

Escape from harem: A women-empowered novel of the Mughal harem



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ABSTRACT

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This study endeavors to scrutinize the intricate roles of women within Mughal harems and their corresponding social hierarchies, with a particular focus on the pervasive mental and physical oppression endured by these women and their endeavors to reclaim their autonomy and individuality. Employing Michel Foucault's conceptual framework of power within the context of new historicism, the narrative of *Escape from Harem* is meticulously examined to unravel the multifaceted dynamics inherent in harem life. Through an analytical lens, this study uncovers the entrenched power structures governing the harem environment, exposing the systematic marginalization and restriction of women within these secluded spaces. By delving into the diverse experiences of women from varied social backgrounds, exemplified by the protagonist Zeenat, the research underscores their tenacity and agency in navigating the constraints imposed upon them. Furthermore, this investigation underscores the profound significance of literature as a potent medium for social critique and advocacy, illustrating how narratives such as *Escape from Harem* serve as compelling instruments for challenging prevailing power dynamics and advocating for transformative societal change. This study not only enriches our comprehension of Mughal society but also underscores the enduring impact of literature in reflecting and shaping cultural norms and values.

Contribution/Originality: This study offers literary analysis, historical investigation, and theoretical frameworks, specifically focusing on Foucault's beliefs regarding power and New Historicism's methodology. By applying these lenses to *Escape from Harem*, we gain new perspectives on the dynamics of Mughal harems and the extent of women's influence and resistance inside these oppressive control systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

Escape from Harem by Tanushree Podder explores women's lives in Mughal harems during the 16th century, uncovering the power dynamics in these isolated settings (Podder, 2013). The term 'harem', derived from Arabic, represents an enclosed area where women were secluded and regulated, illustrating the exertion of authority over their existence (Foucault, 1978). The term originates from the Near East with an Arabic definition and denotes a forbidden sanctum or a sacred, inviolable place in which women were kept hidden. Ali (2015) claimed that the main elements in viewing the harem world, the Muslim world to be more specific, are gender and sexuality. Podder depicts the intricate socio-historical dynamics of Mughal court life and the challenges encountered by women of various social backgrounds through the character of Zeenat, a servant girl of low rank in the harem. This narrative

is consistent with Stephen Bressler's viewpoint on New Historicism, which questions the idea of historical objectivity by highlighting the cultural and ideological influences that affect narratives (Bressler, 1994).

As shown in Podder's novel, Michel Foucault's theories on power and discourse can be used to analyze the dynamics within Mughal harems. Foucault contends that power functions use discipline and surveillance mechanisms to control individual conduct and societal standards (Foucault, 1995). Set during the reign of the Mughal Empire, this novel characterizes the decadent lifestyles of distinguished personalities, such as Akbar (Mughal emperor) and Jahangir (the emperor's son). The author accurately depicted the lives of both privileged and disadvantaged women in Mughal harems from a socio-historical perspective. As the central figure in this study, the protagonist, Zeenat, conveyed to the reader how women were treated and valued. Podder's examination of power dynamics within the harem mirrors Foucault's observations, demonstrating the subjugation of women to hierarchical frameworks and mechanisms of control. This thematic analysis aligns with the methodology of New Historicism, which seeks to comprehend texts by considering their socio-political settings and highlighting the dynamic relationship between power, ideology, and representation. *Escape from Harem* combines historical analysis with fictional narrative to inspire readers to contemplate the autonomy and defiance of women in the face of oppressive systems, emphasizing the ongoing significance of these topics in current discussions on history and gender.

1.1. Significance of the Study

Many mysteries and secrets about the Mughal culture and lifestyle and the oppressive treatment of its women lie untold within the confines of its harems (Balabanlilar, 2010). *Escape from Harem* is a poignant narration of the hurdles these women had to overcome during the Mughal era. Tanushree Podder has allowed her characters to unveil their stories through Zeenat amidst the ambiguities underlying the social hierarchy (Mani, 2015).

This study presents the following objectives to provide critical insights into the fragility of humanity during the supreme reign of the Mughal emperor:

- a) Broaden the applicability of New Historicism in the literary text to female oppression, objectification to male sexual satisfaction and reproduction tools, and the deprivation of public life or economic pursuits.
- b) Highlight the role of harem women in the Mughal Empire and the workings of the social system to objectify and control the women with the power concept.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A harem is defined as the women's quarter in a Muslim household in India. The word harem originated from the Arabic word 'haram', which refers to something sacred or forbidden and is used for the sacred precincts of Mecca (Sharma, 2009). Women who live in harems are treated as objects of desire to be owned and kept from others or to please the emperor and his royal associates. Each harem housed women from different social classes, many of whom were not summoned again after their first night with the emperor. These women were demoted to become servants, whose duties depended on their social status (Sharma, 2009). The history of the Ottoman culture, which relied on slave concubines or working girls along with legal marriage for reproduction, justifies the existence of harems. In the Ottoman tradition, the Crown takes slave concubines for sex and reproduction (Toledano, 1998). Harem women wielded their power through familial roles and the emperor's support. In addition to being a vast space that houses women of different regions, religions, and cultures, a harem is a place where the emperor's descendants are born and raised. Markets, bazaars, laundries, kitchens, playgrounds, schools, and baths are constructed within the harem grounds to keep the women healthy and rested. Despite these luxuries, the women remain trapped within the harem walls without social contact, communication, or romantic relationships (Sharma, 2009). The emperor only employed eunuchs as guards to monitor the women within and outside the harem gates and forbid them from communicating with other people, specifically men (Toledano, 1998). In this vein, the women

were regarded as the emperor's property, and he decides the women's fate and plans their sexual life and level of intimacy. The eunuchs were obliged to report on the women's activities and conversations. Women healers were employed to treat harem women who were ailing or in need of medical attention. If a male doctor was necessary (depending on the nature of the illness), he had to cover his face with a scarf while sitting outside the women's chambers and treat the patient without physically touching them, on pain of death. The harem rules were established by the emperor's wife and mother, who represented the highest rung in the social ladder of the harem. All the harem women were expected to comply with holy and ethical rules to keep the place sacred and pure (Khandhar & Mani, 2015). Royalty secured the highest social class in the Indian Mughal harem, followed by land-owning families and the *Kaneez*, who belonged to the lowest social class.

2.1. The Novel

Set against the backdrop of the Mughal era from Jahangir's to Shahjahan's reign, *Escape from Harem* narrates the story of Zeenat, a 15-year-old girl brought into the Mughal emperor's harem to satisfy his lust. The extravagant weddings, festivities, and celebrations held during the Mughal dynasty were cohesively narrated in this novel, written after extensive research. Zeenat and her mother initially lived in one of the poorest territories of Agra. The young lady garnered much attention from businesspeople and male pedestrians, who were attracted to her fair complexion and voluptuousness. Given her beauty, Zeenat's mother constantly fretted about her daughter attracting unwanted attention (from the emperor). She kept her daughter close to her until the emperor's eunuch forcibly took her away for four consecutive nights. The emperor soon lost interest in Zeenat and began drunkenly wallowing in failing to woo Nur Jahan, a beautiful and desirable widow.

The story continues to narrate Zeenat's journey in the emperor's harem from age 15 to 60, where she grew up, fell in love, and eventually escaped her imprisonment. The protagonist's viewpoint was deliberately considered to reflect on dramatic historical events, where a mere servant causes a historical turn of events. This turning point rendered the novel unique. Narrated from the age of 15 to almost 60, Zeenat's life provides ample scope to document a vast series of events (Podder, 2013). *Escape from Harem* also portrays the categorization of women into three social classes in descending order: (i) Mahaldars, royal women (the emperor's wife and mother); (ii) Pariataraan Ehadur, the middle-ranking class that included the women given as gifts to the queen, daughters of landowners, or girls who were given as gifts by high-class royal politicians; (iii) *Kaneez*, or enslaved women, who were lower-level employees or the emperor's passing fancy.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a brief overview of the New Historicism theory and a close reading of the text to justify the power concept derived from the class structure. Theoretically, a literary text should be examined and interpreted based on the author's and critics' history to determine (i) how the writer's times affect the work and (ii) how the work itself reflects the New Historicists argument, where "all levels of society share in the circulation of power through the production and distribution of the most elementary cultural and social texts" (Foucault, 1995).

Power follows a circulation principle in which people maintain existing power structures rather than the emperor. In turn, a writer's timeline acknowledges the influence of current cultural contexts on critics' conclusions. According to Bressler, in assuming the inextricable link between history and fiction, this historical literature, which re-imagined the Moghul era, must be analyzed through historical research under New Historicism (Bressler, 1994).

The author can project history in the desired manner. As Podder provided her readers with a first-hand experience of harem women (fictional characters with fictional names) in a historically factual setting, this New Historicism analysis considered the author a chronicler of history. In this vein, *Escape from Harem* is imbued with historical authenticity. The author endows her protagonist with the ability to escape physically and emotionally from the harem via the power concept. The notion of power under New Historicism was applied to this literary text

to disclose how harem women were sexually objectified and treated as reproduction tools by the emperor and other men, who had no regard for their souls or emotions. These women remained prisoners in their own homes.

3.1. Conceptual Framework

The concepts of newness and history were integrated to form a novel notion which portrays the depth of both concepts. As a prominent post-modern literary theoretical criticism, New Historicism represents culture and social studies on history, which is fundamental for literary criticism and human culture (Gregory, 1993). This theory stemmed from the American literary tradition, which performed analyses of the Renaissance in literary and social-cultural domains. New Historicism goes beyond text-based literary criticism to include the implicit meaning of the text. This theory's social structure, culture, and national importance render it popular in literary theoretical research. American and English scholars who focused their Renaissance studies on history in a cultural context, known as cultural materialism, paved the path to New Historicism. This notion was associated with Marxism, sociology, feminism, structuralism, and history.

New Historicism further adopted different methods based on historical values and cultural structure (Khandhar & Mani, 2015). Although the theoretical evolution in America significantly differed from the one in England, some questions were posed in both instances: (i) "Is history created by culture or is culture the creation of history?" and (ii) "Is history considered a tool for strengthening or weakening historical or cultural studies?". The term 'historical criticism' remains debatable, as culture should not be examined as a criticism. Notwithstanding, New Historicism scholars followed the notion of criticism as a means of understanding rather than criticizing. New Historicism objectifies its interests in analyzing and studying history rather than associating it with any other critical theory. As such, New Historicism is deemed more practical than philosophical. A literary text has historical value and context, regardless of whether the text–history relationship is direct or indirect. Hence, the literature textuality of history implies historical representation and relations to historical truth. The author uses literature in place of a factual setting to represent the hidden depth of historical truth.

The ambivalent relationship between literary texts and their context remains unaddressed. The history of literary theory denotes theoretical complexities between textualism and contextualism, which oscillate between the verbal literary and socio-historical elements of textualism and contextualism, respectively (Lai, 2006). Historical and literary studies were subsequently integrated in the 1970s, which resembled networking between the context–text demarcation. Thus, New Historicism existed in a mutual but ambivalent dialogue between history and literature, which replaced the Deconstruction Theory (Gregory, 1993). "New Historicism indicates the cultural-driven nature of texts as products of particular periods and discursive formation while viewing reality (history) as itself, mediated by linguistic codes which historians bypass in recuperating past culture" (Spiegel, 1993). The theoretical notion of New Historicism aims to interpret literary texts and art based on historical value. In other words, the theoretical and critical study of society involves using literary texts as the foundation for developing historical textuality. Interpreting Indian literary texts with New Historicism would generate a novel understanding of modern history and its structure. Overall, New Historicism examines the literary text and history as one entity.

3.2. The Concept of Power

The notion of power generates an intuitive understanding of its meaning. Philosophers and scientists consider power to be one of the critical elements in systematic structure studies, as it embodies social, cultural, and political development (Manokha, 2009). Initially interpreted based on relationships, the meaning of power and the people wielding it have changed. This concept became a symbol for those in different positions of rank, specifically in America and the United Kingdom. Both nations constantly elaborate on the fundamentals of being empowered and powerless. Power is one of the oldest and most ubiquitous concepts, not unlike other social and historical theories (Wandel, 2001). Observably, some people wield more power than others. The notion of power and social classes has

influenced society since the beginning of civilization. Many theories and studies have been developed and performed to provide a sound understanding of power and empowerment. Nevertheless, systematic research on power as a social and cultural theoretical construct is relatively novel with the recent emergence of accountability (Robert, 1957).

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed two theoretical approaches to familiarize readers with the Mughal harem and its women's private and personal lives. As historical fiction, *Escape from Harem* clearly depicts the harem from Zeenat's perspective. It examines the female characters in the novel and how their environment and the patriarchal oppression subjected them to different traits in life and how they survived it. New Historicism declares that a text must be analyzed through historical research that assumes that history and fiction are inseparable (Bressler, 1994). This approach suggests that while history reflects a "selected truth" based on recorded events, literature offers an "absolute truth" by exploring the complexities of human experiences beyond factual occurrences. By encouraging parallel readings of historical and fictional texts, New Historicism promotes a critical analysis of how narratives are constructed and interpreted, highlighting the interconnectedness of culture, power, and ideology in shaping our understanding of the past. The analysis of the text entails the utilization of a new historical concept of power in the related characters, events, and incidents (Välikangas & Seeck, 2011). It also includes a contextual analysis of the issues in related literature in addition to the feminism praxis of identifying the relationship between the women and their cultural and harsh environment inside the harem (the setting of the novel). The concept of power driven by New Historicism also served to portray and examine the harem women. Through this critical method and the comprehensive expenditure of the concept of power, which highlights the class structure, this paper describes the harem's isolated and prisoned existence and how the royal Mughal family oppressed thousands of women throughout history. The selected text will be analyzed through careful reading and will provide detailed information from the history of the Mughal Empire and the Harem in India using other texts and journal articles as secondary sources. To conduct a more detailed analysis, it is necessary to take the supporting ideas of other writers as they relate to the primary literary text, *Escape from Harem*.

Their ideas will provide critical reviews of New Historicism and the concept of power, looking at the female characters in the ancient Mughal era's local environment and harems' secret walls. This entails thorough reading and a detailed examination of occurrences in the local harems and the Indian historical environment and how they affect the female characters in the novel and other information on class system dilemma in the Mughal Empire, which may not necessarily be in complete detail in the novel but as it relates to how it affects women (Sharma, 2009).

The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India (Jahangir, 1999) was closely read, as this book was mentioned in the literary text and it helps provide definite information about the era in which the story was set, the harem, and Jahangir himself as the male figure. Furthermore, this revision will focus on the female characters and their expedition to freedom, reestablishing their misplaced individuality. This study offers a guideline to understand harem women's lives and their struggles to attain freedom and personal choice within the confines of the harem using the concept of power under New Historicism. Finally, this study demonstrates how literature is a medium through which people express their views about society's ills and acts as society's voice. The novel shows this by explaining the different approaches women use to confront their ecological issues, the decisions made, and the actions these women take to liberate themselves and every other victim of oppression.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The current work provides historical and social overviews of the women living in Mughal harems during the reign of Emperor Akbar and his son, Jahangir, based on Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem*. The underpinning

theory of New Historicism explains the concepts of power, female oppression, and social classes, which apply to the novel's main female characters. These women's lives were examined based on female hardships in a patriarchal society.

5.1. Social Classes and Power in *Escape from Harem*

Set in the 16th century, the Mughal era was an intricate web of historical, cultural, and social forces that determined the obsession for power among the Mughal emperors. Podder's *Escape from Harem* portrayed this obsession by characterizing the Mughal royalty. Despite solely focusing on Jahangir's reign, the author has unveiled the complexities underlying the harem women's lives. *Escape from Harem* enables its readers to comprehend life in a Mughal harem from the viewpoint of 15-year-old Zeenat. As a young girl, Zeenat was seen as the only "gloss and glitter of the harem" (p. 3). It was not until 1610 that Jahangir summoned her to the harem to be raped. This event characterizes the primary social classes and their sense of entitlement.

The highest social classes in Mughal harems are the Mahaldars or royal women (the emperor's mother, wife, and sisters) who ruled the harem. As the head of the Mahaldars, the emperor's mother established the harem rules and exerted control over its inhabitants. The second social class encompasses the Pariataran Ehad, or middle-class harem women (wives and mistresses of political chair members) or those belonging to wealthy and prominent families with close connections to the Mughal royalty. The majority of the Mughal Empire, the Kaneez (palace and harem employees and servants) belonged to the lowest social class.

The cultural and social gender class during the Moghul era was strictly patriarchal, where men were deemed superior to women. The controversies surrounding the harem women stemmed from information-gathering methods rather than the notion of women being confined within the harem. Different social classes were created to enforce different types of power among the harem dwellers. Regarding 'invisible power', the women were only summoned by the emperor for purposes of pleasure. They were led to feel fortunate to be chosen to spend the night with the emperor. Foucault claimed that women's subconscious minds were embedded with this notion. As such, their conduct aligned with the thought of being lucky and privileged to be chosen by a man from the "royal class".

For example, Bahar Begum felt privileged and obligated to satisfy the emperor's son, who raped every woman and girl he set eyes on while intoxicated, at the cost of her life following 14 pregnancies. The emperor created his harem in this vein. Only the rich and powerful, or those from high social classes with close connections to royalty, could afford to maintain a harem. Zeenat mentioned during the Nauroz celebration that "Every few men were privileged to attend the event in the harem. The close coterie of the emperor included his sons and a few trusted high-ranking nobles who had served the emperor well" (p. 55). Gender discrimination is the critical component in Podder's novel, which portrays female imprisonment, regardless of their social class. They were forbidden to have relationships with other men inside or outside the harem.

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Escape from Harem, set in the 16th century during the Mughal era, begins with two female characters: 15-year-old Zeenat (the protagonist) and Humra (Zeenat's mother). Zeenat lived alone with her mother, who worked as a servant in the royal harem household. Zeenat likened the harem to a fantasy land populated by beautiful women living elegant lives among royalty. Given her charm, fair complexion, and talent for dancing, Zeenat impressed every woman in the harem and the Mughal prince himself. Zeenat always fantasized about being a princess and living in the palace. Regardless, only her mother knew the truth about the royals and the harem. One night, Zeenat and her mother heard a knock on the door and opened it to find Yakub, the head eunuch who served the emperor, who took Zeenat away by force to the royal harem where the emperor raped her.

Zeenat stayed in the harem with her mother, who died one day in the harem household. She remained alone until she began working as a servant for one of the royal women. Zeenat soon experienced the challenges of being a

part of the emperor's harem. Eventually, she fell in love with a servant soldier, Salamat, who reciprocated her love. Salamat and Zeenat decided to escape the harem. Such romantic relationships were forbidden on pain of death. The couple managed to escape and were married for 30 years. Salamat then died in the war. The emperor's son, who ascended the throne after his father's death, allowed Zeenat to visit the harem household one last time. History repeated itself when she met a young girl who was brought to the emperor and subsequently raped. Zeenat saved the servant girl by replacing her with another who wanted the privilege of bedding the emperor.

Narrated by a young lower-class female servant, this novel recalls history from different stances. Podder attempts to establish her history by conveying the stories of unheard and muted women. A patriarchal male-dominated society sexually objectifies women, who are considered the emperor's property to be traded, sold, raped, abused, and imprisoned to satiate men's lust. The Mughal Empire's three-tier social structure depended on wealth and power. The first tier encompassed royal family members (the emperor, his offspring, wife, mother, and other family members). The second tier comprises the emperor's close associates (rich men and their families). The third and lowest tier encompassed the working class (servants, doctors, eunuchs, soldiers, and farmers), which constitutes the majority of people in the Mughal Empire.

Power was wielded based on gender and class. Bestowed with power and wealth, the emperor was the most influential person in the Mughal Empire and used his power to possess and abuse all the women he desired (Balabanlilar, 2010). Few could exercise control over the emperor. The beautiful and astute Nur Jahan was a widow whom every man in the empire desired. Even the emperor, infatuated with Nur Jahan, failed to control or possess her. Paradoxically, this strong-willed woman was both available and elusive. Only the emperor was allowed to possess her through marriage. In this vein, Nur Jahan's hidden power enabled her to control the emperor, who only acted with her consent and approval.

Podder (2013) intended to portray women as resilient and independent, such as the characteristics reflected by Nur Jahan, rather than weak, uneducated, or easily oppressed. Through Zeenat, the author indicates how a character evolves from being an inferior female into one with the strength and courage to escape the harem and assert her freedom.

Tanushree Podder's *Escape from Harem* is a story with social and cultural complexities. Set in India during the reign of the Mughal era, this literary text denotes class and gender discrimination, with women abused, misused, treated as lesser beings, and sexually objectified by a patriarchal society (Mani, 2015). The author conducted historical research to detail the struggles of Mughal harem women, particularly those of the lower social class. Men discriminated against women physically, sexually, and emotionally, considered them to be inferior beings, and subjected them to untold suffering and misery. The plot introduced characters such as Zeenat and Nur Jahan, who evolved with the story and enabled readers to empathize with them. Based on the story, women have equal rights as men and do not necessarily have to submit without question. Podder highlighted all the inequalities women faced so that her readers could recognize and understand some of the facts of life during the Mughal era.

Excluding Zeenat and Nur Jahan, every female character in *Escape from Harem* reflected female oppression, class gender discrimination, and subordination in a patriarchal society. Podder's selection of this historical period (Mughal era) required her to identify relevant names and events and integrate fiction with historical facts to generate a notable literary work, which was a complex task, as traditional social and cultural contexts in India perceive females and males as inferior and superior, respectively (Yodanis, 2004). The author narrated her story from the perspective of a servant girl (protagonist). Female discrimination and oppression could be shared in the present by empowering unheard voices to speak from a historical past. The social classification was deemed crucial in Mughal and Indian cultures following its association with power and wealth. Foucault's concept of power provided a sound understanding of female oppression and social classes in the selected literary text.

7. STUDY LIMITATION

While the study's primary utilization of New Historicism provides a valuable lens for understanding *Escape from Harem* within a historical context, its reliance solely on secondary sources such as the novel and historical documents may limit the depth of the analysis. The study's narrow focus on the novel may also restrict the exploration of harem life in the Mughal era. Without incorporating diverse perspectives or comparative analyses with other works of literature or historical accounts, the study may miss opportunities to enrich its understanding of the novel's themes and socio-cultural implications within a broader literary and historical framework.

8. STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

To overcome the aforementioned limitations, further study could contemplate integrating primary research techniques, such as interviews or archive analysis, to complement the analysis with direct viewpoints and supplementary historical information. In addition, incorporating alternative literary theories, such as feminist critique, eco-criticism, or post-colonial viewpoints, into the theoretical framework would provide a more thorough comprehension of the novel's themes and socio-cultural implications. A comparison analysis with other literary works or historical records from the Mughal era would expand the study's scope and offer significant insights into the distinctive elements of *Escape from Harem* within the larger literary and historical context.

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