



Queer Labors: Female Intimacy, Homoeroticism, and Cross-dressing in Mughal Courtly Paintings

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Abstract

Right-wing religious groups in India routinely claim that homosexuality is “alien to Indian culture” and persecute queer-women despite the legal decriminalization of homosexuality. This article contributes to the growing scholarship exploring same-sex love and gender fluidity in South Asian history before British colonial legislation criminalized homosexuality and transvestism.¹ While historians have uncovered a rich literary and poetic history of South Asian homoeroticism, there has hardly been any scholarly attention to visual sources, particularly of female homoeroticism. This article uses an unexplored archive of Mughal-style paintings—mainly from the 18th-century Awadh, Rajput, and Deccan courts—to provide a visual history of female intimacy, homoeroticism, and cross-dressing in South Asia, and the courtly patronage of queer female love. I argue that labor—sexual, domestic, and care labor—provides a useful lens to analyze the Mughal paintings of female intimacy, as the courtly idealization of female homoeroticism usually involved hierarchical mistress-maid relationships.

Keywords: Indian Art, women, lovers, Awadh, Rajput, Deccan, harem

¹ Using contemporary identity terms for the past is always problematic. People in pre-colonial South Asia certainly did not identify as queer or gender-fluid. However, scholars have used these terms to refer to historical cases of fluid gender expression, cross-dressing, mythological stories of women becoming men, and vice versa. Historians have demonstrated that the idea of gender and even the idea of sex were often non-binary and quite flexible in the pre-modern period, particularly in non-Western societies. See Penrose (2016) and DeVun (2021). In this article, I use gender fluid to refer to the phenomenon of female servants or mistresses dressed in masculine attire in Mughal paintings, i.e., the gender expression, not the gender identity of the subjects in the paintings. The word transvestism is now outdated, but this was the term used in the British colonial period, when the practice was criminalized in India. The main focus of my article, however, is female homoeroticism in Mughal-style paintings, the majority of which depict female couples dressed in feminine attire.

Introduction – Queer History and Historiography in South Asia

In 2013, when the Indian Supreme Court upheld the criminality of homosexuality, and in 2018, when the Court finally decriminalized homosexuality, right-wing groups proclaimed that homosexuality is a corrupt “Western import” incompatible with Indian culture. In a rare display of solidarity, Hindu and Muslim religious leaders argued that homosexuality was “unnatural,” “sinful,” “against the scriptures,” and “against Indian culture”. A popular guru even offered to “cure homosexuality” through yoga, contrasting the supposedly Western disease with Indian traditional therapeutics (Madhukalya, 2013). The right-wing argument that homosexuality, particularly lesbianism, is against Indian culture, had been taking shape over the last two decades, particularly in protest against Deepa Mehta’s 1998 film *Fire*, which depicted same-sex relations between two sisters-in-law, trapped in oppressive loveless arranged marriages (Dave, 2011). Hindu militant groups vandalized cinema halls in Mumbai and Delhi to stop the screening of *Fire*, particularly incensed by the fact that the “lesbian” protagonists were named after the Hindu goddesses Radha and Sita (Ross, 2016). Subsequently, female couples in rural India have faced [death-threats](#) from family members and have even been murdered in [“honor-killings”](#) for this supposedly anti-Indian practice.

Countering right-wing claims, activists and scholars have documented same-sex intimacies and gender fluidity in South Asian history for more than two thousand years.² Ancient Hindu mythology, particularly the epic *Mahabharata*, is rife with examples of androgynes, feminine men, masculine women, pregnant kings, women marrying women, and women becoming men (Pattanaik, 2012; Sinha & Bhattacharya, 2021). The Sanskrit sex-manual *Kamasutra* provides

² India as a nation-state emerged in 1947, along with Pakistan, after political independence from British colonial rule. This article uses South Asia to refer to the region more broadly, with its shared history. Pre-colonial empires, such as the Maurya Empire in the ancient period and the Mughal Empire in the early modern period ruled over large parts of present-day North India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

detailed advice on penetrative sex between women using sexual instruments, sex between men, and mentions *tritiya prakriti*—people of third gender (Penrose, 2001; Sweet, 2002). Ancient Hindu textual and sculptural studies point to dual feminine deities and inter-feminine relationships (Thadani, 2016). The Sanskrit medical treatise *Sushruta Samhita* even held that a female couple could produce a baby, although it would be a lump of flesh without bones (Vanita, 2005).

In Turko-Arabic and Perso-Mughal Islamicate court culture of medieval and early modern South Asia, same-sex love between elite men and their slave-boys was poetically idealized, although male intercourse was unlawful in Islamic jurisprudence (Sarkar, 2013). South Asian Persian-Urdu literature celebrated the eleventh-century warrior Mahmud of Ghazni's eternal love for his slave cup-bearer Ayaz (Kugle, 2002). The fourteenth-century courtier Ziauddin Barani, however, wrote critically about the Delhi Sultan Alauddin Khalji, who in his old age had “fallen deeply and madly in love” with his eunuch slave Malik Kafur, the “castrated” and “ungrateful sodomite” who acquired great political influence taking advantage of the Sultan's infatuation (Vanita & Kidwai, 2001, p. 132).³ The first Mughal emperor Babur, in his 16th-century memoirs, unabashedly described his “mad and crazed” longing for a bazaar boy, coincidentally named Baburi (Thakson, 2002, p. 90). Foreign travelers noted Mughal rulers' sexual passion towards slave-boys, particularly Jahangir, who complained to a Samarqand visitor that a dark-complexioned “Hindu boy stole my wretched heart” (Vanita & Kidwai, 2001, p. 144). In contrast to the extensive historical and literary texts on male intimacy, textual records on female intimacy are very limited. In the late-18th century, a new genre of Urdu ghazal poetry called *rekhti* emerged in the city of Lucknow. Composed and recited in the colloquial feminine Urdu dialect *auraton ki zubaan* by male poets—often in female dress, *rekhtis* expressed female sexual longings for a feminine beloved (Petievich, 2002; Vanita, 2012).

While literary archives of South Asian same-sex intimacy have been amply explored in the last two decades, there is a surprising lack of scholarly attention to visual archives. Mika Natif (2013, 2015) has begun exploring visual representations of male intimacy in Mughal illustrations of *Gulistan*. Yet the rich

³ The disparaging term “sodomite” is no doubt Eurocentric, originating from the Biblical “sin of Sodom”. The use of “sodomite” in Kidwai's English translation suggests that Persian texts may have used an identity-term for men who had sex with men.

Mughal visual archive of female intimacy remains unutilized—both in South Asian queer history as well as in art history. This article focuses on Mughal-style paintings produced in the provincial Awadh, Rajput, and Deccan courts depicting female homoeroticism and cross-dressing. Most of the paintings studied here are from the 18th century, before the gradual decline of this art-form with declining courtly patronage, and before the introduction of British colonial legislation in the nineteenth century criminalizing homosexuality and transvestism. I argue that labor—domestic-labor, sexual-labor, emotional-labor, and care-labor—is a useful analytical frame to read these paintings of female intimacies. Just as pre-colonial male intimacies were mainly forged between elite men and their slave-boys, female intimacies were also hierarchical and usually involved aristocratic mistresses and their servitor-lovers, served by maidservants and slave-women. South Asian feminist historians have rightly challenged Western Orientalist depictions of the harem as an oppressed space for women (Lal, 2005). The lens of intimate labor, however, allows a revisionist corrective to the post-colonial feminist historiographical valorization of women's empowerment and agency in pre-colonial South Asian households.

The study of Mughal-style paintings of female homoeroticism and cross-dressing produced under both Hindu and Muslim courtly patronage, contributes to the growing body of evidence about non-heteronormative sexuality and gender fluidity in pre-colonial India. The lens of labor to interrogate these female intimacies nuances the celebratory attitude towards precolonial homoeroticism, and sensitizes us to the inegalitarian and possible non-consensual nature of some of these queer intimacies. Instead of anachronistic identity-categories such as “lesbian,” “gay,” “homosexual,” or “transgender,” which emerged in the context of modern Western history, this article uses homoerotic, cross-dressed, and same-sex for precolonial South Asian female intimacies, which usually co-existed within and alongside heterosexual polygamous marriages. Urdu terms such as *chipti* (rubbing together), *dogana*, and *zanakhi* were used for female sexual acts and female same-sex lovers in *rekhti* poetry (Vanita, 2012), but the vernacular vocabulary for female intimacy and cross-dressing in other South Asian languages and courtly cultures is yet to be uncovered. The term “queer” offers multiple interpretive possibilities and is used in this article as an amorphous term to refer to various forms of non-binary and non-heteronormative South Asian gender and sexuality. While the word *queer*

is an identity-term today, it has a long history, since the 16th century, to describe (usually disparagingly) anything or anyone considered strange, before the term was radically reclaimed by the LGBT community. Historians of the pre-modern period have used the term queer, as well as a queer lens, to productively analyze same-sex desires and write social histories of gender non-conforming people in the past (Klosowska, 2005; Spencer-Hall & Gutt, 2021). My article uses *queer* as the umbrella-term to discuss female homoeroticism in Mughal paintings, as well as *mistresses* and *maids* who cross-dressed as men. More importantly, queer is used here as the method to analyze Mughal art and female domestic labor, just as labor is used as the lens to interrogate the paintings of queer intimacies.

Idealization of Female Intimacy in Mughal Paintings from the Awadh, Rajput, and Deccan Courts

The Mughal-style of painting was shaped by Persian, Indic, and European influence and flourished in the courts of the Mughal rulers in North India in the late-1500s and early-1600s. Often referred to as miniatures (although South Asian art historians now view the term as Eurocentric), Mughal paintings were small but highly detailed illustrations on paper, colored with opaque watercolor and powdered gold. Mughal paintings were influenced by realism and naturalism, but were also idealistic (Singh, 2017), and most commonly depicted Mughal rulers and nobility in court settings, hunting, or meeting important subjects. Mughal portraiture depicted the face in profile and the body frontally, or in a three-quarter view (Branfoot, 2020). There are a few early examples of female homoeroticism in Mughal art, such as a painting (Figure 1)⁴ of two amorous female couples, one seated at the center and served wine by two maids, and the other standing to the right, in a Mughal *zenana* (harem) garden-setting. Another painting (Figure 2) depicts an aristocratic female couple reclining on a bejeweled bed in the garden terrace, holding a cup of wine and a peacock-feathered fan, visual props of Mughal romance. This painting was produced in the Mughal imperial workshop in the early 1600s, and is attributable to Govardhan, the master painter who received patronage from the successive Mughal rulers Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan.

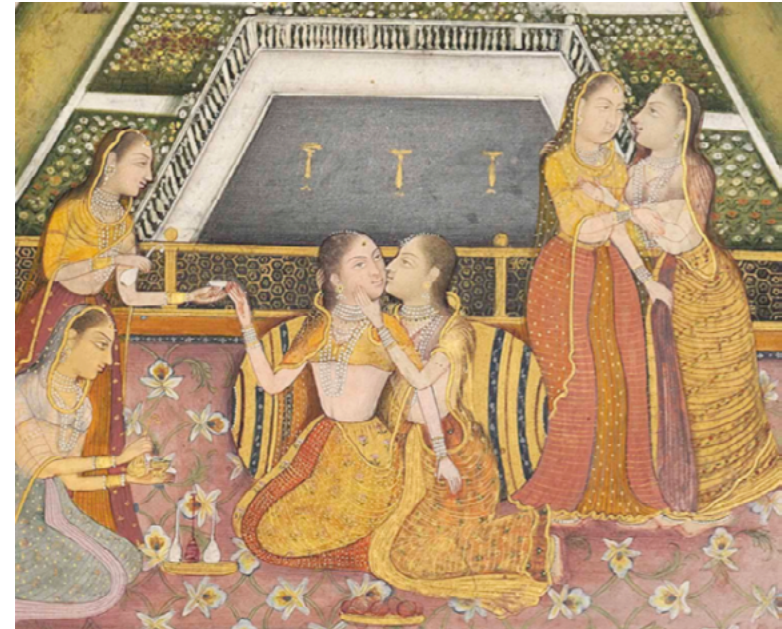


Figure 1. Mughal painting, unknown artist, Christie's.



Figure 2. Mughal painting from the 1600s, attributed to Govardhan, Christie's.

⁴ All the paintings in the article are in the public domain (120 years after creation and 70 years after the death of the artist, according to [US copyright law](#)).

By the late-1600s, the Mughal style had been adopted in the regional South Asian courts of the Awadh (in North India), Rajputana (in West India), and the Deccan (in South India). The Mughal rulers' military campaigns and alliances also led to the spread of the Mughal painting-style in the regional courts, which were asserting their autonomy from the Mughal Empire. With the decline of the Mughal court in the 1700s, painters trained in the Mughal atelier sought patronage in the flourishing provincial courts. The majority of Mughal-style paintings depicting female homoeroticism are from the regional courts of Awadh, Rajputana, and the Deccan in the 18th century. Although these regional courts developed their local artistic cultures (which should not be homogenized by the term Mughal), they still remained rooted in the Mughal visual culture. I use the term Mughal paintings, or Mughal-style paintings, to refer to these Mughal-inspired paintings produced in the prospering regional courts in the 18th C, when the Mughal Empire was gradually declining. The homoerotic paintings are mostly folios from *muraqqas* (albums) rather than illustrated manuscripts. The absence of descriptive calligraphy makes it difficult to know the context of their production, leaving them open to interpretation.

Several of the Mughal-style paintings of homoerotic and cross-dressed women were produced in mid-18th century Awadh, a Mughal province in North India. A Mughal album commissioned by the ruler of Awadh, Nawab Shuja-ud-Dowla, has several folios (Figures 3, 4, 5, and 6) depicting amorous female couples in *zenana* (harem) garden settings. In all of them, the central couple gaze enraptured into each other's eyes (*nazar*), which was a [common artistic trope for heterosexual Mughal romance](#). At first glance, the central couple in Figure 3 seem heterosexual, but close observation reveals that the protagonist on the right is a princess cross-dressed as a prince. She wears a gold and red turban under which her hair is tucked in, giving her a masculine look. The diaphanous muslin *peshawaz*, however, reveals her breasts; and her feet decorated with red henna confirm that she is female. Her relaxed posture against a bolster cushion and her bejeweled turban with a black aigrette establishes her dominant status. The partner on the left wears a red *choli* (blouse) and green *ghaghra* (skirt) and puts one arm around her lover's shoulders. Like the other three attendants, she too serves her mistress and holds out a glass of wine to her. In Mughal symbolic imagery, red wine stood as a metaphor for love's intoxication, symbolizing both a desire for the lover's red lips,

and the redness of a longing heart (Kugle, 2002). The servant who poured wine, or the cup-bearer, was frequently the object of homoerotic male romantic desire in Islamicate poetry and paintings, epitomized by [Shah Abbas's love for his cup-bearing slave-boy](#).



Figure 3. Mughal painting from Awadh, Accession No. IS.48:48/A-1956, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 4. Mughal painting from Awadh, Accession No. 1S.48:42/A-1956, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Figure 5. Mughal painting from Awadh, Accession No. 1S.48:45/B-1956, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Figure 6. Mughal painting from Awadh, Accession No. 1S.48:41/B-1956, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The homoerotic female couples in Figures 4 and 5 also have a subtle hierarchical relation. The cross-dressed turbaned female person in Figure 4 is the dominant partner who lovingly lifts up her lover's chin while her toes creep up and erotically caress the feet of her companion, who in turn has wrapped her arm around her lover's shoulder. The female couple are flanked by two elite maids, each sniffing a red rose—a Mughal symbol of romance. The romantic couple are served wine and food, fanned, and entertained by several other maids. In Figure 5, once again, a cross-dressed turbaned female in gold bangles and elaborate pearl necklaces is the dominant partner. She offers a cup of red wine to her lover, who wears green trousers and a gold-bordered veil over her head, and is also adorned with pearl necklaces. The female couple sit on a rug with cushions and are entertained by two female musicians and served by two other maids, one of whom is cross-dressed. The maids serve, entertain, and labor to conjure the romantic setting for the central couple. Beautiful gardens with flowering plants, pools with ducks and lotuses, water fountains, rolling clouds, moonlit starry night skies, and scarlet-tinged sunset skies were other props used by Mughal painters to create an ambiance of romance.

Cross-dressing the dominant female lover as a prince, however, was not always deployed in the Awadh paintings. In Figure 6, both the female lovers exchanging amorous glances, are dressed in a feminine way. The principal lady is served wine by her servitor-paramour, and she gets her foot massaged by a maid, while another maid fans her with a peacock-feathered *morchal*. There is a cross-dressed turbaned female in the painting, but she carries a flask and accompanies a maid carrying a tray, suggesting she too is probably one of the many attendants surrounding the amorous couple, serving and entertaining them. Another Mughal-style Awadh painting (Figure 7), commissioned in either the city of Lucknow or Faizabad, depicts a *zenana* scene where several women are celebrating the spring festival of Holi (Lotsy, 2020). While the musician maids on the margins play a variety of instruments—vina, sarod, tambourine, and drums—the principal women in the center dance around in romantic pairs and erotically fondle each other in the guise of applying color. Three of the women are cross-dressed with their hair tucked in turbans, one of whom may be a harem-guard joining in the celebrations.



Figure 7. Mughal painting from Awadh, TAPI Collection, India

In the Mughal-style paintings of homoerotic women produced in the Rajput courts of Western India, power hierarchies are more slippery, but the female couple are served and entertained by maidservants and slave-women whose labors create the romantic mood. Some of the earliest homoerotic Rajput paintings were produced in the late-17th-century Rajput court of Bikaner, by the Mughal painter Hazi Ruknuddin, working under the royal patronage of Raja Anup Singh. Ruknuddin had accompanied the Bikaner rulers on their military campaigns to the Deccan (in South India) under the Mughals, a testimony to the confluence of Mughal, Deccan, and Rajput painting styles. Demonstrating the eclectic synthesis in late Mughal art, Ruknuddin, a Muslim painter patronized by a Hindu ruler, adapted Islamic Persian-Mughal and Deccan styles to paint scenes evocative of Hindu mythology (McInerney, 2016). The homoerotic female couples of Ruknuddin are in a secular Islamicate domestic setting, but are modeled on Rajput paintings of the Hindu divine couples Lakshmi-Narayan and Radha-Krishna, surrounded by female servants. The wine, music, and gardens evoke an ambience

of romantic love in both the female-couple paintings of Ruknuddin, one set under a golden afternoon sky (Figure 8) and the other under a silvery night sky (Figure 9). Both partners are attired and adorned in feminine fashion, and positioned in an egalitarian posture, making it difficult to discern a power hierarchy between the principle women. The maids serving and entertaining their mistresses and enabling the romance, are on the margins.



Figure 8. Mughal-style Rajput court painting from Bikaner, by Ruknuddin, dated 1666. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Lent by The Kronos Collection.

Figure 9. Mughal-style Rajput court painting from Bikaner, by Ruknuddin, dated 1666. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Lent by Private Collection.

Ruknuddin's paintings became the prototype of homoerotic female couples produced subsequently in Bikaner, Jaipur, and other Rajput courts in the 18th century. A watercolor and gold painting from 18th-century Jaipur (Figure 10) depicts a scene of romantic love between two women whose bodies are intertwined

and eyes are interlocked as they hold hands and share a glass of wine. They sit against a gold-embroidered cushion on a white marble terrace-garden under a golden-sunset sky. A maidservant fans the amorous couple and two other maids attend on them. Another 18th-century Rajput painting (Figure 11)—in the grisaille *nim qalam* style adopted from the Mughal and Deccan courts—depict an amorous female couple with interlocked eyes seated in a courtyard, sharing a class of wine, and served by four maids preparing food and drinks. A later Rajput painting (Figure 12) from the Jodhpur court depicts a homoerotic female couple intimately embracing at a *jharokha* (balcony-window), which would make their romance visible to passers-by. Both the lovers wear turbans with feather plumes depicting their elite status. The partner on the left is dressed in a green choli-blouse and orange lehenga-skirt, while her lover on the right is dressed in a yellow peshwaz. The latter pours wine from a flask into a cup for her companion “forming a time-honored means of starting a seduction” (Lotsy, 2020, p. 159).

Some of the Rajput homoerotic paintings depict the female lovers in moments of more intense passion. A [painting from early-18th-century Mewar](#) in the new subtle-shading style introduced in the court of Udaipur, depicts an elite Rajput lady reclining against cushions, while her servitor-lover boldly places her hand inside her lady’s blouse. Another 18th-century Rajput painting (Figure 13) from Bundi or Kota depict two Rajput ladies at the *jharokha* holding each other’s left hand and with their right hands fondling each other’s right breast. Both women have their long wavy black hair let down under Chagtai-type ornamental headgear with black feather plumes, indicating their elite status. Probably the most explicit depiction of female homoeroticism in 18th-century Rajput art is a [painting in gold attributed to the celebrated artist Nihalchand from the court of Kishangarh](#) (Figure 14). It depicts a nocturnal orgiastic scene involving several women under brilliant fireworks that illuminate the night-sky. While a somnolent elderly male ruler seems to be the center of the satirical merry-making, several female couples are engaged



Figure 10. Mughal-style Rajput painting from Jaipur, Accession No. IM.105-1922, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Figure 11. Mughal-style Rajput painting from Bikaner, Accession No. F1907.607, Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art



Figure 12. Mughal-style Rajput painting from Jodhpur, TAPI Collection, India



Figure 13. Mughal-style Rajput painting from Bundi or Kota, Object No. 1973.149, Gift of John Kenneth Galbriath, Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum

in their own amorous acts. A homoerotic couple in the foreground conspicuously engages in penetrative sex, aided by the male sexual organs of one of the veiled and feminine protagonists.

Some of the homoerotic paintings depict women or eunuchs of Ethiopian (Habshi) slave origin, such as the figure on the right of the promiscuous couple in Figure 14. The Mughal Empire, and particularly the Deccan Sultanates, participated in the Indian Ocean slave trade. Male slaves from East Africa were imported for military training, and many of them rose to high administrative posts, and became [de-facto rulers](#), constructing cities, forts, mosques, and commissioning expensive paintings (Ali, 2016; Eaton, 2006). Upward mobility, high wages, property rights, and integration with local elites through marriage and adoption distinguished Indian Ocean slavery from the dehumanizing plantation slavery of the Atlantic world. While little is known about female Ethiopian slaves, daughters of African male slaves entered royal harems as maids, companions, or concubines, and [could rise to become royal-wives](#), exemplified by Yasmin Mahal of Awadh and Mehr Lekha of Bengal. Figure 15 depicts two female lovers under a starry moonlit night-sky, who are served wine and fanned by four dark-complexioned maids, possibly of African origin. This painting was most likely painted in 18th-century Deccan. Black women did not merely play servile marginal roles in Mughal homoerotic paintings, but sometimes became the principal protagonist. In an 18th-century painting commissioned in the Rajput court of Bikaner or Mewar (Figure 16), a dark-skinned lady in elaborate pearl jewelry offers a glass of wine to her light-skinned female companion, while embracing her with the other hand and looking dotingly at her eyes. They both wear Mughal-style peshwaz and gold bordered muslin veils and are seated on a terrace against a row of red poppy flowers. They share a compositional parallel with the female-couple in an 18th-century Mughal painting from the Deccan (Figure 17). In it, the homoerotic couple are also seated on a terrace-garden, but entertained by musician-maids, who conjure up the nocturnal romantic mood.



Figure 14. Mughal-style Rajput painting from Kishangarh, attributed to Nihalchand, Sotheby's.



Figure 15. Mughal painting, possibly Deccan, Accession No. 1967-30-394, The Samuel S. White 3rd and Vera White Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art

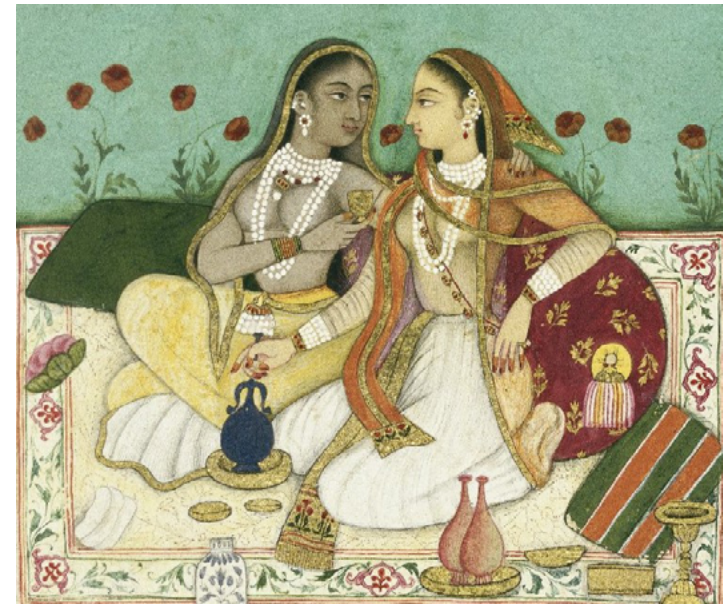


Figure 16. Mughal Rajput painting from Bikaner or Mewar, Accession No. 78.260.4, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Poster, Brooklyn Museum



Figure 17. Mughal painting from the Deccan, Accession No. CIRC.227-1922, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Interpreting the Courtly Visual Culture of Female Homoeroticism

So, how do we read all these paintings? Why were they painted? Could female romantic intimacy and cross-dressing in late-Mughal art have allegorical spiritual symbolism? In Bhakti and Sufi popular devotional culture in early-modern South Asia, intense loving relationship with a personalized God was idealized. In Bhakti (Hindu) tradition, particularly in Vaishnavism, male devotees emotionally and physically identified with the goddess Radha and the gopis' (milkmaids) passionate elusive love for the god Krishna (Hardy, 2014). The sexual love of devotees acquired a transcendental divine form. Gendered and sexual metaphor was also used in Sufi (Muslim) poetry to express divine love. Male Sufis often cross-dressed and identified as female-lovers and loyal-brides of the Supreme Being or Allah—symbolized as a divine-groom (Anjum, 2017). In one of the homoerotic Mughal paintings (Figure 3) from Awadh, the feminine partner has her hair tied in a topknot and a meditation band around her knees in the style of a *yogini*—Hindu female ascetic. Perhaps this painting depicted divine spiritual love through female homoeroticism? In the 16th-century illustrated Sufi romance *Pem Nem* from the Deccan court of Bijapur, and in subsequent paintings, a noblewoman taking the guise of a *yogini* and going in search of her beloved was a popular trope (Hutton, 2011). Perhaps the 18th-century Awadhi painting was inspired by earlier Deccan paintings and the *yogini* has come to visit her lover—in this case a princess cross-dressed as a prince? Sufi or Bhakti spiritual metaphor, however, does not explain the Mughal paintings depicting female homoeroticism, where both partners are feminized and not cross-dressed. Divinity was rarely symbolized in feminine-form in the Bhakti or Sufi tradition, except in Shakti worship popular in Eastern India, where devotion for the goddess was expressed through filial love for the mother, instead of romantic love (McDaniel, 2004).

Another possibility is that the Mughal paintings of female homoeroticism were commissioned by male patrons for a voyeuristic heterosexual male gaze? We do know that some of the female-couple paintings were executed by male artists such as Govardhan, Ruknuddin, Nihalchand, among others. In some paintings, a male voyeur surreptitiously peeks into the scene of female homoeroticism (Figure 18), suggesting that the patron and target consumer was a man. While male subjects in Mughal paintings were usually individualized with distinguishable

features, female subjects were generic idealized beauties. Deindividualization veiled elite women from public visibility, which makes it very difficult to read the identities of the courtly women in these homoerotic paintings.



Figure 18. A Mughal-style painting showing a male voyeur viewing the scene of female homoeroticism, Mullock's Auctions.

Historical research into the lives of elite Mughal women demonstrate that they had considerable property, political power, access to avenues of independent wealth-generation through tax-collection, trade-investments, and inheritance (Lal, 2005). Mughal women commissioned paintings and [female-painters](#) had privileged access into the *zenana* (harem). Perhaps some of the numerous paintings of female intimacy were commissioned by propertied elite women? Perhaps they wished to

partake in the romantic-spiritual Sufi and Bhakti devotional culture by creating a feminine homoerotic visual idiom? Or perhaps they simply depicted what they experienced in the gender-segregated space of the zenana? In a courtly culture where marriages were arranged, and polygamy and concubinage were the norm for elite men, it is possible (probable?) that elite women got their emotional, romantic, and sexual desires fulfilled by companions, maidservants, and slave-women. That is not to suggest that the South Asian zenana was an embodiment of the Orientalist harem fantasy or Foucauldian *ars erotica*.⁵ However, if we understand sexuality and gender expression to be socio-culturally constructed, the courtly patronage of female homoeroticism, visual and poetic idealization of female intimacy and cross-dressing, perhaps shaped the realities of South Asian elite women?

British Colonial Regulation of South Asian Gender, Sexuality, and Intimate Labor

Mughal paintings of female intimacy were collected by British merchants and officers of the East India Company, which was transforming from a trading company to a colonial power in late-18th-century India, with the decline of the Mughal Empire. The four Awadhi paintings (Figures 3, 4, 5, 6), for instance, were part of the war-loot of the British governor Robert Clive after defeating the Nawab of Awadh in the Battle of Buxar (1765). In fact, the word “loot” itself entered the English lexicon from Indian vernacular, around this time. Clive took the Mughal Album to his Wales estate, from where it made its way to the Victoria and Albert Museum. Most of the Mughal paintings of female homoeroticism are housed in European and North American museums and in Euro-American private collections today. The history of their display and viewership in 18th-19th century Britain is yet to be written. European collectors probably valued them as exotic-erotic curio objects, or authentic testaments of Mughal life, validating the Orientalist hypersexualized harem myth.

The “detestable and abominable vice of buggery” had been criminalized by both the church and state in England since the 16th Century (Fone, 2000, p.

⁵ Michel Foucault (1978), in his *History of Sexuality* (Volume 1), argued that while sexuality was studied as a science in Europe (*Scientia Sexualis*), in the “Orient”, sexuality was concerned with pleasure and erotic arts (*Ars Erotica*). While the focus of my article is homoeroticism in South Asian courtly paintings, I do not wish to reproduce Foucault’s Orientalist binary of *Scientia Sexualis* in Europe versus *Ars Erotica* in India.

215). Although British homophobia was mainly targeted against men through the anti-buggery laws, there were cases in early modern Britain where women found guilty of sex with maidservants were charged with witchcraft (Goodare, 2016). The disgust towards female homoerotic labors in British colonial mindset is evident from the 1796 court testimony of a British planter in India. Accused of assaulting the slave-girls of his Indian mistress (bibbee), William Hunter argued in his “self-defense” that “the *Bibbee* called me into her apartment to shew me how her slave servants passed the night—I then saw two women naked one upon the other with some fictitious instrument made of cloth bound round with string doing as Fathers and Mothers do.” Highlighting the sexual debauchery of Indian women was Hunter’s strategy to exculpate himself in the newly set-up colonial court. While providing “proof of the indelicacy and infamy of the Bibbee’s conduct,” he highlighted his own “shock” and “abhorrence” at “seeing her five servants laying totally naked” (Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultation, 1796, No.22).

British colonial travelers were equally shocked and disgusted by cross-dressing and non-binary gender expressions they witnessed in South Asia. A British merchant encountering the Maratha royal army, mentioned “a considerable number of human beings called hermaphrodites” who “wear the habit of a female and the turban of a man” and worked as cooks. He accompanied “several medical gentlemen” into a “private tent” to “examine some of these people: my visit was short, and the objects disgusting” (Forbes, 1834, p. 359). A British officer visiting Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s court in Punjab noted that equestrian masculine female servants “armed with bows and arrows” were state employees receiving land-grants for their services. These militant masculine women fascinated yet horrified the officer who argued that the Sikh ruler needed to tame these “Amazons” (Osborne, 1840, p. 95). A British visitor to the Awadh court described “female bearers” headed by “a great masculine woman,” “female sepoy,” and “men-like women pacing up and down before various entrances to the female apartments.” All these “living curiosities of the palace,” the writer expected, would not only sound “strange to European ears,” but would remind readers of the superior domestic morals of Englishmen, stating: “Truly it is not in Europe that one discovers the greatness of England!” (Knighton, 1855, pp. 201-213). Such examples of Oriental debauchery legitimized the British annexation of Awadh in 1856.

As the English East India Company acquired political power in India, they introduced new policies regulating South Asian gender, sexual, and domestic fluidity. In Bengal, the colonial government reconstituted Islamic law to legally differentiate “wives,” “concubines,” “slaves,” and “servants”. Slave-women and their children, who had enjoyed property and upward-mobility in elite households, were now declared illegitimate and disinherited (Chatterjee, 1999). In Awadh, the British attempted to limit the important political and managerial power of emasculated and castrated men (*Khwajasarai*) by reducing them to menial eunuch-slaves (Hinchy, 2014). After the British Crown took over Indian administration, legislation was introduced to criminalize gender and sexual fluidity that did not sync with Eurocentric heteronormativity and gender binary. The Obscenity Acts, the 1861 Indian Penal Code’s criminalization of homosexuality as “unnatural,” followed by the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act’s criminalization of eunuchs and transvestism, solidified British colonial attempts to govern South Asian gender and sexuality (Bhaskaran, 2002; Hinchy, 2019). Internalizing colonial legislation and Victorian sexual morality, South Asian nationalists began purging homoeroticism from the new national canon of art and culture (Vanita, 2002).

In 1944, the Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai was taken to the colonial High Court of Lahore on charges of obscenity. In her semi-autobiographical short story *Lihaaf* (Quilt), Chhugtai narrated her stay as a young girl in the mansion of an elite Muslim lady Begum Jaan, whose elderly husband had “tucked her away in his house with his other possessions” while he himself philandered with “young, fair and slender-waisted boys”. It was Rabbu, a maid and masseuse, who “brought life back” into the melancholic Begum with her intimate oil-massaging. Rabbu spent all hours of the day in the Begum’s bedroom or bathroom, rubbing “some part of her body or the other,” much to the disapproval of the other maids. Through the eyes of the frightened yet fascinated young girl, readers glimpse the bizarre quivering shapes the Begum’s quilt takes every night, and “slurping sounds” from underneath the quilt with Rabbu inside (Chhugtai, 1941, pp. 36-40). The quilt metaphorically concealed female homoeroticism from colonial laws. The elite Muslim community of Lahore who brought Chhugtai to the colonial court, however, deemed female homoeroticism a greater moral threat than the story’s backdrop of male homoeroticism (Gopinath, 2005). Chhugtai was acquitted, but the postcolonial Indian and Pakistani governments adopted British colonial law to

penalize artists and writers violating the sanctified heteronormative definitions of national culture.

Queer Intimacy as Domestic Labor, Sexual Labor, and Care Labor

In *Lihaaf* (Quilt) the homoerotic relationship is also a mistress-maid domestic labor relationship. Rabbu satisfies the Begum’s emotional, physical, and sexual needs, but the Begum does not provide reciprocal bodily pleasure to Rabbu. In fact, the maidservant’s bodily needs, emotions, or desires are hardly explored; she gets paid for her services and has negotiated benefits for her son—the Begum “bought him a shop, got him a job in the village”. The cross-class hierarchical nature of their relationship is emphasized by the Begum’s “white and smooth” skin and “exquisitely formed” waist, in contrast to the “dark”, “short, stocky” Rabbu with a “paunch” and face “scarred by small-pox” (Chhugtai, 1941, pp. 36-40), which mark the maidservant’s body as low-status, undesirable, fit for providing rather than receiving sexual pleasure. Many of the Mughal paintings of female homoeroticism are similarly inegalitarian and involve one-way transactions of bodily pleasure and intimate care from maidservants, slave-women, and servitor-companions to the Begum or noble-woman.

Male homoerotic couples in Sultanate and Mughal representations almost always had a hierarchical gendered power-relationship, with the elite bearded adult as the dominant masculine experiencer of pleasure, and the young beardless slave-boy or wine-bearer as the effeminate subordinate provider of pleasure. Slave-boys, emasculated and penetrated by masters, enhanced the master’s virility, but underwent dishonor themselves; they were stigmatized as *gandu*—one who is anally penetrated (Penrose, 2006). The subordinate-lover becoming agentive and penetrating his master’s body was unacceptable; it was sexually and politically subversive, even treason (Chatterjee, 2002). While there are numerous textual records of Mughal noblemen’s passion for their slave-boys, it is impossible to know whether the slave-boys themselves consented, or enjoyed these amorous labors, or whether they were coerced by threats, poverty, or hopes of upward mobility.

In the Mughal female-homoerotic paintings, hierarchies of age or wealth are not visually explicit. Unlike the rigid power-relation of male master-slave

love, gender roles and sexual agency appear more flexible, even reversible, in the female-homoerotic paintings. In three of the Awadhi paintings (Figures 3, 4, and 5), the noble-woman is cross-dressed as a prince and assumes the role of the dominant lover, yet in other paintings (Figures 6 and 17), one of the maids is cross-dressed, or the dominant lover herself assumes the role of the wine-server. Subtle hierarchies would perhaps be discernible to art connoisseurs of the time. In paintings depicting erotic feminine care-labor (Figures 19, 20, 21), mistress-maid hierarchies are quite evident—the maids anoint the mistress’s nude body with aromatic oils, massage her limbs, or tend to her bath. The bodily care-labor provided by maids enabled the mistress to become the doted eroticized *nayika*-heroine (Dehejia, 2005). We do not know if, in real life, maids enjoyed these intimate labors or how/if they were compensated.



Figure 19. Mughal painting from the Ouseley Album, Shelf Mark: MS. Ouseley Add.171, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford



Figure 20. Mughal-inspired Pahari painting, Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2018.115, The Cleveland Museum of Art



Figure 21. Mughal-inspired Pahari painting, Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2018.105, The Cleveland Museum of Art

While explicit depictions of female homoeroticism were rarer, a Mughal-style illustration attributed to a 17th century translation of the medieval sex-manual *Kokashastra*, depicts an aristocratic mistress sexually penetrated by a harem-guard. The female harem guard, with her forehead shaved, takes on a masculine role, armed with a bow and phallic-arrow (Figure 22). The ancient Sanskrit sex-manual *Kamasutra*, propounded that it was the duty of older female servants to teach young mistresses the arts of pleasure; elite courtly women could supposedly fulfill their sexual desires with the aid of maidservants: “Having dressed the daughters of their nurses, or their female friends, or their female attendants, like men, they accomplish their object by means of bulbs, roots, and fruits having the form of the lingam (phallus)” (Vatsayana, n.d. p. 124). Undated Mughal-style paintings (Figures 23 and 24) of unknown provenance illustrate this sexual labor performed by maids with carrots and cucumbers. These paintings were certainly meant for pornographic male consumption, rather than their purported claim of female sexual instruction, but they naturalize mistress-maid relations as the site of female homoeroticism. In order to avoid reproducing for contemporary readers the pornographic voyeurism historically intended for a heterosexual male gaze, Figures 22, 23, and 24 have been censored here.

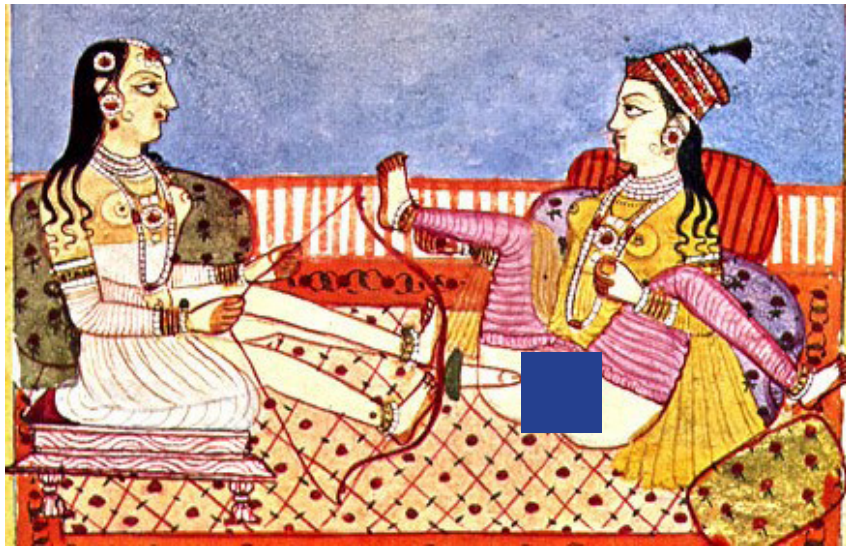


Figure 22. Mughal painting attributed to the seventeenth-century sex-manual *Kokashastra*, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris



Figure 23. Mughal-style painting, Reference No. 526769i, Wellcome Collection, London

Figure 24. Mughal-style painting, Reference No. 459816i, Wellcome Collection, London

The Mughal paintings of female homoeroticism, particularly the ones from late-18th-century Awadh, were commissioned around the same time as the emerging genre of *Rekhti* poetry in Awadh celebrating female same-sex love between mistresses and maids. The spatial setting of *rekhtis* was the household; the bedroom, kitchen, the bath, household furniture were integral to expressions of lust and longing for the *dogana/zanakhi* (female lover). Servitor-lovers in *rekhtis* frequently acted as the mistress’s liaison between the domestic space and the outside city space. High-born servitor companions like *sakhis/sahelis*, low-status maidservants such as *domnis*, as well as bonded female slaves such as *bandi*, *laundi*, *dada*, all played prominent roles in *rekhti* poems as confidantes,

go-betweens, and frequently provided sexual service to their mistresses (Petievich, 2002; Vanita, 2012) in Awadhi poetry. Mistress-maid hierarchies were momentarily reversed when the mistress claimed to be the one enslaved by love towards her slave-girl/maidservant, even while ordering the latter to pleasure her properly: “Don’t put the weight of your thighs on my thighs/ How trashy is your way of taking positions, *domni*/ I am your slave, bound to you with raw thread/ Please agree to what I say, *domni*” (translation of a rekhti by the poet Qais in Vanita, 2012, p. 109). Contextualizing the Mughal-style paintings in the broader Mughal imperial courtly culture of celebrating mistress-maid homoeroticism, such as rekhti poetry, further demonstrates the usefulness of domestic labor as a lens to look at courtly depictions of female same-sex love.

Conclusion: Contemporary South Asian Legacy of Historical Queer Labors

While embracing a queer identity in South Asia today can be agentive and subversive, contemporary South Asian queer intimacies sometimes continue to be shaped by age, class, and [caste hierarchies](#), as studies have shown. In continuation or emulation of Mughal pederasty, in some Pashtun-regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, young boys (kidnapped or purchased from impoverished families) continue to serve as slave-concubines of military leaders (Wijngaarten & Rani, 2011). Trained in the arts of dance, these [dancing boys](#) provide coercive romantic and sexual labor to their powerful patrons. In contemporary India, Hijras and transwomen—despite legal recognition as the Third Gender—are forced into [exploitative underpaid sexual-labor](#), without adequate access to healthcare, and vulnerable to police brutality, [sexual violence](#), and HIV. Abusive and coercive forms of historical queer labors have left their legacy on contemporary South Asia. In popular cinematic celebration of female homoeroticism in recent years, for instance in the Bollywood film *Dedh Ishkiya* (Chaubey, 2014), the locus of female same-sex love remains the unproblematic hierarchical mistress-maid relationship, with the maid providing emotional and erotic labor to her mistress, in a tribute to *Lihaaf* (Chhugtai, 1941).

The Mughal-style paintings examined in this article present a valuable visual archive of the rich history of South Asian female intimacy. The homoerotic paintings from pre-colonial India add to the growing body of evidence that refutes the religious right’s claims that homosexuality is “against Indian culture” or a

corrupt “anti-Indian” Western import. British colonial legislation criminalized and stigmatized the courtly visual culture of same-sex love in India, which declined in the 19th century also from the loss of aristocratic patronage with the rise of British imperialism in the subcontinent. European and North American art collectors and museums in the 19th and 20th centuries actively collected and continue to collect Mughal-style paintings of female homoeroticism, often dismembering them from their original albums and manuscripts. The lack of visibility of these Mughal-style homoerotic paintings in Indian museums and Indian art collections in the 20th century may have strengthened right-wing assumptions that same-sex female love never existed in Indian history. In order to challenge the brazen (and often militant) homophobic claims of religious groups, scholars are sometimes pushed too far in the opposite direction, which results in the glorification of pre-colonial South Asia as a utopia of gender non-conformity, same-sex love, and female agency. While celebrating the rich pre-colonial history of same-sex intimacy, the lens of labor reminds us that the Mughal Empire was not some sort of a queer paradise. Same-sex intimacies and cross-dressing were shaped by domestic hierarchies, domestic labor relations, and domestic slavery. The homoerotic Mughal-style paintings of mistresses and maids remind us that labor can be a useful lens to read queer intimacies in South Asian history.

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