tradition. They are also serving as a mode of visual representation for historical and literary texts and court proceedings. Illustrated manuscripts like the *Akbarnama* and the *Hamzanama* act as visual documents preserving history, political ideology, and culture. As a rule, narrative paintings combine several time moments into a unified scene in which a particular event or set of events unfolds in a certain order before the eyes of the viewer. By means of compositional technique, the artist tells his story. However, despite the wealth of the tradition, most Mughal painting tends to focus on the central role played by men – the kings, ministers, soldiers, and religious figures – as narrative actors. The harem or the private place of men and women is not only tended to assume the dominance of the visual field, but it also reduces the presence of women within Mughal paintings to mere decoration (34).

The present work aims to challenge these prevailing views by reconsidering the role of women in the narrative paintings of the Mughals. This research seeks to demonstrate that women in such paintings do not act as mere decorative elements but are crucial for creating the narrative meaning in the artwork. There are several ways in which the analysis of visual materials may offer an insight into the role of women in the construction of the meaning of images. One could consider a methodical approach whereby the analysis of images is based on qualitative research that takes into account such factors as composition, space, gesture, costumes and relational position. It was not until the nineteenth century that paintings of Mumtaz Mahal (ca. 1830) were mass-produced by Indian artists for British patrons (13).

Besides, in such paintings, the methods used within the framework of the research allow studying the representation of women visually and understanding that this process correlates with the concept of gender in the Mughal society, for British patrons. The main goal of the research lies in redefining the significance of women in Mughal narrative miniatures and emphasizing their crucial role as active contributors to the creation of the visual story. The purpose of the research is in the encouragement of rethinking traditional approaches to Mughal miniatures and the development of a holistic perception of these masterpieces regarding their diverse representations. Hence, the analysis of Mughal narrative miniatures can help discover the dynamics of communication between characters and depict women in the paintings (41).

Research Objectives

- To analyze the visual appearance of women in Mughal narrative painting.
- To investigate the role of women as observers in Mughal narrative painting compositions.
- To explore women's participation in narrative action.
- To interpret the symbolic and social meanings of female representation.
- To reassess Mughal visual narratives through a gender-aware perspective.

Research Questions

- How are women visually positioned as observers in Mughal narrative paintings?
- In what ways do women participate in the unfolding of narrative events?
- What narrative and symbolic functions do women perform?
- How do space, gaze, and gesture shape women's roles in these paintings?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In conducting this current study, the methodology used for researching into the representations of women in Mughal narrative paintings involves the adoption of a qualitative interpretive approach. This is because qualitative research approaches involve the use of techniques to investigate issues. As a result of this, there is no use of quantitative techniques like surveys, interviews, questionnaires, etc., which may not work effectively in the study of paintings. Interpretive research is suitable for investigating issues related to paintings, including those of miniatures, because of the multilayered nature of the art. In this study, the main methodological technique to be used would involve conducting a visual analysis. Such an analysis would include analyzing the following elements: composition, spatial organization, gaze, gestures, costumes, and others. For instance, in the analysis of composition, it would be possible to establish how different characters relate to each other within the composition and how the viewers' attention is directed through the painting. About spatial organization, one would find out where the women are placed in relation to the setting, narratives, and other characters within the painting.

The research shall be undertaken through selected narrative paintings of the Mughals featured in the illustrations of manuscripts like the *Akbarnama*, *Hamzanama*, *Razmnama*, and *Jahangirnama*. Each manuscript is a product of a distinct narrative context, from historical narratives, epics, to chronicles and biographies, thereby providing the researcher an opportunity to explore the position of women in different contexts. Iconography, which entails the recognition of symbols and the interpretation of their meaning within their socio-cultural context, serves as the theoretical framework for this research.

Women as Observers in Mughal Narrative Paintings

Visual Positioning of Female Observers

In many paintings of the Mughal tradition, it is common to see women gazing silently from their window or balcony openings onto the scenes taking place outside the frame of the image. This choice of location for female figures in the picture plane is not an arbitrary decision on the part of artists but is rather a conscious effort to portray women at a distance from the action, even while connecting them visually to the unfolding event through the positioning of their bodies in relation to it. Through such framing devices, which may include arches, windows, and screens, Mughal artists make the figure of the woman a witness to the key events happening beyond her field of vision. In this way, architecture creates boundaries separating the world of women inside and the outside world where men carry out most of their activities. Yet despite these boundaries, architecture also allows the presence of women in the narrative scene (32).



Figure 2 Emperor Akbar Receiving a Royal Visitor, captured by the eye of Women

Source: *Akbarnama*, (1590–1595) (3)

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451283>

In (Figure 2), the addition to being silent spectators, the women in these compositions are also active participants. Their gaze provides a contextual dimension to the event. The present image is a case in point, showing the portrayal of women stationed on architectural formations such as *jharokha* or terraces, observing the events taking place beneath them. Such an approach forms a composition wherein the women are placed in the upper portions or the enclosures of the painting. This creates a gap between the women and the event occurring in the middle portion. Nevertheless, the gazes of the women establish their connection with the happening event through their observation of specific activities or characters. For instance, in paintings (Figure 2), women observing from the balcony can intensify the emotions expressed by the event, either out of curiosity, anxiety, or adoration.

Moreover, the positioning of women plays a crucial role in the compositional balance of the painting. Many Mughal painters make use of the elevated positioning of women as a means of framing the event, behind the curtains, thereby establishing layers both vertically and horizontally in the painting. Such a layering technique allows for multiple perspectives to be present within curtains or without curtains, even sometimes doctors were blindfolded or forced to examine women from behind a curtain (15).

Additionally, the fact that there are female spectators makes for another aspect of mediated spectatorship. Not only is the viewer supposed to witness the event firsthand, but they are also supposed to imagine what it feels like for the women to witness the same event from the sidelines. By watching the women's reactions, gestures, and gaze, the

viewer might feel empathy, curiosity, and tension, which will make them more emotionally invested in the scene. Women in these paintings act as mediators between the viewer and the scene.

The Female Gaze

The role played by women's gaze in Mughal paintings can be considered an important component that contributes to both the visual and interpretive aspects of the paintings. Indeed, it is common for such women to watch political scenes, love scenes, and ceremonies taking place at a distance and thus being spectators and observers of what is happening, although not being an integral part of the main plot. In (Figure 3), there is an illustration of an affectionate encounter between a nobleman and a female sitting on a terrace. Two other women are watching the event, one from behind the couple and another from below at a lower architectural elevation. The arrangement is well planned to establish multiple levels of narrative storytelling. It shows that the women were freer; they did not have a task to do, and they had several attendants to serve them. Due to extreme wealth, they feel the passing time in gossiping and gazing as the Mughal Empire (1526-1858) was the wealthiest and longest Muslim dynasty to rule the Indian subcontinent (23).

In (Figure 2) main actors in the illustrations of the painting are the nobleman and the woman. Their actions show that they have something to say to each other, perhaps an offering or courtship ritual. The secondary actors are the two women watching the encounter. The Mughals were more affluent due in part to their abundant agrarian resources. The first woman is behind the couple, while the other is leaning forward from below. It seems that the second woman has a higher point of view than the first one. The first woman looks more serious compared to the second one, who seems to be smiling. She watches the encounter discreetly, unlike the other woman, who is openly looking.



Figure 3 Mughal Romantic Terrace Scene with Female Observers

Source: Mughal miniature painting, 16th–17th century (28)

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>

At personal and political meetings in imperial courts and diplomatic missions, harems, the females, who are usually positioned on balconies or other concealed places, watch attentively and carefully. A painting (Figure 3) contains a rare depiction of a Mughal ruler (often identified as Akbar in Akbarnama illustrations) in an intimate scene

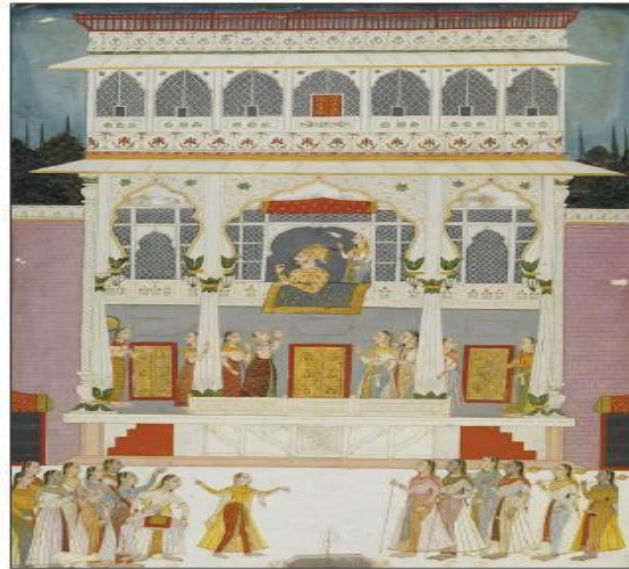
with a woman (38). They observe what is happening there with a hint of understanding of what is going on, and thus, they demonstrate awareness and perceptivity of the situation. In the scenes involving intimacy and fun, the women's gaze takes an even more vivid expression. They can express themselves using gestures, showing some emotion by observing others having fun or engaging in intimate activities. This way, they introduce another level of meaning to what is happening, which cannot necessarily be seen from the action alone. By doing so, they are interpreting the emotions involved and becoming a kind of interpreter of emotions. Some gazed women shared their experience about Akbar, that, unlike his Timurid ancestors, who accepted homosexuality and bisexuality, Akbar wanted to set an example for heterosexual relationships (4).

Moreover, in many paintings, the scenes of some ritual or ceremony are taking place, and the women's gaze adds to the significance of the moment. By being there and observing the events taking place, they show that they are also involved in the rituals as they add another layer of participation. Even if separated from other people by distance, they create connections between other zones because of their presence at the same time. Overall, the women's gaze in Mughal paintings is a very important element. Not only does it provide some subjectivism to the paintings, but it also gives women agency as their gaze suggests judgment, awareness, and knowledge of the situations presented.

Narrative Function of Observation

In the case of Mughal painting narratives, the figures who observe the unfolding events assume an equally vital position as far as helping viewers interpret the scene. In most instances, such figures appear either on the edges, in elevated areas, or even behind architectural structures. The gestures, the direction in which they look, and the body positions of the observers provide a basis for the viewer's navigation of the scene. It is important to note that observing figures in Mughal paintings, mostly women, helps the observer make sense of the scene. The importance of the narrative aspect of observation is highly significant because Mughal painting narrative scenes feature several events taking place in the same picture plane. In such works, viewers' eyes are directed along a specific pathway that the artist has created by incorporating several elements in the painting.

For instance, in (Figure 4), women who observe can be used to point out certain actions, such as ceremonies, meetings between people, or even a conflict in some situations. In addition to that, these female figures can be considered as representatives of an audience, since they watch the scene happening before them, just like the spectator himself does. Their presence in the painting gives additional emotional color to the scene and makes it more believable because the event takes place against the backdrop of social reality. Mughal paintings usually depicted various episodes of both courtly and private life. For example, the famous *The memoir of Gulbadan* (1523-1603) added below indicates that Indian dancing girls hired by the court exposed Mughal women to indigenous clothing, inspiring royal women to adopt local fashions (6).



Painting of Jharokha Darshan

Figure 4 Jharokhaa Darshan

Source: Mughal miniature painting, 18th century (30)

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>

The miniature painting (Figure 4) provides another good example of the importance of the figures of observers in narrative compositions. In this composition, women occupy the borders of the scene and stand on high architectural structures such as jharokhas or behind the walls. Their specific placement in the composition, as well as their body language, the woman's conical head dress and long tunic represent her Central Asian origin (26). It helps to organize the picture compositionally, guiding viewers' eye movement and creating visual links between different parts of the painting. The complexity of Mughal paintings lies in their multifaceted narrative, which often includes several consecutive scenes. Thus, the presence of observing figures becomes an integral part of the creation of a meaningful composition, where all the details interact.

Furthermore, women as witnesses lend authenticity and credibility to the event that is represented in the image. The fact that women are present implies that what is shown in the image takes place in the social world of the painting. It adds to the sense that the event is witnessed, lived through, and recognized. Thus, the role of the witness in Mughal narrative painting can be considered another element of visual documentation that aims at depicting historical events in a realistic manner, which is characteristic of Mughal manuscript paintings.

The fact that women act as witnesses to the event shown in the image (Figure 4) provides another important dimension to the narration. The way in which the women react to the event gives additional information about the social and psychological aspects of life. For example, their attention, curiosity, or contemplation make the scene more realistic and demonstrate how various members of society can perceive different events. Therefore, observation is an important narrative technique used in Mughal paintings that adds meaning and structure to the representation of events depicts a woman of undoubted power, and it is unprecedented in either Indian or Islamic art (10).

Women as Participants in Mughal Narrative Paintings

Even though the depiction of the females in Mughal narrative paintings is that of an observer, there are several instances where they are seen actively taking part in different narratives. Besides being mere observers, they engage in different practices that relate to court life, domestic duties, rituals, and emotions. The women in Mughal paintings have a great deal of importance in the narrative process.

Women in Courtly and Domestic Narratives

In the case of Mughal narrative painting, (Figure 2 and 3) depict the domestic space as a critical environment where women not only exist but play an active role in creating the everyday routine. In the palace interior, garden space, and chamber space, women are regularly portrayed in situations involving conversations, playing instruments, dressing up, and caring for children. These environments offer a private space in opposition to the public or political space controlled by men, highlighting an alternative space of interaction equally essential for storytelling. Women are regularly portrayed sitting together, communicating with each other, suggesting an extensive web of social ties existing within the harem. This interaction between women is represented visually through small gestures of leaning towards each other, sharing items, or gazing at each other intently, indicating their communicative and emotional bond. They controlled substantial resources, and they often used those resources to further their names or their lives (2).

Activities during leisure time also form an important aspect in the portrayal of the narratives. It is common to see women enjoying themselves by listening to music, dancing or relaxing in a space that has been meticulously arranged for their enjoyment. Such paintings are not merely decorative because they contribute to building the tone and tempo of the narrative. The presence of musical instruments, servants and a lavish setting helps create the elegance of court life while also allowing women to participate in the festivities. Caring roles also point to the involvement of women in family narratives. In some paintings, women are portrayed in caring roles, taking care of children or other members of the family. Such images serve to give authenticity to the narrative through an element of human touch.

It is also worth noting that the mentioned domestic scenes can be included in a wider narrative framework. For example, these scenes may complement and parallel the political and ceremonial events to make the story more wide-ranging. The scenes mentioned above are those shown in the and other courtly manuscripts, a full-fledged, holistic depiction of Mughal society can be made because both the private and public spheres merge within one image. Another significant aspect that is worth paying attention to in the depicted interior scenes is that they combine the ideas of restriction and agency. Even though women live in closed areas, these places are very well developed and actively socialized. Persian art specialists suggest that this painting is an idealized image of a historical woman (26).

The use of decoration, carpets, and pavilions creates a sense of dynamics and depth, which means that women's domestic spaces are organically connected to the cultural background. Therefore, it becomes evident that women presented in courtly and domestic narratives are important contributors to Mughal culture because they participate in many activities, such as conversation, leisure, child-rearing, and socializing. Women become an integral part of the described narrative space, and their actions help develop its storyline through emotions and conversations.

Women in Ritual, Festive, and Romantic Contexts

The portrayal of women in Mughal narratives occurs in ritual, festive, and romantic contexts, whereby the presence of women becomes indispensable in forming aesthetic and emotional aspects within the paintings. During weddings, religious, musical, and erotic celebrations, the woman is involved in a context that enables her involvement in the event; her involvement becomes necessary in forming the narrative story. It may have been given as gifts to possible suitors and their families. The involvement of women in rituals and celebrations is portrayed through their involvement in meaningful social and cultural practices such as weddings, parades, and religious ceremonies. Through this portrayal, it is clear that the role of women in social and cultural traditions cannot be ignored, and their involvement in rituals and ceremonies plays a crucial role in forming the narrative story.

Women's involvement in celebrations also serves to enhance their presence and active involvement. Likewise, (Figure 4) includes instances where the context is a festive one, such as a musical gathering (mehfil), performance of dance, and festival, and where the woman is depicted singing, dancing, or even involved in other activities that are characterized by action and interaction. The depiction usually involves movement and rhythm using flowing robes, music, and instruments, as well as other forms of body language. In addition, women's role as active participants in romantic themes has been seen to play an important role in the portrayal of women. Romantic depictions include contexts where the setting involves terraces or gardens and where women are depicted as active participants in

romantic activities through various gestures and actions. The objects in the woman's hands are also important because they are symbols of regalia that can be traced back to the Timurids (5). Women are shown as being actively involved as central figures in the act of romance or in supporting acts where they become companions or facilitators of romance.

Moreover, roles played by women in such scenarios tend to serve the purpose of bridging narratives. Women serve the purpose of connecting the different segments of the narrative in a composition. In many cases in Mughal art, several events occur at once in one frame, and women act as links in making sense of these events by connecting them either through actions, space occupied, or themes. In addition to serving as narrative bridges, women also add an important element of emotional tone to the scene. For instance, the emotions of women in the (Figure 3) paintings contribute greatly to the emotional tone of the scene through such means as expressions and postures adopted.

Agency through Gesture and Interaction

Gesture and Interaction are some of the most interesting elements that show the power of agency in Mughal painting narratives. Although the women may not be the main focal point of the painting, the gestures made by their bodies in terms of body posture, hand gestures, and direction reveal how active they are within the narration. These gestures are rarely coincidental because they serve as visual codes communicating intention, emotions, and power. The gestures can be pointing at someone, giving something to another person, receiving something from someone else, or even turning around to face another individual. In all these cases, they indicate an important act of communication and decision-making. The women are usually depicted interacting with other women and sometimes men in conversation.

This is an especially important characteristic of these types of gestures. Women are often presented in company, with interaction becoming an important element of the artwork. This can include shared eye contact, movement, or gestures to establish a network of interactions that help frame the painting. In some cases, one gesture, such as raising a hand or looking toward something else, will draw the viewer's attention to a particular part of the picture. Le has repeatedly written about the idealization of Mughal portraits (24). He also highlights the formal aspects of Portrait of a Mughal Woman in portraits (16).



Figure 5 Dancing Women in a Mughal Courty Setting

Source: Mughal Miniature Painting, c. (18th century)
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>

The above-mentioned Mughal miniature (Figure 5) is a depiction of three ladies dressed very elaborately in a synchronized dancing performance held against a backdrop of an architectural landscape with arched architecture and

bordered by ornate decorative elements with flowers. Thus, the theme of the depicted scenery can be defined as a court mehfil where music and dance performances play a significant role. In the depicted dance performance, ladies make specific poses, which convey the movement of their bodies and show their engagement in the music performance. Besides, ladies are portrayed in elaborate dresses, wearing many ornaments and showing elegant postures, which signifies the elegance of the depicted women.

Akbar's historian wrote, [a] woman on reaching the limit of her period of fertility, when [her] courses stop, should no longer wish for her husband. Youth and fertility are two characteristics that go hand in hand, and the ideal Mughal woman possesses both qualities. (30). When female viewers are repeatedly exposed to such images, they are visually informed of what makes the ideal woman in their society. These images are akin to contemporary fashion magazines or advertisements, which reiterate the standards of an elite circle and impose predetermined ideals on society at large (11).

While in other paintings women act as spectators rather than performers, this painting depicts women who are actively engaged in some activities, such as dancing. Moreover, there are no men in the depicted scenery, which signifies a purely female world of a court mehfil where only women act and participate in cultural activities. At that, the floral border used for depicting women dancing adds aesthetic value to the overall scenery and signifies refinement and harmony, which are inherent qualities of the Mughal artistic style. Gesture is used even more prominently to emphasize the nature of interaction in Mughal paintings. In some paintings, the women are depicted in interactions with men. They could be holding something out, reacting to an act of authority, or participating in the rituals at court, indicating that they play a role in these processes despite being within hierarchies. Portrait of a Mughal Woman represents an ideal woman rather than an observed likeness of a specific individual (9).

Therefore, it can be stated that agency in Mughal narrative paintings need not necessarily manifest in active forms but can be subtly conveyed through gestures and interactions. The gestures of the women convey, influence, and connect, thus becoming an example of how subtle and effective the manifestation of agency can be within the realm of visual culture. The enchanting subject is illustrated with the same conventions as a Mughal portrait; her entire body faces one direction, her youthful face is in profile, and her body appears in three-quarter profile. Her skin is a powdery white color. Her face has discrete features: a thin, high-arched brow, brown eyes that resemble enchant.

Case Studies of Selected Paintings

The purpose of this analysis will be to consider selected examples of Mughal paintings that reveal the role of women in the composition, not only as observers but as active participants as well. Visual analysis of these specific cases will help to explore the diversity of women's roles in the compositions and the way it influences the meaning, structure, and interpretation of paintings.

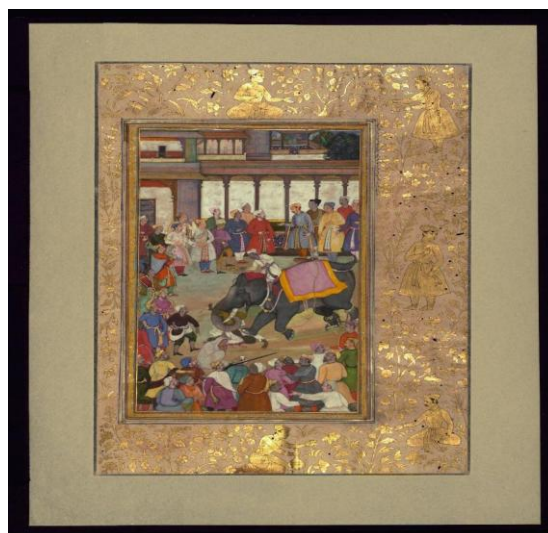


Figure 6 Akbar Controlling the Mad Elephant Hawai

Source: Mughal miniature painting (18th century)
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>

The composition of (Figure 6) contains powerful visual elements which show Emperor Akbar controlling an elephant to demonstrate his imperial strength and masculine authority. The scene shows no women because it presents a different visual depiction than other Mughal paintings which show women watching from balconies and behind closed doors. The absence of women in this space presents important meaning because it strengthens traditional gender roles which separate public political spaces from private home environments. The artwork shows male supremacy while it shows the minor status of women in political stories that occur at high tension. In (Figure 6), the scenes showing Emperor Akbar viewing a hunt for capturing wild elephants, which can be frequently seen in illustrated books such as *Akbarnama*, the overall composition is filled with dynamism, tension, and power represented by the emperor himself. In the composition, he is usually shown in an elevated position and watching the dangerous action taking place below him. However, within this composition full of action and energy, women are positioned separately from the scene; they stand on elevated architectural spaces such as balconies or terraces. Burns statement is important because by the reign of Akbar (r.1556-1605) (Figure 6), the third and perhaps the most influential emperor, the Mughals saw themselves as Indians and not as foreigners (8). Despite being far away from what takes place below (Figure 6), these women still look actively involved in the scene as they observe it. It can be concluded that the women play the role of the secondary spectator in the scene since they are looking at what is happening below.

In the painting (Figure 7) entitled *Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings*, a different type of narrative takes place in terms of symbolism and allegory. In this scene, Jahangir is presented as preferring spiritual supremacy over the world, in contrast to other rulers. The scene consists of a strict composition with a hierarchical approach that expresses ideological principles. Just because Shah Jahan believes the image resembles him, however, does not mean that it is not glamorized. When Shah Jahan was emperor, he wanted images that were perfected according to his standards (31).

Nevertheless, despite the predominance of males in the visual field and the role played by men in it, there are also some female characters who play an important role as participants of the composition. Even when female figures are presented in a rather decorative manner, they contribute to building a visual system that is meaningful and symbolic. With the help of allegories, symbols, and attendants, feminine characters enrich the painting aesthetically and semantically. Thus, it can be stated that women become an element of a larger whole rather than actors of the plot. Shah Jahan period, with a name to her face, facing right, is standing in a field holding up a book in her right hand, dressed in a transparent yellow costume over gold brocade trousers. The sky is green with gold and colored clouds at the top (18).



Figure 7 Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings

Source: Bichitr. (c. 1615–1618) (7)

<https://asia.si.edu>

The Mughal miniature above (Figure 7) shows Emperor Jahangir seated on a highly ornate throne under a canopy with all the figures hierarchically arranged around him. Here, Jahangir offers a book to a Sufi shaikh, signifying that he favors spiritual leadership over political power. Around him stand various kings and rulers, possibly even Europeans, indicating the political significance of the Mughal dynasty currently.. The miniature painting is very symmetrical and symbolic in its composition. Jahangir is shown to be bigger in size compared to all other figures present in the miniature painting, and he is also encircled by the divine halo, denoting his semi-divine and supreme powers. This miniature painting clearly indicates how skillful and talented the Mughals were in creating narrative painting within a single frame. The queen wears a short-sleeved dress with trousers, which are elements of Persian dress adopted by the Mughals (33).

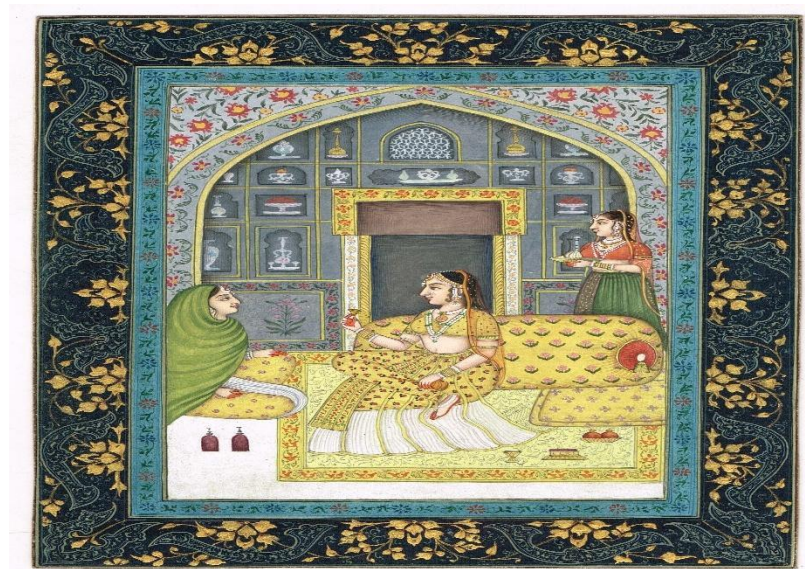


Figure 8 Palace Interior Scene: Women in Conversation

Source: Victoria and Albert Museum, mid-18th century, Mughal School (39)

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/mughal-paintings>

Painting like (Figure 8) is the depiction of a scene inside the palace in which ladies are conversing and engaging in other activities. It is noteworthy that the scene is set up in the zenana. In addition, the use of arches, columns, and elaborately designed walls indicates the intimacy of the place. It also has some spectators of curious and lusty women who have long braided hair curving along a woman's back, mimicking the movement of a snake, an animal that represents fertility in Indian culture (35). The ladies are gathered in small clusters, either sitting or reclining in various postures. The body language of the ladies includes leaning towards each other, looking at each other, or holding objects in their hands. Body language reveals the fact that the ladies are engaged in some form of communication and interaction. Mughal women were not veiled, moved about freely in public, traveled abroad frequently, participated in sports, and indulged in leisurely activities as they pleased (19).

3. RESULT

Women are found in various themes in Mughal narrative paintings, such as court scenes, domestic life, ritual events, festive occasions, and romantic episodes. It is evident from their frequent appearance in multiple themes that

women play a fundamental role in the art tradition and thus cannot be considered marginal figures. They are central to the portrayal of Mughal culture as a whole and provide both cultural value and narrative depth to the tradition. In addition, women not only serve the purpose of representation but also perform functions of observation, participation, and narrative structuring. As observers, women assist the viewer in looking at the scene in a particular way; as participants, women perform certain activities that advance the narrative; and as narrative organizers, women frame the artwork. The use of primary colors, bold contours, and compartmentalized narratives are key characteristic of Mughal manuscript painting (12).

The depiction of women in Mughal paintings adds to their social realism. Since the pictures represent not only interactions between people but also depict a particular period and place, women's roles cannot be overlooked. Women are portrayed while performing various activities in different settings. In doing so, the painter presents a broader picture of what was going on in those days and adds credibility to his painting. Mughal women conform to an archetype yet have individualized physical features (24). The recognition of women as active players in their narrative contributes to a more insightful study of the visual art of the era. Women depicted in Mughal narrative paintings are not marginal but play a crucial role in the construction of meaning. Not only do they provide a sense of realism, but they are also key to establishing connections between characters and creating tension (40).

4. DISCUSSION

The discussions they hold together create continuity in terms of narration and engagement among one another. In such instances, the domestic environment becomes significant because it is here that culture, emotions, and interactions take place. Although there are no overt actions by women that involve politics, they are still important because they emphasize interpersonal relations and day-to-day events. The episode of gossiping is special because here everyone indulges in sharing their views about their husbands. Through these (Figure 8) illustrations, the artists of the Mughal Empire demonstrate the presence of women who are key players within the context of the court. This painting is also significant because the Mughals openly celebrated both Hindu and Muslim holidays, an indication of their diverse, cosmopolitan society (14).

Unlike other paintings and drawings that present women in a passive role, the illustrations found in the Hamzanama provide an exciting alternative. It is important to note that Hamzanama is well-known for its storytelling techniques and use of dramatic illustrations. There are many instances, like (Figure 8), wherein women are depicted as active participants in the story. These women in illustrations for Hamzanama might depict the activity involved in their actions; they can react to danger or act on something in the story, or interact with another figure present in the story as well. The female has a slim waist and tapering limbs, which are characteristics that show cultural continuity within Indian art (20).

Women in the Mughal paintings were often painted within controlled settings like balconies, terraces, and interiors. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that rather than being confined and thus non-existent within these images, women maintain a presence that is both controlled and significant. In fact, by utilizing selective visibility, women were able to engage in active observation and even participation in the creation of narratives associated with the Mughal Empire. Even though this image appears “miniature” by modern standards, the Mughals never saw their paintings as small. Compared to earlier rectangular palm-leaf manuscripts, Mughal paintings are much bigger (37). The canvas page depicts the tantric of the scene (36).

Female figures also perform an emotional function within the artwork, since they may convey the emotions of characters through facial expressions, gestures, or other forms of interaction. The female subjects still have rounded breasts, a slim waist, rounded hips, and tapering limbs. However, the figure's limbs are rendered with greater volume, and the abdomen appears more pronounced, suggesting a deviation from the idealized representation which is compared to the painting (Figure 8) and other portraits of Mughal women (17). This emotional aspect of females is very helpful in providing a deeper understanding of what is happening in the painting, making the depicted events more immersive. Thus, female figures can be considered as emotional anchors that make the painting more humane and give it life.

Furthermore, women are internal observers who provide visual stability to the artwork. Specifically, when showing several events or interactions between characters, the placement of female figures allows adding coherence to the painting. The Jahangiri artists accepted the physical reality of the universe as they perceived it and attempted to record its unique inner character and outward appearance. Shah Jahan's painters present, instead, an idealized or perfected image of the world (22).

Contribution of the Study

- The most important contribution of this research lies in providing a new interpretation of Mughal narrative painting, which emphasizes gender issues rather than following the mainstream approach in which female characters are not given much weightage. Rather than considering visual images as being composed of only male characters or focusing only on political aspects, this work provides a new insight into the role played by women in Mughal paintings.
- This research contributes by broadening the art historical discourse in Mughal painting from an essentially male-oriented perspective. Earlier studies of Mughal painting have emphasized royal power, heroism, and male agency. In contrast, this study brings to light the variety of roles of women in different situations in Mughal paintings. The inclusion of the perspective of women in visual history adds value to its interpretation.
- Importantly, this study shows the role of women as storytellers in the Mughal paintings. Through the gaze, gestures, and interactions, women contribute to the creation of meanings in visual historiography. This study has enriched the visual interpretation of Mughal painting through the consideration of the presence of women in Mughal paintings.
- The integration of an approach that is sensitive to the issue of gender, combined with iconography and visual methods, would lead to many more paths in future studies. This shows that artistic expression was greatly impacted by social and cultural structures as well as gender relations in the Mughal period.
- Eventually, this research will add to the understanding of the Mughal narrative paintings. It emphasizes the significance of considering different viewpoints in history and calls for future researchers to explore various approaches in studying historical artistic traditions.

5. CONCLUSION

Through this study, it has been established that the women characters portrayed in the narrative paintings of the Mughal era play an important role both as observers and participants in a narrative. Unlike the conventional view, which asserts that these women are merely decorative and do not contribute anything meaningful to the stories being told, in fact, they have a crucial role in shaping narratives. As observers, they create the narrative's background by establishing a point of view within the story. The results of this paper have many important suggestions that could prove helpful in the development of future scholarly work in the subject. The emphasis on the role of women would be valuable in further exploration of the issues of gender and art history in early modern South Asia.

Limitations of the Study

- The research utilizes a specialized set of Mughal narrative paintings which restricts the study to that specific collection while actual Mughal artistic output remains unexamined. The investigation should be understood through its particular artworks which it investigates because these works do not represent the complete artistic heritage of the time.
- The research uses qualitative visual and iconographic analysis as its main method while it fails to include archival materials which consist of historical documents and production records and patronage details.
- The research fails to present a complete understanding of the social and economic factors which affected artistic production during that time because it does not explore these institutional contexts. The study cannot

investigate the role of women as patrons and artists because there are not enough available sources to support such research.

Scope for Future Research

- The research investigates narrative artwork from the Mughal era which includes illustrated manuscripts such as the Akbarnama. The study analyzes how women are portrayed in artworks through visual analysis and iconographic study which includes the assessment of artistic composition and visual effects and the analysis of symbolic content.
- The research establishes a wider artistic framework for Mughal paintings through its comparative study of Indo-Islamic artistic traditions which includes Persian art to examine how different cultures represented women. The research project provides multiple research pathways which enable researchers to investigate women's involvement in Mughal artistic production. The research will explore how women from the Mughal court sponsored artists and which artistic themes they supported. The study will investigate how female artists participated in Mughal workshops when historical records allow for research.
- The combination of gender studies and cultural history with art history creates an interdisciplinary method which enhances our understanding of how women are represented. The analysis links narrative paintings through two different painting styles which expand the research base to include all Mughal artistic works which will produce more detailed and complex findings.

Author Contribution Statement

Anshika Mahawar: Conceptualized and designed the study, conducted the literature review, performed the bibliometric and systematic review analyses, interpreted the findings, and prepared the original manuscript draft.

Dr. Poonam Rani: Supervised the research work, contributed to the interpretation of results, critically reviewed and edited the manuscript, and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors report there is no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Statements

Ethical approval was not required for this study as per institutional guidelines. However, all ethical standards were followed, and informed consent was obtained from participants.

Declaration of AI Assistance

The authors declare this manuscript was prepared without the assistance of generative AI. All conceptualization, analysis, interpretation and writing were developed independently by the authors.

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