

## REIMAGINING A SCREENED SELF: AN ANALYSIS OF JOHN SHORS' *BENEATH A MARBLE SKY*

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### **Abstract:**

*The life of people in a halo is glorified in the pages of history. But still there are some who were born, lived, marked their footprints in the short span of human life and died without coming to the forefront, without a mention of their names in golden letters, without referring their life's story anywhere - but leads a life to give a worthy message to the coming generation. They are given life and blood and fictionalized in literary forms to represent a group of hidden personalities of a bygone era. This paper tries to explore one of those personalities in the Mughal history - a woman who was under the glaze of patriarchy and screened under the illuminating royalty.*

**Keywords:** *Mughal Age-hidden personalities-representative-Ladli.*

'If there is a paradise on the face of the Earth, it is this, it is this, it is this' --this is an inscription on the ceiling of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan's Peacock Throne. Such was the splendour of the bygone Mughal Era. The Mughals were a Muslim dynasty of Turko-Mongol origin that ruled most of northern India from the early 16th to the mid-18th century, after which it continued to exist as a considerably reduced and increasingly powerless entity until the mid-19th century. The beginning of the empire dated to the victory of Babur over Ibrahim Lodi in the first Battle of Panipat (1526). It reached its peak under Aurangzeb and declined after his death in 1707. The Mughals were famous for their pursuit of arts, music, architecture, painting and their proficiency in running a vast and magnificent empire. But still there are some arenas yet to explore deeply which may lead to the scope of more discussion about the unknown and hidden facts on Mughal Dynasty.

The life of women in the Mughal world was under a dim light making it impossible for the historians or knowledge seekers to sketch a detailed picture of the female scenario. This study unravels the life of an imaginary female character Ladli, whose name, so also the names of ordinary ladies like her was never heard before in anyway. The names of Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal and Jahanara Beegum are written all over the pages of Mughal history, foreshadowing the common women in a mysterious halt. John Shors, an American writer tries to untie the life of an ordinary lady - how she suffers the patriarchal conventions, the methods by which she unknotted the shackles thrust on her, how love seems to her and the ways through which she pursued her life - through his historical narrative *Beneath a Marble Sky*.

John Shors was a newspaper reporter in United States and won several statewide awards in journalism. Now he is a full-time novel writer. Shors has been lucky enough to travel worldwide to know more about the cultural differences of the regions he visits and incorporate them in his novels. He travelled to Asia, South Pacific, Europe, Africa and North America. His experience in visiting the Taj Mahal imposed him to write a historical narrative on the Mughal Dynasty. John Shors' important works are *Beneath a Marble Sky* (2004), *Beside a Burning Ocean* (2008), *Dragon House* (2009), *The Wishing Trees* (2010) and *Temple of a Thousand Faces* (2013) *Cross Currents and Unbound*.

*Beneath a Marble Sky* begins with Jahanara Begum's narration of her past life as the princesses of Mughal India, to her granddaughters Gulbadan and Rurayya. Born as the daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan

and Mumtaz Mahal, she enjoys all luxuries in her childhood. Unfortunately after the death of her mother Mumtaz, Jahanara's fate also changes to put her in a prison along with her father for a long time. Jahanara introduces in her narration a long relationship with her bosom friend Ladli.

Ladli, means 'one who was loved' is a faithful servant in Jahanara's harem and her close friend who exerts her influence in Jahanara's life several times. John Shors portrays her as a Hindu orphan who enters the harem at a very early age. Ladli is free enough to perform her Hindu rituals and worship the Hindu gods and goddesses despite the fact that the harem comprised of a majority of Muslim women. At times of adversities Jahanara solely depended on Ladli for her advice as well as physical help. Thus there arises a strong bond between the two which facilitate Jahanara to escape from the custody of her brother Aurangzeb. The analysis of various incidents in the novel throws light on Ladli's personality and the unexplored life of common ladies in Mughal Empire.

In the beginning of the novel, John Shors draws Ladli as a representative of helpless girls in front of the powerful princes. It is obvious from Jahanara's conversation with Mumtaz. Jahanara wants to join Ladli to have a bath in the Yamuna River and she asks Mumtaz's permission. As the social conventions never prevails women to enter outside the houses Mumtaz is bewildered to take a decision. At last she finds a solution by letting Jahanara go along with Ladli and bath with her brothers. Jahanara aware of her brother Aurangzeb's character says that: "But Aurangzeb is cruel to her (27)." Later in the novel Jahanara explains how Aurangzeb treats Ladli and herself cruelly in order to win for himself.

The intimate relationship between two friends is seen when Jahanara reveals to Ladli the offenses she has to face from her husband Khondamir. Shors describes Khondamir as: "He's more of a toad, for you won't find an uglier, nor a more witless creature (60)." Jahanara depends on Ladli for Ladli can use offensive words on whom her friend suffers. Jahanara says that her own high born family background inhibits her to retaliate with her husband. Shors' portrayal of Ladli is unconventional to the norms of medieval India.

Ladli announces her affection for Jahanara's elder brother Dara in one of the occasions in *Beneath a Marble Sky*. While Jahanara asks her whether she and Dara kisses each other, Ladli says: "I'd have liked to, but since he married that ornament, it will never happen (60)." Ladli here referred Dara's wife as in John Shors' narration Nadira never liked to share her husband's love with other women. A vigorous Ladli can be seen in *Beneath a Marble Sky* when at other occasions also, she discloses her love making with strangers. Only Jahanara has the key to open up Ladli's mind as they are bosom friends and know each other deeply right from their childhood. Ladli has an affair with the son of a fisherman and most often he sneaks out Ladli far away from the harem. Jahanara reveals her fears of discovering Ladli and her lover by anyone in the empire. To her dismay Ladli replies: "Nobody will find out. And I see no reason to keep myself untouched so that some old lout can grope me (61)."

In an age where the chastity of harem women was considered so important, Ladli's words sounds very remarkable. Here also Ladli tries to occupy an elevated position in the minds of unconventional readers who wants to modify women's status.

Ladli does not like the wicked eyes of Aurangzeb as he watches her always when she happens to come in front of him. Ladli discloses Jahanara about Aurangzeb's crookedness by illustrating an incident. Aurangzeb freed a prisoner from the Mughal prison who rapes and mutilates a Hindu girl while returning from battle. Balkhi, the freed prisoner is under the service of Aurangzeb and Ladli points out that only a wretched person like Aurangzeb can do such callous deeds. Hearing the interest of Aurangzeb on Ladli, Jahanara asks Ladli a favour. Jahanara wants to utilize Aurangzeb's wickedness by using Ladli as her lover thereby befooling him and spying on his deeds. Ladli agrees Jahanara's wish even though she knows how dangerous it would be to serve Aurangzeb. That is the character of Ladli, she will give even her life if her loved ones are in a threat.

When Jahanara says about the charming character of Ustad Isa who is appointed as the architect of

Taj Mahal, Laldi's comments makes it clear that she has a sound knowledge of the men's mindset. She says: "Men deceive. They charm you at first, then they've bedded you, their gifts disappear and their gallantry becomes as rare as their compliments (94)." Laldi's reach in the harem gossips and her birth in an ordinary family in the empire benefit her with such extra ordinary observation skills. But Laldi never shows any interest in marrying and to be happy with her husband for the rest of her life. Whenever Jahanara points out the need for Laldi's marriage, she finds excuses to defend Jahanara. Once she opines: "Why? You think I'm so bored as to want to spend a lifetime taking care of some scoundrel? (94)" From Laldi's disposition Jahanara understands it to be mere excuses and Laldi is very much interested in love making. Jahanara says: "Despite her words, I sensed that behind her feigned indifference she was as interested in finding love as was I. But she would never admit it (94)."

Laldi performs her new assignment well to spy on Aurangzeb as per Jahanara's directions. Acting like an efficient and loyal servant in the service of Aurangzeb, Laldi brings Jahanara the news of Aurangzeb's plots on killing Dara. And Laldi's comments on Aurangzeb's plans make it obvious that Laldi has an inherent talent in deciding which is wrong and which is right in the administration. Laldi observes on Aurangzeb: "He's no dullard, Jahanara, even if less clever than you. He knows he isn't strong enough yet to rule the kingdom. The nobles follow the emperor and Dara. If your father died, they'd support Dara. Aurangzeb would have the army behind him, and it might secure him the throne. But he's not one to take chances. He'll wait for your father to die, and with Dara gone, will become the next emperor (140)." Laldi's keen observation on Aurangzeb reflects how well versed an ordinary lady in the empire in matters of politics even though they are treated as marginal. Again in the novel Laldi confirms to be a dutiful servant when she reports Jahanara of Aurangzeb's plan to kill her. Laldi asks Jahanara to be safe with her daughter Arjumand. Laldi's piece of information helps Jahanara to escape from Aurangzeb's trap.

The most sympathetic part in her loyalty to Jahanara is that Laldi has to concede her body before Aurangzeb in order to win his credibility. To a shocking Jahanara, Laldi reveals: "Because...because I realized that if I were to give him...if I gave him my body, in time I'd pry all his secrets loose (140)." Laldi again justifies the reason for her complete surrender to Aurangzeb. She says: "It just happened one day. He came to me, and I let him...I let him do as he wished. Because I knew then, as I'd always known, that I could best serve your father, and you, if I were his mistress (141)." For one more time Laldi proves that she is a soul mate to Jahanara as well as an obedient servant.

Laldi as a courageous woman is seen when she challenges Aurangzeb's determination of wiping out the Hindu population in the Mughal Empire. As Laldi is a Hindu girl Jahanara fears that something dangerous may happen to Laldi because of Aurangzeb's hatred towards the Hindus. Laldi annihilates Jahanara's anxiety by saying that "I've never seen a piglet turn against a tiger (222)." It is remarkable that Laldi's character is exceptional in an age where patriarchy dominates and people find supremacy in imperialism to challenge a royal prince.

Laldi's love for Jahanara reaches its optimum when Jahanara is imprisoned by Aurangzeb's soldiers. Nobody is brave enough to dare the orders of Aurangzeb as he enthroned as the new emperor of Mughal India. Aurangzeb orders every servant in service of the royal court not to give any food, water or clothes to Jahanara when she is under his custody. He imprisoned her naked inside a jail with two hungry cheetahs. His plans are as though the cheetahs are not fed for the last few days, they would attack Jahanara and eat her. Knowing Jahanara's hazardous situation Laldi reaches there at once and gives the hunting cheetahs bloody steaks to feed on. If she were caught by any of the guards of Aurangzeb, her fate would be no better than Jahanara's. With all the chances to be caught by the soldiers Laldi exposes great valour to rescue her friend.

Laldi acts as a confidante of Aurangzeb and plays a crucial role in rescuing Jahanara after eight years of her imprisonment with Shah Jahan. Laldi also escapes with Nizam, the faithful eunuch of Jahanara, from the clutches of Aurangzeb. They run away from the Mughal kingdom and finally settle at a

sea shore far from Agra, the capital of the Mughals. In the course of the novel Nizam discloses to Jahanara that he loves Ladli. Jahanara makes all arrangements to Ladli and Nizam to unite and live forever as husband and wife. Ladli, Jahanara, Isa, Nizam and Arjumand lead their life happily disguised as fishermen and earn their living by fishing in the sea. At last the novel ends with Jahanara narrating her how their life changes as Isa died. Jahanara also narrates the last part Ladli plays in her life and returns to the other world. She says: "And so it was with Ladli. She went for a swim one day, and when the sea returned her she had travelled from this world to the next. We followed the Hindu tradition and burned her body, casting her ashes into the water... Still we missed her terribly and our world emptied sometimes with her passing (353-354)."

That is Ladli - even death cannot swipe her memories and influence on whom she loved. Jahanara's comments are the best observation needed to explain Ladli. Jahanara opines: "...thanked Allah for giving her to me as a friend. This one woman, this daughter of a commoner, had proven herself more loyal, cunning and caring than Father's most powerful nobles (247)." Through Ladli John Shors tries to reveal how an ordinary lady spends her life in the service of an emperor like Aurangzeb. Ladli is only a representative of the numerous ladies who are still veiled under the bright personalities of royal Mughal woman or purposefully forgotten by the historians. As Thomas Gray in his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* writes: "Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen,/And waste its sweetness on the desert air" the lives of Ladli's and also other ordinary Mughal women's blossomed and decayed in a highly male dominated world.

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