



## **Negotiating Political Spaces and Contested Identities: Representation of Nur Jahan and her Family in Mughal *Tazkiras*<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The paper looks at a particular genre of Mughal writing, the *tazkira*, which has largely been ignored by historians in the emphasis that they place on court chronicles. The paper also seeks to suggest that the neglect that *tazkiras* have suffered at the hands of historians is misplaced, and as repositories of social memory, they provide perspectives about the Mughal court culture that are largely absent in historical chronicles. This is particularly the case when we look at imperial women in the Mughal court and compare the articulation of their agency in the chronicles with that found in the *tazkiras*. With these issues in mind, the paper studies the representation of the life of Nur Jahan (and her family), the influential wife of Mughal ruler Jahangir, in two *tazkiras*: *Zakhirat-ul Khawanin* written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Shaikh Farid Bhakkari and *Ma'asir-ul Umara* written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Shah Nawaz Khan. It also locates the changes that came about in the historical discourse when one moves from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The *tazkiras* were collective biographies and their efflorescence in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries reflects a new-found concern with proper deportment, norms of manliness and gender relations. Limited in their perspective of the investigation of the lives of individuals, biographies are presumed to be of little relevance in exploring the larger forces of historical change. With the waning of the teleological, unilineal view of history, historians are now beginning to realize the need to place human experiences, emotions and subjectivities in the historical narrative. With this has come the realization that biographies are not simply individual life stories, but are studies of the incessant interaction of the individual self with wider socio-cultural forces in diverse temporal and spatial contexts. In this paper, I look at how these two *tazkiras* reveal a shift in the role of women in the political process, changing perceptions of gender relations and norms of etiquette, comportment and civility. Moreover, based on the specific examples I pick up from these *tazkiras*, I look at how this change in the discourse that comes about in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is tied to the shifting

perceptions of family and household, conjugal relations, notions of love and intimacy and the norms of manliness in Mughal court culture.

**Keywords:** Biography, Representation, Household, Masculinity, Sovereignty, Agency, Intimacy.

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In this paper, I explore the representation of the agency of imperial women at the Mughal court in a particular genre of sources, the *tazkiras*. The *tazkiras* were forms of biographical dictionaries that were written in the Mughal period to record for posterity the lives of influential nobles, saints, sufis and scholars. Historians have largely neglected these but as bearers of social memories, they are unusually important sources for the study of social perceptions and *mentalities*. In some of these *tazkiras*, in what is clearly a noticeable difference from court chronicles, we notice detailed descriptions about imperial women. In studying the representation of the agency of imperial women in these *tazkiras*, I focus on the life of Nur Jahan, the influential wife of Jahangir, with a view to understanding gender relations better, and more importantly, social perceptions about the presence of women in the political—and largely ‘masculine’—spaces in early modern South Asia. For my study here, I have chosen two *tazkiras*: Farid Bhakkari’s *Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin* and Shah Nawaz Khan’s *Ma’asir-ul-Umara*. In choosing the two *tazkiras*, one written in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the other in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, my effort is to examine the issues at hand within a diachronic frame of reference and note shifts in the representation of lifestories from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The shifts in representation need to be related to changes in Mughal courtly norms and values, in particular norms of civility, masculinity and gender relations. I argue that the shifts in discourse as can be gleaned from a comparison of the two *tazkiras* were a result of changes in the social and political environment.

### **Nur Jahan and her family in *Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin* and *Ma’asir-ul-Umara*—A comparative analysis**

Bhakkari’s *tazkira*, *Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin* contains a separate chapter on Nur Jahan; and this is worth noting. In assigning her a separate chapter, Bhakkari is not only recognizing her immense social and political significance but is also willing to treat her as a self-sufficient human agent, one who was not, despite her gender, dependant on her spouse or father. The important point here is that Bhakkari also mentions in his *tazkira* other imperial women as well and this suggests that he recognizes them as political agents in their own right, and as against the impression we get from historical chronicles, crucial in the political process.

In contrast, when we look at *Ma’asir-ul-Umara* we notice that even as the author discusses Nur Jahan in some detail, he fails to assign her a separate chapter; she is discussed in the chapter on her father Itmad-ud-Daulah. In discussing Nur Jahan within the biography of

Itmad-ud-Daulah, Shah Nawaz is trivializing her political significance, and more importantly, he is seeking to subsume her agency and represent it as dependent on her father. At the same time, more than half the chapter on Itmad-ud-Daulah contains description of Nur Jahan's life and activities strengthening the claims that her mention was crucial to complete the picture of the Mughal court nobility. It would seem that even as the author of *Ma'asir-ul-Umara* conceded the immense significance of Nur Jahan to imperial sovereignty, he was nonetheless reluctant to represent her as an autonomous person, enjoying a subjectivity of her own.

### **Historicizing Jahangir and Nur Jahan's love**

Bhakkari begins by writing about Nur Jahan's marriage to Jahangir in the 6<sup>th</sup> regnal year (1611) and hails the event as auspicious, one on which 'volumes should be written'. He then mentions, without much comment, the death of Nur Jahan's first husband Ali Quli Beg Sher Afgan, after which Nur Jahan was brought to the court of Agra and placed in the care of one of Jahangir's stepmothers Ruqayya Sultan Begum. It was at the *Nauroz* of 1611, that Jahangir and Nur Jahan met for the first time leading to the development of an affectionate bond between the two which strengthened over a period of time. An interesting thing here is that Bhakkari mentions the escalation of 'attachment between the two' and Nur Jahan's 'position of power' in the court in the same sentence probably suggesting that the two things were inter-related (Bhakkari 1993: 14). More importantly, Bhakkari uses terms like 'queen of the world' and 'lady of the time' for Nur Jahan (Shah Nawaz 1999: 1072) even before he mentions her ascendance to power suggesting perhaps that given her political acumen and skills she was predestined to exercise sovereignty.

However, the events leading to Jahangir's marriage with Nur Jahan find a new twist in *Ma'asir ul Umara*. Unlike Bhakkari, Shah Nawaz does not even mention the *Nauroz* in 1611 as the moment when Jahangir developed feelings for Nur Jahan. According to Shah Nawaz Khan, Nur Jahan often accompanied her mother on her visits to the palace during feasts and entertainment. He further writes that 'by a strange chance, Prince Salim—who had reached the age of adolescence—fell in love with her' (Shah Nawaz 1999: 1072). Moreover, when Akbar came to know about this affair he very quickly gave Nur Jahan in marriage to Ali Quli Beg (Sher Afgan Khan) (Shah Nawaz 1991: 622–25). It was because of his earlier love, going back to his days of adolescence that Jahangir proposed to marry Nur Jahan when she returned to the court after her husband's death. Initially Nur Jahan refused, dejected as she was with her husband's death and in return Jahangir blamed her for the assassination of his foster brother Qutb-ud-din Khan by her husband and made her over to his stepmother Ruqayya Sultan Begum. However, later the 'old feelings were revived' and they got married (Shah Nawaz 1991: 127–34). Later traditions romanticize Sher Afgan's death a great deal. Though Shah Nawaz Khan doesn't say it overtly in his text, but the fact that he mentions Jahangir's earlier love for Nur Jahan can suggest that in order to get Nur Jahan for himself Jahangir devised ways to get rid of Sher Afgan. The earliest Persian source to suspect Jahangir of planning Sher Afgan's murder was Sujana Rai, the author of *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh* (ca. 1695–96), who reported: 'Under these circumstances, it

is not strange that Sher Afgan might have been killed at the imperial insistence' (Findly 1993: 28–29). Some European travellers such as Niccolao Manucci (1907: 107) write in this regard:

...the king, who was deeply in love with her, sent an order to the governor of the city of Patana that as soon as Sher Afgan should arrive there with a letter he must be slain... Sher Afgan being dead, Jahangir took the woman into his palace.

Interestingly, even as the European travellers' accounts and later Persian sources refer to Jahangir hatching a conspiracy to eliminate Nur Jahan's husband Sher Afgan, the event is not mentioned in any of the contemporary sources. Persian sources such as the *Iqbalnama* (1999) and *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* (1909) do not refer to the alleged conspiracy to eliminate Sher Afgan. Presumably, the theme of conspiracy was developed during the reign of Shah Jahan to tarnish Nur Jahan's image as Shah Jahan's claims to the throne were adversely affected due to her influence at the court (Manucci 1907: 107). It might have been pushed by the clique opposing her at the imperial court, and then it found its way into sources and the bazaar gossip; the European travellers received this juicy narrative from bazaar gossip.

### **Sharing sovereignty? Debating Nur Jahan's rise to power during Jahangir's reign**

Another theme that is crucial in both *Ma'asir-ul-Umara* and *Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin* is the escalation in Nur Jahan's position of power. Bhakkari (1993: 14) writes:

...gradually the affairs of the begum reached to such an extent that the disposal of the affairs of the kingdom were in her hands and towards the end, her name was included on the coin itself. Except for the fact that her name was not recited in the sermon, whatever other requisites of kingship are there were performed by her.

*Ma'asir-ul-Umara* echoes the same scenario:

...in fact, except for the *khutba* not having been read in her name, she exercised all the prerogatives of royalty, so much so that she sat in the *jharoka*, and received the respects of the officers. Coins were struck in her name (Shah Nawaz 1991: 127–34).

As is well known, in the Islamic theory of sovereignty, *sikka* (coins) and *farmans* (imperial orders) were royal prerogatives but the fact that these were shared with Nur Jahan shows the extent of the power that she wielded in court politics. Tirmizi, in his study 'the Edicts from the Harem', puts forth the point that while the *hukms* of queen mothers (like Maryam Makani and Maryam Zamani) were limited in terms of their jurisdiction and administrative reach, those issued by Nur Jahan were fairly wide-ranging (regarding revenue collection, grant of villages, administrative decisions etc.), particularly during the period of her ascendancy (1622–27) (Tirmizi 2009: xxiii–xxxv). Nur Jahan's orders bear close resemblance to the *farmans* of the emperor (Tirmizi 2009: xxi). Jahangir had delegated many of his powers to Nur Jahan especially after the death of her father Itmad-ud-Daulah in 1622 AD.

Even as both our *tazkiras* refer to Nur Jahan's administrative acumen and skills, they diverge in terms of their assessment of her personality. Bhakkari is never short of his admiration for her, and at one place describes her in the following words (1993: 14):

...during the time of the government of that house of generosity (i.e Nur Jahan), India received (great) splendour and freshness and it has left its good name till the time of Resurrection. How can I enumerate the rules and regulations of that lady of the time, for they exceed the limit of

space and time.

Shah Nawaz looks at Nur Jahan's control over state affairs with derision and accuses Jahangir of sloth and indolence in assigning important administrative responsibilities to her. He says (1991: 127–34):

...she exercised such influence over emperor Jahangir that except for the name of the emperor, he exercised no powers. He frequently remarked that he had presented the kingdom to Nur Jahan, and required nothing more than a *ser* of wine and half a *ser* of beer for himself.

Unlike Bhakkari, Shah Nawaz presents Nur Jahan as crafty and scheming and explains her influence in administrative matters as resulting from her clever, manipulative temperament. It appears from *Ma'asir-ul-Umara* as if Jahangir was put in some kind of a trance by Nur Jahan and so was tricked into leaving the reins of the empire in her hands. How does one explain the divergence in the representation of Nur Jahan in the two *tazkiras*? Bhakkari appreciates and eulogizes her; Shah Nawaz writing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, treats her with obvious disdain. We should bear in mind that Shah Nawaz had access to Bhakkari's *tazkira* and borrowed a large number of details about Nur Jahan, as also several other nobles, from Bhakkari. And yet their assessments about her are so much at odds with each other. One plausible explanation could be that during the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Shah Nawaz wrote his *tazkira*, in the wake of the continued decline of the Mughal empire women's participation in imperial sovereignty had come to be seen with some anxiety. As we know now, in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the *harem* was tied to imperial sovereignty and women were major political actors playing crucial roles in the consolidation of the empire in South Asia (Lal 2005). Historians have suggested that the participation of women in the Mughal state was linked to the Turko-Mongol heritage, for under the Mongols and Timurids imperial women were powerful political figures who actively participated in imperial sovereignty (Balabanlilar 2012). It seems that by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century in the wake of political and economic pressures on the state the involvement of women in Mughal India had come to be seen with some anxiety—a potential source of the decline of the empire.

Interestingly, in both the *tazkiras* Nur Jahan is projected as a woman of immense talent and acumen. Bhakkari credits her with inventing the Jahangiri perfume (*itr*), *dodamni* (cloth weighing two dams) for *pishwaz* (full-dress gown) and *pachtoliya* (stuff weighing five *tolas*) for head cover for women (Bhakkari 1993: 15). Similarly Shah Nawaz (1991: 127–34) says:

...the emperor used to say that until she came to his house, he had not understood domestic pleasures or the spirituality of marriage. She invented and designed several ornamentations for dress and jewellery which are still prevalent in India.

She gave away huge sums as charity to help the needy, especially women: 'The number of elephants, horse, *saropa* and cash which she gave away has not entered the mind of anybody' (Bhakkari 1993: 15). She collected duties on goods from merchants, traded with Europeans who brought luxury goods, engaged in international diplomacy with high placed women of other countries and controlled all promotions and demotions issued from the royal government. The English ambassador Sir Thomas Roe, immediately after his arrival at the Mughal court in 1616 noted that 'The queen (Nur Jahan) must be presented with something

whenever he came even though he did not approve of this “daylye bribing” (Findly 1993:155). She even managed to tackle Shah Jahan’s revolt against her father at Balochpura. In doing so, says Bhakkari (1993: 15), ‘The Begum made name in statesmanship and all manliness’. This is an interesting statement and reflects the andocentric element in Bhakkari’s appreciation of Nur Jahan. He eulogizes her not because she was a woman but because of the qualities which in his perception actually defined ‘manliness’. Exercise of sovereignty was indeed considered a ‘manly attribute’, and if Nur Jahan was able to do so, and with such competence, she was anything but a woman, or better still, a woman invested with attributes of ‘manliness’.

Nur Jahan ‘routinely constructed expensive buildings—rest houses for travelers (*sarais*), gardens, palaces and tombs’ (Findly 1993: 46). These construction activities apart from establishing an enduring reputation for Nur Jahan, gave her an opportunity to participate in the political process for building activity was a deeply political act as well. In fact, in the Islamic world construction activity was an important means of the articulation of political authority. More importantly, women were known to participate in construction activity, and this was one of the important ways through which they participated in imperial sovereignty (Peirce 1993; Hambly 1999). When the authors of our *tazkiras* provide detailed descriptions of the building construction activity by Nur Jahan, they are at the same time highlighting her immense control over the symbols of sovereignty.

### **Theory of Nur Jahan’s *junta*: Myth or reality?**

In a rather dated biography of Jahangir, Beni Prasad had argued that as the years went by Jahangir became an opium addict and left the charge of administration in the hands of Nur Jahan. In the task of administration she was assisted by her family, especially her father (Itimad-ud-Daulah) and her brother (Asaf Khan). When Prince Khurram was recognized as Jahangir’s heir apparent, Asaf Khan’s daughter, Arjumand Banu Begum, better known as Mumtaz Mahal was married to him. This marriage, held in 1612, was primarily a political one which symbolized the alliance of Nur Jahan with the heir apparent Prince Khurram. All these people formed a kind of a ‘family clique’ or ‘junta’ that rallied around Nur Jahan (Prasad 1922: 179). The ‘junta’ theory is contested by Nurul Hasan (1958: 324–35), who argues that Nur Jahan’s family members had attained exalted administrative posts due to their loyalty and dedication to service at the Mughal court much before Nur Jahan’s marriage to Jahangir.

While the existence of a *junta* is certainly doubtful, the immense influence of Nur Jahan’s family members is attested by the *tazkiras*. Shah Nawaz Khan explicitly says in *Ma’asir-ul-Umara*: ‘Your (Nur Jahan’s) kith and kin are glorified because of you, and flourish; Because of the beauty of one, the whole family is glorified’ (1991: 127–34). He further adds (1991: 127–34):

...as a result of this close connection (i.e. the marriage of Nur Jahan and Jahangir) Itimad-ud-Daulah was appointed Prime Minister, and given the rank of 6000 with 3000 horse, and elevated with the grant of a flag and a drum. In the 10<sup>th</sup> year, he was, as a special favour, permitted to sound his drums in the Presence, and so was raised above all *Amirs*.

Moreover, the fiefs of Nur Jahan’s relations (*silsila*) amounted to half the estates of the

kingdom. As if to drive home his point, Shah Nawaz sarcastically adds that not only her family members, but even her slaves and eunuchs were assigned high positions, and ‘received the ranks of Khans and Tarkhans’ (Shah Nawaz 1991: 127–34). If a little restrained, Bhakkari (1993: 15) is actually also saying the same thing: ‘It was she (Nur Jahan) who made the entire house of Itimad ud Daulah elevated and honoured with high mansabs.’ From a comparison between *Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin* and *Ma’asir-ul-Umara* it appears that while the former *tazkira* attributes the elevation of Nur Jahan’s family to her marriage to Jahangir, for the author of *Zakhirat*, this elevation was because of their own record of loyal service that they were doing so well in Jahangir’s time. Shah Nawaz Khan says that ‘After the begum was married to Jahangir’, Asaf Khan received the title of Itimad Khan and became the Khansaman (Shah Nawaz 1999: 287), stressing the fact that Asaf Khan’s elevation to this post was due to the marital alliance between his sister (Nur Jahan) and Jahangir. On the contrary, Bhakkari (1999: 9) while stating the same fact says that Asaf Khan, while serving as Khansaman in Jahangir’s reign obtained the title Itiqad Khan and a high *mansab*, hinting that the elevation in his rank was a result of his loyalty towards the Mughal court and dedication to imperial service. Several Mughal historians doubt the existence of ‘the junta’, and view it as a later day construct to tarnish Nur Jahan’s image. Nurul Hasan points out that this theory of the *junta* is principally based on European sources, the works of travellers like Thomas Roe (1899), Peter Mundy (1914) and Bernier (1891). Even so, Hasan concedes the fact that Nur Jahan did exert some influence on Jahangir. Nurul Hasan (1958: 324–35) shows that many of the *mansabdars* who were promoted to high *mansabs* during this period were either hostile to the *junta* or not connected with it. One could take the case of Mahabat Khan who was not out of the Emperor’s favour despite several unpleasant bickerings between him and Nur Jahan and her obvious dislike of him. In fact, despite the fact that Bhakkari applauds Nur Jahan for the way she handled Mahabat Khan’s supposed rebellion around 1626 near the shore of the Jhelum, saying that ‘the Begum made name in statesmanship and all manliness’ (Bhakkari 1999: 15), it becomes obvious to the reader (from this narrative) that Jahangir instead of being a mere puppet in Nur Jahan’s hands did assert his authority whenever necessary.

Jahangir had sought the combined support of Mahabat Khan as well as his eldest son Parviz, ‘to ease his mind about any further rebellion’ (Shah Nawaz 1999: 377–426). Mahabat Khan’s growing prestige and power made Nur Jahan very suspicious and insecure especially because Mahabat Khan might throttle her dream of putting Shahryar on the throne by supporting the kingship claims of Prince Parviz. She was thus determined to break this alliance. When Mahabat Khan had been staying in his Ranthambhor castle with the Prince and with his Rajput forces, both Asaf Khan and Nur Jahan started poisoning the emperor’s mind against the minister framing charges of embezzlement and disloyalty against him (Findly 1993: 264). In order to present his point and show his innocence, Mahabat Khan decided to come face to face with the emperor when he was camping on the side of Behat River. When Nur Jahan discovered Mahabat Khan’s presence inside the emperor’s quarters, she summoned the best *amirs* of the state and

reprimanded them saying:

... the matter on account of your negligence and defective action, has (now) reached this state that whatever had not passed even in the imagination of anybody has happened and you have humbled yourself in the eye of God and people by your action. Now, (at least) you should strive to rectify that (mistake) and should put forward whatever unanimous (plan of action) there be in which lies the welfare of the state and the (successful) outcome of the affair (Bhakkari 1999: 15).

Reprimanded by Nur Jahan, the nobles accompanied by her decided that they would cross back over the river the next day and lay siege to Mahabat Khan's camp and rescue Jahangir. When Jahangir heard about this decision, he dispatched Muqarrab Khan, Sadiq Khan, Mir Bakshi, Mir Mansur and Khidmat Khan to Nur Jahan, Asaf Khan and the select *amirs* of the state with the message:

...to cross the river and give battle to Mahabat Khan is simply wrong. Beware! Take this unsound deliberation to be a result of inexperience and immature work and do not allow it to give it access to your mind as, except shame and remorse, no result thereof will accrue (Bhakkari 1999: 15).

This message clearly belies the assumption that the reins of the empire were in the hands of Nur Jahan and she was the one who took all the administrative decisions independent of the emperor. In fact, Bhakkari informs us that even after Mahabat Khan's showdown with Nur Jahan, Jahangir continued to show kindness to him and once also warned him about the evil designs of his queen against the minister (Bhakkari 1999: 15–16). Clearly, if we bring in the evidence of the *tazkiras*, we get a complex picture of the political developments of the period. While the chronicles and contemporary travellers' accounts portray a picture of an impotent ruler in the total grip of his spouse, our *tazkiras* communicate a different picture, one that suggests that Jahangir was politically active even as he delegated political and administrative responsibilities in Nur Jahan's favour.

### **Marriage and ethnicity as markers of upward political mobility**

Irfan Habib provides a statistical analysis of the rise of Nur Jahan's family after her marriage with Jahangir. His study is based mainly on Jahangir's memoirs and contemporary chronicles of the period: *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, *Iqbalnama-i-Jahangiri* and *Ma'asir-i-Jahangiri*. After establishing Nur Jahan's family tree he notices that her family came to be allied through marriages with families of certain other high *mansabdars* such as Khan-i-Khanna, Amirul Umara Sharif and Khwaja Abul Hasan. Each of these nobles is known to have attained pre-eminence well before Nur Jahan's marriage to Jahangir. Usually marriages took place among families having the same status. Thus these marriages were a result and not the cause of the position attained by these respective families. Further the royal princes could not be counted among the beneficiaries of Nur Jahan's influence as their positions rested on the fact that they were sons of the emperor (Habib 1969: 74–96). However, Irfan Habib also shows that there was still a noticeable change in the fortunes of Nur Jahan's family after her marriage with Jahangir.

During the first five years of Jahangir's reign, out of 19 posts only one, that of *Diwan-i-*



*Kul*, was occupied by the members of Nur Jahan's family. However, after Nur Jahan's marriage with Jahangir, Itmad-ud-Daulah was appointed as *Diwan-i-Kul*, a post retained by him until his death. The names of her family members appear with marked and increasing frequency. After the death of Amirul Umara Sharif, her father also becomes the *Wakil*. The Lahore and the Kashmir provinces remained in the hands of different members of the family throughout Jahangir's reign. At the time of Jahangir's death, two out of the three major post at the centre (that of *Mir Bakshi* and *Wakil*) were held by members of Nur Jahan's family. Besides, the number of provincial governors' posts held by them also increased and included Lahore, Kashmir, Multan, Thatta, Agra, Gujarat and Orissa. In other words, 7 out of 16 provincial posts were in the hands of Nur Jahan's family. Compared to the total *mansabs* in 1605 and 1621, the *mansabs* of Nur Jahan's family show a marked increase from a mere 1.9 per cent of *zat* ranks in 1605 to a whopping 7.7 per cent of *zat* ranks and 10 per cent of *sawar* ranks in 1621. Nur Jahan's family held core offices at the centre and even important provincial governorships, which points to this strong power centre at the court. This is further proved by the fact that even during political upheavals such as Shah Jahan's rebellion or Mahabat Khan's coup, the family's ascent continued. Nur Jahan's family clearly gained power and posts after her marriage with Jahangir (Habib 1969: 74–96).

Irfan Habib postulates that perhaps Nur Jahan's family formed the core of the Persian (Khurasani) element in the Mughal nobility and its rise partly represented the predominance of this section of the nobility. Since Nur Jahan's family members married into Persian families only, with the exception of Nur Jahan, it naturally tended to cement the ties among leading Persian families and set them apart from other groups. In a letter to Jahangir, Mirza Aziz Koka condemned Jahangir's policy of favouring the Khurasanis and Shaikhzadas (Indian Muslims) at the expense of the Chaghatais and the Rajputs in 1612. Habib, thus points out that Beni Prasad's statement with regard to the nobility being divided into two factions has to be seen in the light of the ethnic groups that divided the nobility at the time. Nur Jahan's supporters were Khurasanis while her opponents, the older nobility consisted of the Rajputs and the Chaghatais (Habib 1969: 74–96). Sanjay Subrahmanyam rightly points out that the 'junta' theory is but one interpretation of the political hegemony achieved by the Iranians under Jahangir's rule. Thus instead of seeing it as the emperor's weakness, it should be viewed in terms of the fact that the Iranian elites were valued more for their 'administrative-cum-commercial *savoir-faire*' wherein Nur Jahan and her family played a crucial yet subordinate role as intermediaries (Subrahmanyam 1992: 340–63; see also Lefevre 2007: 452–89). The ascendancy of Nur Jahan's family during the reign of Jahangir should be analysed within the larger context of ethnic identity, centralized administration and factional divisions within the nobility and their marital alliances.

### **Carving favourable political spaces and normative codes through marital alliances**

In Mughal India marriages played an important role in maintaining political alliances. In fact if one recognizes the significance of marriages in the organization of the Mughal ruling class, the implication of influential alliances like those between Jahangir and Nur Jahan become evident,

and help us understand Nur Jahan's dominance at the court and the dynamics of administration during Jahangir's reign. Afzal Husain views marriages among Mughal nobles as an index of status and aristocratic integration that helped them gain *mansabs*, assignments of *jagirs* and special status at the court (Husain 1972: 304–12).

The *tazkiras* are replete with examples that show the significance of these marriages. Shah Nawaz Khan describes marriages as an 'Indian custom through which blood feuds are wiped off' (Farhat Hasan 2004:77). Shaikh Farid Bhakkari (1999: 15) praises Nur Jahan's ability in match making:

...she arranged the marriages of the daughters of His Majesty Jahangir Shah, late prince Shah Murad, Dan Shah and Sultan Khusraw with great men and she married the lady attendants (*saheliyan*) of the royal harem ranging in age from twelve to forty to the *ahadis* and *chelas* of the king.

In fact, the marital alliances between Ladli Begam (Nur Jahan's daughter that she had from Sher Afgan) and Shahryar in 1620 became a cause for Shah Jahan's rebellion against Jahangir that halted and eventually ended Nur Jahan's political dominance at the Mughal court. It was after Ladli Begam's marriage that Nur Jahan started supporting Shahryar's claims to the Mughal throne. As against the independent minded and assertive Shah Jahan, Shahryar was docile and had a feeble mind (Findly 1993: 164) and so was a perfect puppet who would easily become a pawn in Nur Jahan's hands. In pushing the interests of her son-in-law Shahryar Nur Jahan from depriving Shah Jahan of his fiefs in Hindustan to alienating him from his supporters, used all kinds of tactics to push him to the path of rebellion and impudence. Bhakkari (1999: 20) writes:

... due to the mischief making of Nur- Jahan Begam... a son(Shah Jahan) who was the code of conduct of sincerity and seeker of (parent's) pleasure was driven to fighting and quarrelling through force and oppression.

This rebellion resulted in 'raising armies, murder and destruction, and a great deal of the country was ravished by the flood of devastation (Shah Nawaz 1999: 127–34). Eventually, Shah Jahan emerged as the winner and Nur Jahan was kept under surveillance and given a fixed maintenance allowance of 2 lakhs of rupees a year.

Reflecting on these developments, both the *tazkiras* blame Nur Jahan for playing a divisive role. One would expect such a critical tone in *Ma'asir-ul-Umara*, but even Bhakkari, who is quite appreciative of her acumen and skills, reflects on these events with certain bitterness against Nur Jahan. Shah Nawaz Khan (1999: 127–34) quickly declares in his *tazkira* what he thinks to be a universal rule that '...though women are possessed of many charming qualities, yet in essence of their natures they are beings who have been created with a defective understanding.' After this sweeping statement about women, he specifically attacks Nur Jahan saying, 'With all her good qualities she became at last the leaven of confusion, and trouble for India' (Shah Nawaz 1999: 127–34). Though not so harsh, Bhakkari's *Zakhirat-ul-Khawanin* uses more of a suggestive language saying, 'The Begam brought strife and enmity into the open (Bhakkari 1999: 20). For both our authors women play a divisive role if they are allowed to participate in political activities and Nur Jahan was no exception.

It is interesting to note here that for Bhakkari and Shah Nawaz, it was Jahangir's deep

attachment for Nur Jahan that explained the immense power that she wielded in the Empire. Bhakkari writes. ‘Through the strength of her personality, she made Jannat-Makani (Jahangir) so much infatuated with her that (compared to them) the love of Majnun and Khusraw (parvez) appear to be (just) a tale’ (Bhakkari 1999: 15). Modern scholars have presumably bought the story rather uncritically. Findley (1993: 80–81), for example, says, ‘Theirs (Jahangir and Nur Jahan’s) was a real love, no doubt, born of a physical attraction and personal allure on both sides, but also an alliance of perfectly suited talents and needs.’

### **The idea of love, domesticity, politics of sexuality and aesthetics in the *tazkiras***

There might well be a case for arguing that the immense powers enjoyed by Nur Jahan during the period were a result of Jahangir’s love for her. Indeed, both our *tazkiras* drum beat the extraordinary bond of love between them, and while they disagree on an assessment of Nur Jahan, they agree that there was deep attachment between them. However, contemporary sources are far more reticent and Jahangir himself in his memoirs, communicates no such impression. (*Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* 1863–64; see also Thackston 1999). One could reasonably argue that the reticence on Jahangir’s part was because social norms prevented men—rulers, in particular—from expressing their attachments, and in the Mughal court culture ‘extravagant and intemperate emotions were considered to be a weakness and an unworthy quality’ (Farhat Hasan 2009: 105–22). Indeed, the irrational and erotic power of love was considered to be a potential threat to Mughal elite masculinity (Orsini 2006: 68). At the same time, let’s us not forget that the same Jahangir does not have any qualms of conscience in describing his fondness for wine and opium. (*Tuzuk* 1863–64). Contemporary sources rarely, if ever, give a romantic tinge to their relationship, and when someone like Kami Shirazi (1625) describes Nur Jahan’s role in the suppression of Mahabat Khan’s rebellion, it is her loyalty, service and commitment that is at the forefront of the narrative. Like any other work of poetry written in the period it invokes at a couple of places, the tropes of separation and longing, but these are no more than literary devices serving to provide the narrative with an emotional and aesthetic content (Shirazi 1625). In all likelihood, the perception of Jahangir’s intense love for Nur Jahan is a later construction. It is persuasively articulated in Bhakkari’s work, for as mentioned above he repeatedly represents the relations between them as marked by a sense of attachment and intimacy. By the time we come to Shah Nawaz’s *tazkira*, however, the love story is invested with a thick plot of intrigue, deception and murder. Jahangir, as mentioned above, is depicted as an emotional wreck who gets Nur Jahan’s earlier spouse murdered just to be able to consummate his love. If the story had acquired the character of bazaar gossip by the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, what we see here is quite interesting: history catching up with social memory and vice-versa.

While we are on the theme of love, let me end this essay by pointing out that our *tazkiras* reproduce verses allegedly composed by Nur Jahan. While we are not sure about the authenticity of these verses and even if we reject their reliability, they are still useful specimens of the social memory of Nur Jahan. Let me cite one such verse here:

I give not my heart to form (*surat*) if the disposition (*sirat*)  
be unknown,  
I am a slave of (divine) love, and know 72 creeds.

O ascetic! Cast not the terrors of the judgment- day into  
our heart,

We have lived through the terrors of separation and so can  
visualize the day of judgement (Shah Nawaz 1999: 127–34).

Indeed, this poem attributed to Nur Jahan by Shah Nawaz Khan, represents her as a mystically inclined recluse. Drawing on the distinction that the sufis often made between ‘profane love’ (*ishq-i-majazi*) and ‘divine love’ (*ishq-i-haqiqi*), the poet emphasizes her preference for the latter, and more importantly the intimate relations between love and faith. If these verses were really composed by Nur Jahan, they provide a rare glimpse of her literary acumen and innermost beliefs. On the other hand, if these verses are fabricated and circulated in public spaces as her compositions, they reveal an element of her personality that was constructed in popular memory.

This paper has argued that Mughal imperial sovereignty was not only a function of political, military and economic activities, but crucially involved issues of masculinity, domesticity, love and sexuality. While the court chronicles focus mainly on the political achievements and military exploits of the emperor, historical genres like *tazkiras* focus on the experiences and subjectivity of the rulers and nobles and render the women in the Mughal court active agents in the constitution/contestation of courtly power and tradition. Focusing on Nur Jahan, this paper explored the myth of romantic love as the informing trope behind Nur Jahan’s influence over political affairs. I have striven to show that this was a latter-day construction which found its way into our *tazkiras* as a reflection of shifts in gender relations. My study also demonstrates significant divergences in the representation of Nur Jahan as we proceed from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, probably reflecting changes in the prevailing norms of manliness.

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