

RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Journeying Beyond Boundaries: Travel and the Construction of Female Subjectivity in Ruby Lal's *Vagabond Princess*

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Abstract

This paper examines Ruby Lal's "*Vagabond Princess: The Great Adventures of Gulbadan*" (2024) as a revisionist intervention in Mughal historiography, reconstructing female subjectivity through the prism of movement rather than confinement. In contrast to conventional histories, which typically locate Mughal women within the physical and ideological confines of the harem, Lal brings to light Gulbadan Begum, the daughter of Babur, the half-sister of Humayun, and the aunt of Akbar, as a traveller, observer, and historian whose journeys actively shaped her knowledge, voice, and historical authority. This paper examines three defining moments of movement in Gulbadan's life as presented by Lal: her childhood migration from Kabul to Hindustan, her prolonged confinement within Akbar's imperial harem, and her extraordinary four-year pilgrimage to Arabia for the Hajj, a journey marked by shipwreck and diplomatic exile. It argues that travel in Lal's biography is more than a personal experience; it functions as an epistemic practice that enables Gulbadan to develop the observational insight necessary to compose the '*Humayun-nama*.' By examining '*Vagabond Princess*' through the lenses of feminist historiography and feminist travel-writing theory, this paper argues that Gulbadan's subjectivity emerges through movement across geographical, political, and textual boundaries, including the silences created by the missing pages of her manuscript.

Keywords: Ruby Lal; Gulbadan Begum; Female Subjectivity; Feminist Historiography; Travel and Mobility.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, Mughal women have held an enigmatic place in the public imagination

and even in historical texts, often portrayed as secluded within their harems, veiled and divorced from any involvement in the empire's

political or intellectual life. While many scholars have established that such an image has not been formed based on primary sources about Mughal society but rather on the speculations of early modern travellers who did not have access to the spaces that they described, Ruby Lal's work on Mughal domestic culture has highlighted how European observers, unable to penetrate the space of the harem, created highly eroticized images of women who became marginal and anonymous figures in colonial discourse. *Ruby Lal's Vagabond Princess: The Great Adventures of Gulbadan* (2024) enhances revisionist historiography by elucidating the life of Gulbadan Begum as a historically pivotal figure whose mobility, authorship, and intellectual agency challenge traditional narratives of Mughal women's seclusion.

Gulbadan Begum (1523–1603), the progeny of Mughal founder Babur and the half-sibling of Emperor Humayun, holds a distinctive status in Mughal literary history as the author of the *Humayun-nama*, the sole surviving historical prose narrative composed by a Mughal woman. In the late 1580s, Emperor Akbar commissioned an official history of the Mughal Empire and ordered his aunt, Gulbadan Begum, then in her sixties, to document her memories of Humayun's reign. The *Humayun-nama* provides a remarkable depiction of the early Mughal court from a female viewpoint. Utilising this exceptional literature and additional archive materials, Ruby Lal reconstructs both the events of Gulbadan's life and the experiences that influenced her as an astute observer and historian. Lal thinks that the basis of Gulbadan's historical awareness stemmed from her enduring experiences of mobility. At six years old, Gulbadan journeyed from Kabul to Agra as Babur solidified Mughal authority in Hindustan. Reared amid the itinerant culture of the early Mughal court, she observed the shift from a nomadic political system to the more established customs of the Persianate imperial realm. Following Babur's demise and Akbar's ascension to the throne,

Gulbadan entered the imperial harem, where her movement was more strictly controlled. Yet she maintained her intellectual and social prominence at court. Nonetheless, she maintained a profound affinity for the nomadic lifestyle of her youth. This yearning culminated in her extraordinary four-year trip to Mecca, performed with Akbar's consent, with other Mughal ladies. The voyage, characterised by disaster, diplomatic strife, and extended exile, became a transformative event that profoundly influenced her worldview and subsequently shaped her historical writing.

This study uses Lal's narrative of childhood migration, incarceration in the harem, the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), and exile as a foundation for theorising subject development. This paper claims that the above-mentioned moves serve not only as a means of providing biographical information but also as modes of producing knowledge that allow Gulbadan to become an author of a chronicle at a later stage of her life. No Mughal lady achieved this feat. The paper comprises three additional sections devoted to the theoretical and historiographic background of this argument.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Revisionist historiography of the Mughal harem.**

Lal's interpretation of Gulbadan is part of a broader trend in feminist historiography of the Mughals, which Lal has helped create. In her book entitled "Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World" (2005), Lal argues against received notions of "the harem," which have been conceived of as an eternal site of erotic activity, totally divorced from the public sphere of politics. Lal situates herself within the larger feminist historiography of the public/private dichotomy and draws on Gulbadan's writing to argue that there was no separation of the private and public spheres during Mughal times. This line of reasoning fits within the scholarship on the early modern Islamic world, especially

Leslie Peirce's work on the Ottoman imperial harem, which reconfigures the harem from a secluded setting behind the scenes of male power to a contested political space. Vagabond Princess could be seen as the biographical conclusion to this project in history: while the former focused on structure, the latter personalises it in a single female's experience.

- **Travel, mobility, and gendered knowledge.**

The second set of literature to consider concerns travel and mobility more generally, in relation to gendered authority. Travel writing as a literary genre has been subject to feminist critiques for some time because of the notion that the practice of movement and observation was something of a male privilege; when women did travel and write about it, their work was anomalous or was seen as a more domestic version of what travel writing really meant. Lal's biography challenges this assumption about travel writing because Gulbadan's hajj marks the point at which she becomes fully a historian, a "keen observer and chronicler of her age," as one reviewer noted.

As pointed out in Kirkus Reviews, Lal brings Gulbadan's account "to the literary level it justly deserves, giving proper credit to the author of a bold and unfathomable chronicle that has been ignored for too long by modern historians." It is important to stress at this point the methodological relevance of the praise given by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who defines this book as a strongly feminist work focusing on the making of archives and the freedom and intellectual development of certain Mughal women, using the *mujawir*, or the "vagabond," as a metaphoric-conceptual device.

- **The archive, the missing pages, and disputed female authorship.**

A third group of studies addresses feminist historiography, which aims to reconstruct women's voices within problematic archives. The archive in question plays a vital

role in Vagabond Princess, where some of Gulbadan's pages are missing, either accidentally or intentionally removed by those who did not want the princess to voice her opinions. The story of these missing pages becomes the central theme of Lal's book. Reviewers have interpreted the missing part of the archive not as a barrier to the book but as part of its methodology. According to Madhumita Mazumdar (Telegraph), "Lal weaves the biography in such a way that archival traces of different nature form a kind of chain leading to unexpected conclusions, which discloses the complex processes of creation of historical narrative itself." The review article by Sara Wheeler in the Wall Street Journal presents this process of recovery using language borrowed from Adrienne Rich, emphasising the need to decode the cryptic messages of women from the past. The scholarship in this area indicates that the lack in Gulbadan's text is not merely a lack of textual information but rather indicative of the political importance of women's writing in the Mughal Court. This point will be made in this essay regarding subjectivity.

- **Critical reception and the gap this paper addresses**

Commentators have focused on the merits of the plot and the archival reconstruction of Vagabond Princess without engaging in substantive theoretical analysis of travel as a conceptual lens for understanding feminist issues. The Asian Review of Books highlights Lal's excellent narrative technique but also observes that the book offers relatively few of Gulbadan's own thoughts, noting that the reconstructions require some conjecture since the source material is limited. Some other reviews have highlighted the subversion of the stereotype of Mughal women being restricted to their homes by presenting Gulbadan's journey as an expression of bravery and a search for freedom. That which is lacking in this interpretation is a critical and sustained account of how travel functions as a tool for constructing

the self through the stages of Gulbadan's life: displacement in childhood, harem isolation, pilgrimage, exile, and writing. This paper aims to fill this lacuna by interpreting the structure of Lal's narrative as an argument about the connection between mobility and female epistemic agency in early modern Mughal society.

Research Problem

By reinforcing the political agency, mobility, and intellectual engagement of Mughal women and critiquing Orientalist notions of isolation, revisionist history has transformed our perception of the Mughal harem. Gulbadan Begum's life and works can be better understood when viewed through the lens of female subjectivity and travel. Lal has already shown that the "private" life in the Mughal world had always been intertwined with the "public" and that women of the elite were politically active even while being within the harem. Still, the structural point that has been made refers to where the women acted rather than how their travels helped them develop their skills of observing, interpreting, and writing history in the end. Critical readings of Vagabond Princess have focused on the narrative skillfulness and archival detection practised by Mazumdar in her book, treating it more as a self-reflective exploration of its own creative process than as an analysis of the travel itself. This paper examines the portrayal of three critical junctures in Vagabond Princess, namely Gulbadan Begum's childhood migration, her life in the imperial harem, and her journey to Mecca. It takes a more holistic view of her travels, examining how they fit together to shape her historical awareness, authorial identity, and capacity for keen observation, all of which she would later use to compose the *Humayun-nama*. The fact that Gulbadan's original manuscript was partially destroyed, perhaps due to censorship by authorities hesitant to publish her version, raises the additional question of how subjectivity may survive while exploring patriarchal archives.

METHODOLOGY

This research takes a qualitative interpretive approach located at the crossroads of life writing, travel studies, literary criticism, and feminist historiography. Instead of trying to piece together Gulbadan Begum's life story from Persian archives, this article looks at Ruby Lal's *Vagabond Princess: The Great Adventures of Gulbadan* (2024) and how it reimagines the connection between female subjectivity, historical authorship, and travel. Through careful textual analysis, this study delves into three pivotal moments in Gulbadan Begum's life: her childhood migration from Kabul to Hindustan, her time spent in the imperial harem, and her journey to Mecca, to illustrate how these interrelated events shaped her historical awareness and narrative power.

For its interpretation of mobility as a bodily experience and an epistemic process, the research draws on feminist historiography, feminist travel-writing theory, spatial theory, and archival studies. To analyse space, mobility, archival recovery, and the historical agency of women, the main theoretical framework draws on the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Michel de Certeau, Leslie Peirce, Mary Louise Pratt, Sara Mills, Doreen Massey, and Ruby Lal. Further, to put Lal's work in context within modern historiographical discourse, we consider academic assessments of *Vagabond Princess* that have been published in *Kirkus*, *Asian Review of Books*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Telegraph*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

This work examines how Lal employs narrative techniques to re-create Gulbadan Begum as a historian, observer, and traveller. We focus on how Gulbadan's literary and historical identity is shaped by archival silences and the missing elements of the *Humayun-nama*, as well as the link between movement, memory, and historical narrative.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper draws on five overlapping bodies of theory to read the relationship between travel and subjectivity in *Vagabond Princess*.

1. Feminist historiography and the public/private dichotomy

In her methodology, as presented in *Domesticity and Power*, Lal herself provides the basic assumption for this paper: the Mughal domestic realm cannot be studied using the public/private dichotomy. This has been elaborated through comparisons of studies, for example, the research conducted by Leslie Peirce on the Ottoman Empire's harem, in which women's domestic spaces have also been viewed as politically constitutive rather than marginal. The paper builds on this concept and suggests that Gulbadan's mobility does not constitute an exception to the confinements of womanhood.

2. Travel writings and gendered mobility.

The "contact zone" theory by Mary Louise Pratt, which is concerned with understanding the areas where there is an asymmetric encounter but one where each side contributes to the making of the identity of the other, can be used as the basis for interpreting Gulbadan's hajj journey as a space of encounter where identity is created as opposed to being experienced. Sara Mills' criticism of the genre of travel writings, which is based on the idea that the genre has traditionally been male-oriented and focused on conquest, presents another perspective; her hajj experience, according to the paper, challenges this convention because she observes the area.

3. Theories of the spatiality of the subject.

In this respect, one can refer to Michel de Certeau's separation between "the map" and "the tour." While the former concept stands for an abstract vision of space, the latter represents the practice of movement that shapes space in the process of narration. Thus, it becomes possible to interpret the formation of

Gulbadan's status as a historian not in terms of her perspective on space but as an effect of travel. Moreover, one can draw on Doreen Massey's feminist geography, which rejects the linear connection between space and identity and interprets identity as the co-production of space.

4. Archive theory and the problem of the female voice.

Gayatri Spivak's seminal question of the possibility of speaking for the subaltern through colonial and patriarchal archives is pertinent here in an inverted form: Gulbadan speaks in her own narrative, but parts of her narrative are absent, perhaps because the authorities did not wish to give voice to the princess. Spivak's description of the book as dealing with "the making of archives" locates this issue at the heart of Lal's project. This theoretical framework is used in the paper to demonstrate that the absence of a part from Gulbadan's work is not a flaw of the archive but a piece of historical data.

5. Life writing of women and relational selfhood.

Building on feminist autobiography theory's claim that self-narrative by women has traditionally been relational and situated within familial and community networks in contrast to the individualistic approach of masculine autobiographies, the paper analyses Gulbadan's *Humayun-nama*, which is based on the lives of male members of her family and was requested by her nephew to be written.

All of these theoretical approaches enable the paper to consider travel in *Vagabond Princess* as a historiographical statement (Lal's argument regarding the agency of Mughal women), a generic intervention (feminist re-narrativization of masculinist travel writing), a spatial practice (movement as a means of identity construction), and an archival issue (partial preservation and partial loss of subjectivity).

CONCLUSION

This study argues that Gulbadan Begum's subjectivity is not restored by a single moment of emancipation from the harem but rather by the many excursions she undergoes throughout her life. The journey of her childhood from Kabul to Hindustan exposed her at a young age to the nomadic and observant nature of the court of the first Mughals, her decades spent in the institution of Akbar's harem signifying a restricted yet still active form of mobility, through which arises her yearning for the wandering life she had in her childhood; and finally, her pilgrimage to Arabia, her first sea journey to a foreign land on a voyage of pilgrimage, granted by Akbar himself, which was cut short because of political disputes over the behavior of the women and extended due to shipwreck in the Red Sea. Taken together, these trips imply that, through Lal's biography, an argument is made not only about what Gulbadan did but also about how travel between thresholds (geographical, institutional, and textual) becomes necessary for women to write history in the Mughal world.

What is innovative about this paper is its elaboration of a theoretical point embedded in Lal's use of her narrative technique: namely, that travel operates in *Vagabond Princess* as an epistemology rather than simply as a biographical flourish. The extension of feminist travel writing theory, which has been formulated primarily within the colonial and postcolonial archive of European female travellers, to the premodern and non-European context, as well as the extension of Lal's own historiographic program from her institutional analysis of the harem to her individualist analysis of the construction of a historian's voice, both emerge from this innovation. The fact that there are gaps in Gulbadan's manuscript, when read in light of Spivak's analysis of the construction of archives, indicates how the recovery of feminine subjectivities in this era must be partial.

Further research could perhaps explore the model comparatively, such as by analysing additional Mughal women writers and patrons like Jahanara Begum's Sufi texts; exploring European women travelers of the same era for a transcultural comparison of gendered travel and mobility; or delving deeper into the Persian Humayun-nama itself, rather than its English translations, to examine how much of the subjectivity depicted in Lal's account is to be found in Gulbadan's writing.

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