

## **DECIPHERING THE UNSPOKEN: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE POLITICS OF BEAUTY AND GENDER IN *THE MIRROR OF BEAUTY* BY SHAMS UR REHMAN FARUQI**

**Hasnat Fayyaz**

BS in English literature, Govt. APWA Graduate College for Women Lahore

**Faiza Jabbar**

Lecturer in English Language and Literature

Govt. APWA Graduate College for Women Lahore

### **Abstract:**

This dissertation undertakes a critical feminist exploration of Shams Ur Rehman Faruqi's *The Mirror of Beauty*, focusing on the intricate ways in which beauty and gender are constructed, performed and politicized within the context of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Indian society. By employing the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler's concept of performativity and Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, this research delves into the complex interplay between gender, beauty and power as depicted in the novel. It particularly examines the character Wazir Khanam, whose life story serves as a poignant illustration of the societal expectations and constraints imposed upon women of that era. Through a detailed analysis of the text, this study uncovers how beauty standards are not merely aesthetic ideals but are deeply entwined with power structures that enforce gender norms and perpetuate inequalities. By highlighting the untold and often overlooked stories of women, it critiques the traditional notions of femininity and the societal forces that shape the identities of female characters. This research also illuminated the ways in which Faruqi's portrayal of beauty challenges and subverts these norms, offering a nuanced perspective on the resilience and agency of women in the face of oppression. Hence, by scrutinizing the unspoken and marginalized experiences of women, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which literature reflects and shapes societal attitudes towards gender, beauty and power.

### **Keywords:**

Performativity, Intersectionality, Marginalized, Femininity, Politicized

### **Introduction**

Shamsur Rehman Faruqi was an influential Indian Urdu writer, poet, literary critic and theorist, widely regarded as one of the most important figures in modern Urdu literature. Faruqi played a significant role in reviving the classical tradition of Urdu literature while also engaging with modern literary theories. Among his notable works are *The Sun that Rose from the Earth* (2014), *Sawar Aur Doosary Afsany* (2001), *Tanqidi Afqar* (1982), *Kai Chaand Thee Sar-e-Asman* (2006), which he later translated into English as *The Mirror of Beauty* in (2013). This research focuses on exploring the politics of gender and beauty in Faruqi's masterpiece, *The Mirror of Beauty*. While the novel offers a vivid portrayal of 19<sup>th</sup>-century India, particularly the cultural and social life, it also provides critical feminist perspectives, challenging the rigid traditional roles of beauty and gender in shaping the lives of women.

By delving into the feminist themes of “*The Mirror of Beauty*”, this study uncovers the layered narratives that challenge and redefine traditional notions of femininity, offering a critical lens on the socio-political landscape of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Shams Ur Rehman Faruqi’s “*The Mirror of Beauty*” (Kai Chand Thee Sar-e-Asman) is an expensive and intricately detailed novel set in the vibrant yet tumultuous backdrop of 19<sup>th</sup>-century India. The narrative centers on Wazir Khanam, whose life is a testament of beauty, intellect and resilience. Through the lens of Wazir Khanam’s experiences, Faruqi provides readers with a profound exploration of the socio-political and cultural milieu of the time, revealing how beauty and gender intersect to shape the lives of women. This research delves into the feminist dimensions of the novel, scrutinizing the politics of beauty and gender as depicted in *The Mirror of Beauty*. Utilizing the feminist theories of Judith Butler and Kimberle Crenshaw as theoretical frameworks, this study aims to uncover the underlying feminist themes and their broader implications.

*The Mirror of Beauty* is not just a historical novel: it is window into the world where the personal is inextricably linked to the political, and where the private lives of women are shaped by the broader societal dynamics. The historical setting during the decline of the Mughal Empire, a period marked by significant social and political changes, provides a rich context for analyzing the feminist themes embedded in the narrative. Faruqi meticulously reconstructs this era, depicting the complex interplay of power, culture and identity. Understanding this context is essential for comprehending the feminist perspectives that emerge from the novel.

Feminist literary criticism offers valuable tools for analyzing how literature mirrors and challenges gender norms and power structures. Many feminist theorists have provided their theories which offer a framework that are crucial for understanding the construction and perpetuation of beauty and gender roles in society. Judith Butler’s feminist theory, particular her concept of gender performativity as articulated in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (1999), Alongside Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality as explored in her seminal articles, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989), and Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (July, 1991), are pivotal to this research.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity is fundamental for analyzing the depiction and subversion of gender roles in *The Mirror of Beauty*. Butler posits that gender is not an innate quality but a series of acts and performances shaped by societal norms. According to Butler’s theory, these repeated performances create the illusion of a stable gender identity. In the novel, Wazir Khanam’s life is the vivid illustration of this concept. She navigates a world where her identity is constantly performed and reperformed, both by herself and those around her. Her beauty and intellect become tools for negotiating her position in a patriarchal society, but they also restrict her with certain expectations and constraints.

Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is another critical framework for this analysis. Intersectionality examines how various societal identities such as race, gender, class and sexuality intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. In *The Mirror of Beauty*, Wazir Khanam's identity as a courtesan places her in a unique social stratum. Her beauty and talent are both celebrated and stigmatized, reflecting the complex interplay of gender and class. This intersectional analysis helps to uncover how Wazir Khanam's experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping systems of discrimination and advantage.

One of the main objectives of this research paper is to explore the politics of beauty, the beauty plays dual role, both a source of power and a means of constraint in *The Mirror of Beauty*. Wazir Khanam's beauty grants her influence and agency, allowing her to navigate the patriarchal society to some extent. However, it also subjects her to objectification and commodification. This paradox mirrors broader feminist concerns about the societal expectations placed on women's appearances. Beauty, in this context is a double-edged sword. It can empower women but also limit their autonomy by reducing them to mere objects of desire. The novel also critiques the male patriarchal gaze, which reduces women to mere objects of desire. However, Faruqi also depicts Wazir Khanam's efforts to assert her agency and resist such objectification. Her character challenges the passive roles traditionally assigned to women in literature and society, striving to define her identity on her own terms despite the societal constructs.

Faruqi's narrative structure, with its detailed descriptions and shifting perspectives, allows for a multifaceted exploration of Wazir Khanam's character and the society she inhabits. The story telling approach aligns with feminist literature's emphasis on giving voice to women experiences and highlighting the complexity of their lives beyond reductive stereotypes. By focusing on the lived experiences of Wazir Khanam and other female characters, Faruqi offers a rich tapestry that challenges and critiques traditional gender dynamics. This approach not only questions entrenched gender norms but also reveals the ways in which political constructs of gender influence personal and societal roles, thereby engaging with the politics of gender in a profoundly nuanced manner.

Moreover, the novel's depiction of social class and beauty provides an intersectional analysis that aligns with Kimberle Crenshaw's work. Wazir Khanam's position as a courtesan places her in a liminal space where her beauty and talents are both celebrated and stigmatized. This intersectional perspective reveals how social class and gender intersect to shape her experiences and the broader societal attitudes towards women.

Overall, Shams Ur Rehman Faruqi's *The Mirror of Beauty* offers a rich text for feminist analysis, illuminating the intricate interplay of beauty and gender, and power in a historical context. By examining the novel through the feminist theories of Judith Butler and Kimberle Crenshaw, this research uncovers the ways in which beauty politics and gender dynamics are portrayed and critiqued. Faruqi's work not only reflects the complexities of women's

lives in 19<sup>th</sup>-century India but also provides insights into contemporary discussions on gender and beauty. Through this analysis, the novel emerges as a powerful critique of the societal norms and power structures that shapes women's lives, both in past and present.

### Literature Review

The concept of beauty is fluid, with no fixed definition, and has evolved significantly in South Asia over centuries, shaped by cultural, religious, and socio-political factors. Historically, beauty standards have been deeply intertwined with social status and cultural ideals, reflecting the complex hierarchies of South Asian societies. In ancient times, features such as large eyes, smooth skin, and a slim waist were considered ideal, often linked to divinity and virtue. However, these ideals also imposed rigid standards, marginalizing those who did not conform. The medieval period saw the influence of Persian and Mughal cultures, introducing new beauty ideals like fair skin, almond-shaped eyes, and long dark hair, celebrated in art and literature. During British colonial rule, Western beauty ideals emphasizing fair skin and modernity became dominant, further reshaping beauty standards in the region.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a pioneering figure in Indian literature, critically examined the beauty politics of his time in several of his works, including *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), *Indira* (1873), *Bishabriksha* (The Poison Tree) (1873) and *Devi Chaudhurani*. *Rajmohan's Wife*, highlights the superficial beauty standards imposed on women, where physical appearance often determined their worth and societal value. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee also addresses gender politics in several of his works. *Rajmohan's Wife*, considered the first Indian novel written in English, revolves around Matangini, a woman who challenges her abusive marriage and societal norms to protect herself and her loved ones. Munshi Premchand, an Indian writer famous for his modern Hindustani literature. His work *Sevasadan* (1919), reflects socio-cultural milieu of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century. It follows the journey of Suman, a young woman who becomes a social reformer. *Sevasadan* critiques the commodification of women's beauty in a patriarchal society. It explores how societal expectations of beauty can trap women in roles that limit their potential and emphasizes the need to recognize women's inner worth and contributions.

Gender roles in South Asian literature and society have undergone substantial changes over time, reflecting broader socio-cultural transformation. Early South Asian literature, such as the Vedas, Upanishads and epic narratives like the *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana*, depicted women in varied roles. While some texts highlighted women's strength wisdom and autonomy (e.g., figures like Draupadi and Sita), other reinforced patriarchal norms, emphasizing chastity, obedience and domesticity. During the medieval period, Bhakti and Sufi movements provided a platform for women to express spiritual and poetic voices. Female saints and poets like Mirabai and Lal Ded challenged conventional gender roles, advocating for personal devotion and inner freedom. However, societal norms largely confined women to domestic roles, emphasizing purity, piety and submission to male authority. Literary works

often mirrored these expectations, with women portrayed as dutiful wives and mothers.

The colonial period brought new challenges and opportunities for women. Reform movements, such as those led by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, advocated for women's education and traditional gender norms. Post-colonial literature witnessed a significant rise in female voices, deciphering the unspoken and exploring feminist themes. Writers like Ismat Chughtai, Kamala Das, and Mahasweta Devi explored the complexities of women's lives, critiquing patriarchal structures and advocating for gender equality. Contemporary literature continues to grapple with evolving gender roles, addressing issues such as body politics, sexual autonomy and intersectional identities. Authors like Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri highlight the ongoing struggles and resilience of women in a rapidly world.

Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990), argues that the concept of beauty is a socially constructed and politically motivated myth designed to oppress women. According to Wolf, beauty is not an objective or universal standard but a socially constructed ideal that varies across cultures and historical periods. The pursuit of this ideal affects women's relationships and self-esteem, with the beauty myth intensifying as a backlash against feminist advances. This reaction undermines women's confidence and reinforce traditional roles. Wolf critiques the pervasive and damaging impact of these socially constructed beauty standards on women's lives, arguing that they reinforce patriarchal power and control. She urges women to reject the beauty myth and define beauty on their own terms. In *The Mirror of Beauty*, the socially constructed and politically motivated standards of beauty oppress the female protagonist, reflecting Wolf's argument about the myth and its impact on women.

Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) explores how Western culture imposes unrealistic beauty standards on women, leading to widespread dissatisfaction. Bordo illustrates how societal norms discipline women's lives, enforcing conformity to these ideals. This control is linked to broader issues of power and gender inequality with cultural norms maintaining patriarchal dominance. She calls for a critical examination of these norms and urging women to resist oppressive beauty standards and embrace diverse body types. Bordo's work encourages a feminist re-evaluation of beauty standards and advocates for resistance against these powerful societal pressures. Bordo's critique of Western culture's unrealistic beauty standards is evident In *The Mirror of Beauty*, through the societal pressure on women to conform to specific ideals, which disciplines and controls their lives.

In her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler argues that gender is not an inherent quality or stable identity but rather a series of actions and behaviors, or performances dictated by societal norms. By recognizing gender as performative, women can challenge traditional gender norms and expectations through alternative performances and expressions of gender. Butler critiques certain stands of feminist essentialism, which assume a universal female identity or essence, arguing that such

essentialism excludes and marginalizes the women who do not fit the normative definitions of gender and sexuality. Gender Trouble challenges conventional notions of gender identity arguing that gender is a performative and socially constructed concept rather than an innate or stable trait. Butler's work encourages a reevaluation of gender norms and promotes a broader spectrum of identity. *The Mirror of Beauty* showcases the performative nature of gender, as the characters navigate and challenge traditional gender norms, resonating with Butler's theory that gender is a series of actions and behaviors shaped by societal expectations.

Sandra Bartky's *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, (1990) contends that femininity is not an inherent trait but rather a social construct shaped by societal norms and practices that dictate how women should behave and present themselves. Bartky delves into how the internalization of these societal standards results in psychological oppression, causing women to view themselves through the lens of male-dominated culture. She examines the gender power dynamics that maintain women subordination and addresses the reduction of women to their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness which undermines their agency and reinforces male dominance. Bartky advocates for women to resist the internalization of oppressive norms and practices, urging feminist consciousness-raising and collective action to dismantle patriarchal structures. In *The Mirror of Beauty*, the societal expectations of femininity and beauty that the female characters grapple with echo Bartky's analysis of psychological oppression and gender power dynamics.

Bell Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman*, (1981) is a seminal work that examines the intersections of race, gender and class. The book addresses the impact of slavery, the struggle for emancipation, and the ongoing fight for equality. Hooks critiques mainstream feminism for neglecting the experiences and struggles of women, who were marginalized due to their sex, color and identity, advocating for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminist theory and activism. She explores how systemic racism and sexism shape the identities and lived experiences of black women, influencing their self-perception and social standing. Hooks calls for solidarity among women of all races and backgrounds, promoting a united feminist movement that addresses the needs and voices of all women. In *The Mirror of Beauty*, the intersectional struggles of women are mirrored in the portrayal of characters who navigate complex social hierarchies, reflecting hooks' emphasis on the multifaceted nature of oppression.

In her seminal work *Gendered Lives*, (2011), Julia Wood's posits that gender is not biological determinant but socially constructed through communication and cultural norms. Wood delves into how individuals express their gender identities via various behavioral choices and communication styles, highlighting the significant influence these expressions have on personal and professional relationships. Furthermore, she examines the intersectionality of gender with other identities such as race, class and sexuality, which creates a tapestry of diverse experiences encompassing both privilege and oppression.

Wood's analysis extends to gender expectations that permeate interpersonal relationships including friendships, romantic relationships and family dynamics.

*The Mirror of Beauty* by Shams-Ur-Rehman Faruqi has accumulated significant attention and praise from literary critics for its rich narrative, historical depth and intricate portrayal of 19<sup>th</sup>-century India. The novel has been praised for its historical authenticity, rich characterization and the thematic depth. Critics have highlighted Faruqi's skillful integration of language, poetry and cultural commentary, making it a significant contribution to contemporary Indian literature. William Dalrymple, in his review "A Mirror for Princess", published in "The New York Review of Books" on October 23, 2014, commends Shams Ur Rehman Faruqi's *The Mirror of Beauty* for its meticulous research and narrative prowess. Dalrymple highlights the novel's historical authenticity and its detailed portrayal of 19<sup>th</sup>-century India. He emphasizes Faruqi's skills in integrating Urdu and Persian poetry into the storyline, enhancing the narrative's cultural richness. Dalrymple writes, "Faruqi has recreated a world with the precision of a miniaturist, where the tiniest detail carries a weight of meaning." He praises Faruqi's ability to bring historical figures and cultural settings to life, offering readers an immersive experience that vividly captures the era's essence.

Katherine Schofield, in her review "A Woman's World in a Man's Empire," published in "The Guardians" on September 25, 2014, focuses on the novel's exploration of gender roles and the plight of women in a patriarchal society. Schofield appreciated the nuanced portrayal of the protagonist, Wazir Khanam, and the myriad challenges she faces. She commends Faruqi for his detailed characterization and sensitivity with which he addresses the complexities of Women's lives in 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Schofield notes, "Wazir Khanam's story is a poignant reflection of the broader societal constraints that women navigated, making her a compelling and relatable figure."

In her review "The Subcontinent Reimagined," published in *Dawn* on August 3, 2014, Muneeza Shamsie delves into the cultural and historical aspects of *The Mirror of Beauty*. Shamsie praises the novel for its rich depiction of cultural milieu and the seamless integration of historical events into the narrative. She highlights the Faruqi's use of language and poetry, which adds depth and authenticity to the story. Shamsie writes, "Faruqi's narrative is a tapestry woven with threads of history and culture, where each detail enriches the reader's understanding of the period." She also discusses the novel's critique of colonialism and its impact on Indian society, adding, "The novel poignantly critiques the colonial forces that sought to reshape and control the subcontinent's diverse cultural landscape."

Rakhshanda Jalil, in her review "Resurrecting the Past," published in *The Hindu* on July 19, 2014, focuses on the historical and literary significance of *The Mirror of Beauty*. Jalil appreciates Faruqi's ability to resurrect the past with vivid detail and authenticity. She commends the author's portrayal of the social and cultural landscape of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and his skillful use of language. Jalil states, "Faruqi's prose is a bridge between the past and the

present, inviting readers to explore a world that is both distant and intimately familiar.” She highlights the novel’s exploration of beauty standards and the societal constraints imposed on women, noting, “The narrative intricately examines the dual standards of beauty and virtue often imposed by a patriarchal society.”

Ritu Menon’s review “A Mirror of Many Facets,” published in *Outlook India* on August 10, 2014, examines the thematic richness of *The Mirror of Beauty*. Menon discusses the novel’s exploration of identity, beauty and power dynamics, praising Faruqi’s multifaceted characters and his ability to weave together various themes and narratives. She writes, “Faruqi’s characters are not mere participants in a story; they are embodiment of the era’s cultural and social ethos.” Menon also notes the novel’s critique of colonialism and its impact on cultural and social structures in India, stating, “Through his narrative, Faruqi dismantles the colonial narrative, giving voice to those whose stories were often overshadowed.”

### **Research Methodology**

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing close textual analysis to meticulously examine the feminist themes embedded in *The Mirror of Beauty*. Employing the theoretical frameworks of Judith Butler and Kimberle Crenshaw, the study interprets the novel’s portrayal of beauty and gender unraveling the nuanced ways in which these themes are presented. By drawing on feminist theory, the research delves into how the novel challenges the traditional notions of femininity and critique the societal expectations placed upon women. Additionally, the study incorporates the historical analysis to contextualize the narrative within the broader socio-political landscape of 19<sup>th</sup>-century.

### **Research Objectives**

This research aims to critically analyse the politics of beauty and gender in *The Mirror of Beauty* by Shamsur Rehman Faruqi through a feminist lens. It explores how beauty and gender roles are constructed and contested in the novel, with a focus on marginalized voices and narratives. The study also examines Faruqi's challenge to conventional portrayals of Indian women, offering a more nuanced representation of womanhood in 19th-century India. By applying feminist theories, this research addresses gaps in existing literature, enhancing understanding of the female protagonist’s struggles and broader social constraints, while contributing to contemporary feminist discourse.

### **Research Questions**

- 1: How do the politics of beauty and gender intersect and reinforce patriarchal norms in *The Mirror of Beauty*?
- 2: In what ways *The Mirror of Beauty* represents marginalized voices and narratives, particularly those of women, challenge or reinforce dominant beauty standards and gender roles?
- 3: How are Indian women portrayed in Western Literature and how does Shamsur Rehman Faruqi critique and challenge these portrayals in his novel to offer a more nuanced representation of Indian women?



## Data Analysis and Discussion

### Challenging Beauty Standards and Gender Norms

This research examines the feminist dimensions of beauty and gender politics in Shamsur Rehman Faruqi's *The Mirror of Beauty*, focusing on the unspoken voices of 19th-century Indian women. Set during a period of colonial rule and rigid social hierarchies, the novel provides a nuanced depiction of beauty standards shaped by Persian, Mughal, and Indian influences, portrayed through characters like Wazir Khanam. Faruqi's narrative not only highlights the aesthetic ideals of the time—such as fair skin and almond-shaped eyes—but also emphasizes the strength and resilience of women who defied traditional gender roles. This study challenges the Western depiction of Indian women as inferior by uncovering the suppressed stories of their intellect, autonomy, and resistance to patriarchal norms, offering a more authentic representation of their historical significance.

The beauty standards are deeply embedded in the cultural ethos, reflecting the confluence of artistic, poetic and social values. Faruqi captures these ideals through detailed descriptions of attire, jewelry, and cosmetics, where women's rich fabrics and intricate ornaments symbolize both beauty and social status. As Gimlin noted, "Style and appearance preferences display a complex social identity that both relevant for and shaped by class identity." (Gimlin 2001, P.23). Central to the novel is Wazir Khanam, "a celebrated beauty, a woman of a tempestuous reputation whose charm was nothing short of miraculous" (Faruqi 792). Admired across Kucha Rai Man and beyond, she strictly adhered to purdah, never fully revealing herself. Faruqi writes, "Chotti would never open the door to the full, far less come out into the street. She would dismiss them with a word or two from behind the door, or from behind a half-open window in the balcony" (Faruqi 191). Her adherence to purdah, despite her renowned beauty, reflects the intricate dynamics of gender, modesty, and societal expectations in 19th-century India.

In *The Mirror of Beauty*, Wazir Khanam's beauty plays a pivotal, double-edged role in shaping her destiny. While it grants her relationships with powerful men like Marston Blake and Navab Shamsuddin Ahmad Khan, it also subjects her to societal judgments and attempts to control her. Her beauty becomes both a source of empowerment and vulnerability. Faruqi writes, "By the time she was eleven, she became celebrated as a budding beauty...so that visitors came with excuses or pretenses simply to look at her" (Faruqi 190), highlighting the societal obsession with her appearance. Wazir's beauty is mythologized, positioning her as central to the novel's exploration of beauty and its consequences. Her sisters, Anwari and Umdah Khanam, also conform to the era's beauty standards, being described as "both extremely good-looking" and walking "like the beauties of Kashmir" (Faruqi 188).

In 19th-century India, societal norms dictated that women were primarily destined for marriage, seen as the path to prosperity, with men as their guardians. Bari Begam, Wazir Khanam's elder sister, encapsulated this belief, stating, "Girls are born so that they should be married, they should have a home" (Faruqi 198). However, Wazir Khanam rejected these domestic roles,

leveraging her beauty for her own purposes and openly expressing disdain for marriage, declaring, “I am not the marrying type, I am not marrying anymore” (Faruqi 198). She perceived herself as strong and independent, challenging the notion that she needed a man for protection by asking, “Why should he guard me? Am I a little baby that someone will make off with me? Please listen carefully, I fear no one” (Faruqi 198). This defiance highlights a significant feminist critique of gender norms and reflects her desire for autonomy and control over her life. Faruqi critiques the limitations imposed on women through Wazir’s resistance to traditional roles. She questions the male-dominated society, saying, “Let men do what they will, no blame will ever attach to them... we will at once be condemned as loud-mouthed harlots” (Faruqi 199). Through Judith Butler’s feminist theory, the novel illustrates her concept of gender performativity: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (Butler 43).

In 19th-century India, societal beliefs mandated that women could not live independently and had to rely on male support, facing rejection and ostracism if they defied these strict gender norms. As Judith Butler states in *Gender Trouble*, “Discrete gender are part of what “humanizes” individuals within contemporary culture indeed we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Butler 178). This underscores the rigid gender roles imposed by society and the harsh consequences of deviating from them. After Marston Blake's death, Wazir Khanam underwent a significant transformation, facing the need to earn a living. She resolutely rejected becoming a prostitute, refusing to sell her skills or body for survival. Faruqi notes, “She had no desire to dance or sing for her livelihood” (Faruqi 258). Wazir saw herself as no less than a Begum, a title that embodied her dignity and grace, and her confident presence exuded an allure that captivated men. Despite pressures from figures like Bari Begum (Anwari Khanam) to marry, Wazir found this suggestion unacceptable. As Faruqi writes, “She wanted to be the arbiter of her own fate,” (Faruqi 262), strongly believing that a woman could thrive without a man’s support. Wazir embodies the principle that, “A woman’s chastity is tested when she’s without a covering,” (Faruqi 262), challenges societal expectations and asserting her autonomy

History has often overlooked figures like Wazir Khanam, who, despite her complexity and influence, remains an underrepresented symbol of female empowerment and resistance against patriarchal norms. As the mother of renowned poet Navab Mirza Khan, known as “Dagh Dihlavi,” and a poet herself under the pen name “Zuhrah Dihlavi,” she created remarkable verses, with Faruqi noting, “Wazir Begum, it is a marvelous poem! By Allah, your search for new ideas is unrivalled.” (Faruqi 661). Although her ghazal were popular, it was never published or recognized by historians. However, her ghazals were never published or recognized by historians. Society was often ill-prepared to accept such a formidable woman, viewing her with suspicion and fear.

In *The Mirror of Beauty*, Wazir Khanam defies the expectations placed upon women in, where they were often required to follow men’s commands and

speak in muted tones. She boldly asserts her value beyond mere beauty, emphasizing her intellect and independence. Wazir declares, "I don't want to be the image or caricature of anything or anyone. I am good-looking, I have sharp mind, and I have no member that is broken or paralysed. Show me a man to whom I could be inferior" (Faruqi 199). This assertion highlights Wazir Khanam's resistance to patriarchal norms and her commitment to living on her own terms. Faruqi critiques the hierarchical society that confines women, emphasizing Wazir's remarkable agency and resilience despite restrictions on education. She displays exceptional knowledge of fashion trends and luxury ornaments, showcasing her autonomy, as Faruqi notes: "Chhoti was crazy about such things. She knew the name of all ornaments, however arcane, and she had an excellent notion of the various kinds of fabrics and their prices. She was well aware of what fashionable women of the upper classes were wearing in Calcutta, Hyderabad and Lucknow" (Faruqi 191). Additionally, Wazir demonstrates her poetic talent, having composed her first poem at fourteen under the mentorship of the renowned poet Shah Nasir Sahib. Faruqi remarks, "Rather than the creation of a fourteen years old unmarried and purdah observing girl, the ghazal gives the impression of being the work of a mature poet who has had experience of the company of master poets" (194). This showcases Wazir Khanam's exceptional intellect and creativity, challenging the societal norms that sought to limit her potential.

In *The Mirror of Beauty*, Shamsur Rehman Faruqi gives voice to the voiceless women of the past, particularly through the character of Wazir Khanam, who critiques the gender inequality faced by women in 19th-century India. Wazir embodies Faruqi's portrayal of Indian women as they challenge male dominance and gender discrimination. Judith Butler's theory, which asserts that "Gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence." (Butler 33) supports this analysis. Wazir's resistance is highlighted when William Fraser objectifies her, stating, "Actually, I was rather keen to meet you, convers with you, and again propinquity with you," (Faruqi 441), where "propinquity" implies sexual congress. This affront infuriates Wazir, prompting her to challenge societal norms: "Why should anyone from the bazaar, or whenever feel empowered to push his claim over a woman, and the woman be not permitted to open her mouth even in protest? Are women goats and sheep to be driven whenever one listeth?" (Faruqi 441). Through this interaction, Wazir asserts that women should not be used at men's will and must speak out against inequality, reflecting the broader feminist struggle against reducing women to mere objects of desire.

Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, Wazir Khanam's intellectual beauty, skills, and confidence shape her identity as a powerful woman. She prioritizes asserting her agency over her opponents' origins or societal status. Her relationship with Marston Blake further enhances her empowerment, particularly during the conflict with Blake's relatives, William and Abigail Tyndale, who sought to raise Wazir's children, Badshah Begum (Sophia) and Muhammad Amir, according to their culture. As Faruqi

notes, “Aby (Abigail) saw it as a strategy to wean away Marston Blake’s children from their mother’s influence. Chotti (Wazir Khanam) disliked this cordially,” (Faruqi 228). Following Blake's death, Wazir fought for her children's future, insisting on an education rooted in Hindi and Persian and maintaining her cultural values. Her assertive declaration to the Tyndales, including, “I will bear all expenses to be incurred upon my children for their upkeep, and for everything else- They will be educated in Hindi and Persian- I will not agree to their wearing English dresses alone- I should have freedom to visit them when I like. I should be consulted in matters related to their marriage.” (Faruqi 253). The Tyndales were taken aback by her assertiveness. As Faruqi said, “The Tyndales had not expected an Indian woman to negotiate with so much skills and then shake hands on the deal like man” (Faruqi 253). Wazir’s negotiation with the Tyndales, and her insistence on her children upbringing, exemplifies her strength and the unique intersection of her identity traits.

Wazir Khanam becomes increasingly strong and resilient, a transformation likely catalyzed by the harrowing incidents she faced. Wazir Khanam even as a mother did not consider her son, Navab Mirza, born of her union with Navab Shamsuddin Ahmad Khan, as her problem solver. Navab Mirza was barred from meddling in Wazir’s affairs. He recognized the immense power his mother wielded as an independent and formidable woman. Wazir Khanam’s conversation with her son underscores her stance on male dominance. She asserted,

The community of males believes that all the mysteries of the world, all the secret concerns of all hearts, are accessible to the male. And even if some are not, the male believes that he has the power to decide on behalf of everyone and everything. Men believe that women are just as they perceive them to be in temperament, in preferences, and hates, and they know that their beliefs about women are founded on their own superior understanding and superior faculty to solve problems (Faruqi 725).

This statement reveals Wazir Khanam’s self- sufficiency and awareness of her worth. She vehemently criticized the male attitude towards women, who were often regarded as mere objects, by saying, “If women are not what men believe or want them to be, the faulty lies at women’s doors. She should have been as the male believes her to be.” (725)

### **A Feminist Perspective on the Representation of Indian Women**

In Western literature, the Orient is often portrayed as incapable of self-representation, resulting in distorted images of Indian people. However, in the post-colonial era, individuals from the Global South began reclaiming their narratives, challenging conventional representations. Faruqi’s novel *The Mirror of Beauty* exemplifies this reclamation by critiquing misrepresentations of Indian culture and asserting that Eastern individuals possess their own identities and intellectual abilities. Through the character of Wazir Khanam, Faruqi highlights the power of Indian women, often objectified in 19th-century Western narratives. Paul Mark Scott in *The Raj Quartet* notes, “The Indian woman was a mere plaything for the British officer’s pleasure,” reflecting this

objectification. Figures like William Fraser further exemplify this view by treating women as possessions. Faruqi's work underscores the importance of recognizing the agency and complexity of Indian women's identities.

Wazir Khanam challenges dominant gender norms, fully aware of her strength, beauty, and intellect. She refuses to be objectified, as seen when she sharply rebuffs William Fraser's advances, remarking, "Navab Resident Bahadur, please do not try to play those ragas foe which you do not possess the requisite instruments." (Faruqi 441). Fraser is shocked by her assertiveness, contrasting with the societal view that women lacked the power to voice objections, as Faruqi reflects this view stating that, "women have no strength, no daring." (Faruqi 447). Judith Butler's concept of identity as a "signifying practice" from *Gender Trouble* supports this perspective, "To understand identity as a practice and as signifying practice, is to reckon with the persistence and the difficulty to that reworking." (Butler 187). Faruqi uses Fraser to reflect broader antifeminist attitudes, highlighting how his view of Wazir as a mere sex object underscores the struggle for women to assert their autonomy against objectifying norms.

Wazir Khanam, as an unconventional woman, prioritized honor above all else declaring, "I have nothing. But I hold dear my honor and I value my dignity." (Faruqi 729), While she longed for love, she placed greater importance on security and respect, viewing her relationship with Navab Shamsuddin Ahmad Khan as a means to achieve societal stability. As Bell Hooks notes: "Feminist thinking teaches us all, especially how to love justice and freedom in ways that foster and affirm life." (*Feminism is for Everybody*, 71). After Khan's death, Wazir emerged more resolute, making independent decisions that defied traditional gender roles. Living in a male-dominant society that often-perceived Indian women as voiceless objects, she challenged these norms, facing societal backlash. Faruqi captures this reaction, stating, "The world always looked at such women with suspicion and fear; with fear came expectation of easy piking, and it was not a new belief either: the woman had strayed and every man had the right to hold her by the hand." (Faruqi 785). By resisting these constraints, Wazir Khanam not only asserted her strength but also redefined the role of women in her society.

In 19th-century society, men like Navab Mirza, son of Wazir Khanam, were seen as the natural providers and protectors of their families, embodying patriarchal norms. Mirza, believing it was his duty to guide and support his family, initially accepted this role. As Judith Butler said, "Gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender and without these acts there would be no gender at all" (Butler 178). However, his understanding of power shifted after deep conversations with his mother. Wazir Khanam, challenging societal expectations, asked, "How did you conclude that it was your duty to solve my difficulties for me?" (Faruqi 725). She revealed her strength, wisdom, and independence, showing Mirza that she was not constrained by gender roles but capable of making her own decisions.

Wazir Khanam's refusal to conform to societal norms and her determination to control her destiny illustrates a profound feminist stance,

challenging the idea that a woman's worth depends on male support. As Judith Butler argues that, "The distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (Butler 11), a concept reflected in Wazir Khanam's life. Her autonomy, witnessed by her son Navab Mirza, showed she was not reliant on men for validation. "I always understood and believed that my mother's words, my mother's beliefs, my mother's decisions, always outranked all men." (Faruqi 725), marking a significant shift in his understanding of gender roles, as he admired his mother's strength and wisdom, challenging patriarchal norms. Wazir Khanam defies traditional gender norms through her relationships and actions, asserting her identity beyond male-defined roles.

Wazir Khanam challenges the gender hierarchy by questioning male superiority, asserting that strength transcends gender. As Judith Butler suggests, "The performance of gender subversion can indicate nothing about sexuality or sexual practice. (preface1999; xiv), Wazir's reference to Sufi saint Baba Nizamuddin Sahib's quote, "When a tiger appears in a jungle, no one asks if it's male or female." (Faruqi 726). critiques the idea that power is inherently male. She further invokes the example of Rabia Basri, a female saint, to resist traditional norms. Her profound questions on gender roles, "What status does the male have in our world? What is the female doing here? I need answers to these two questions." (Faruqi 745). highlight her critical examination of patriarchal expectations.

In 19th-century India, women were often deemed illiterate and confined to domestic roles, yet *The Mirror of Beauty* challenges this notion through characters like Wazir Khanam and Umdah Khanam. Both women defy societal expectations, with Wazir excelling in poetry "She was a true master in the art of composing poems," (Faruqi 193). and Umdah pursuing calligraphy and embroidery, "She was more interested in calligraphy and embroidery work." (Faruqi 192). By applying Judith Butler's theory that, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results." (Butler 33). resonates with Wazir's subversion of traditional gender roles. Through her education and talents, Wazir disrupts conventional femininity, embodying Butler's idea that gender is constructed through performance and can be redefined through alternative expressions Faruqi further challenges gender norms by portraying women in roles of power and influence, such as female security guards, "A tall powerful Central Asian Turk woman, fully armed and in male battle dress." (Faruqi 459). demonstrating women's capacity for strength and material prowess. This depiction destabilizes fixed gender categories, showing that women can perform traditionally male roles.

Wazir Khanam critiques the patriarchal system that places men above women by default. In this male-dominated society, women were considered inferior and incapable of handling their own affairs. Bell Hooks explains this dynamic: "Patriarchal masculinity teaches men that their sense of self and identity, their reason for being, resides in their capacity to dominate others." (Hooks 70). Wazir challenges this hierarchy, asking "Why should the son assume the mother to be incapable? Why should it be held that since she is a

woman, only a man is entitled to help her when she is in need of help?” (Faruqi 726). She questions the male-dominated educational and religious teachings, “Who wrote these books? Your qazis, your muftis, your elders, who are they, if not men?” (Faruqi 726). This male-dominated narrative instilled the belief that men were superior to women. As Faruqi noted, “Men believe in a natural hierarchy, placing themselves above women. Men believe that the world’s business is run by them, and them alone” (Faruqi 726).

Wazir Khanam’s commanding presence and sharp intellect defied patriarchal norms, as seen in her conversation with Ziauddin Ahmad, where he was left speechless by her insightful remarks: “Ziauddin Ahmad Khan found himself at a loss for an appropriate reply.” (Faruqi 790). This showcases her rhetorical prowess and the respect she commanded. Renowned for her beauty and charm, Wazir defied societal expectations by rejecting suitors who saw her as an object, asserting her worth and independence. Her ability to challenge male pride and maintain autonomy made her a revolutionary figure against the patriarchal norms of her time.

This research amplifies the suppressed voices of women from the past, revealing their marginalized experiences and resilience through the novel. The protagonist’s struggle with societal beauty standards reflects the pressures women faced in a patriarchal context. By depicting characters who resist or conform to gender norms, the novel illustrates women’s resilience and subtle acts of defiance. This study deepens our understanding of women’s historical struggles and strength, enriching feminist discourse.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, this article explores the intricate and multifaceted representations of beauty and gender politics through a feminist lens, drawing on the theories of Judith Butler and Kimberle Crenshaw to deepen our understanding of these dynamics within the novel. Through a detailed literary analysis, this study demonstrates that, the novel’s portrayal of beauty as a site of both power and vulnerability. The character’s experiences, especially Wazir Khanam’s experiences with beauty reveal societal expectations and the pressures placed on women to conform to certain aesthetic ideals. Wazir Khanam’s relationships with beauty serves as a critique of patriarchal structures commodification and control over women’s body. Using Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, this research examined the constructions of gender identities and performances. Butler’s concept that gender is not a stable identity but rather a repeated performance has been instrumental in understanding the character’s behavior and choices. Wazir Khanam challenges these rigid societal norms by demonstrating that women are strong enough to defy gender expectations and make their own decisions. The novel’s depiction of characters who resist or conform to traditional gender roles illustrate the fluidity and complexity of gender, challenging the binary understanding and highlighting the performative nature of gender.

Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality has been used as essential tool in analyzing how overlapping identities, such as race, gender, class and physical appearance intersect to shape the character’s experiences. This framework has allowed to see beyond a single-axis analysis of gender, revealing the compounded nature of discrimination and privilege. Wazir Khanam’s beauty, education, intellect and power intersect to made her whole identity, which was so strong overall that no one can get control over her. She

holds power and control on her body and her life, which is prominent in her life experiences and dialogues. Despite Wazir Khanam, there are other minor female characters, who showed resistance against gender and societal norms that tried to dictate their behavior. In a nutshell, it can be concluded that, *The Mirror of Beauty* serves as a powerful critique of the politics of beauty and gender, using its rich narrative and complex characters to unravel the unspoken rules governing women's lives. Both of the feminist theories have provided a robust framework for this analysis, offering a deeper understanding of the interplay between identity, power and societal norms. This research advocates feminist discourse by highlighting the importance of intersectionality and the performative nature of gender.

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