

Illuminating the Life of the Light of the World: Indu Sundaresan's portrayal of Nur Jahan in *The Twentieth Wife*

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ABSTRACT:

As Virginia Woolf has rightly observed women are absent in history books and are mentioned only as queens or relatives of ruling monarchs. Literature has always given them space but only as much as society allows. Any woman who oversteps the limit is subjected to severe criticism, ostracism, and punishment. They have been marginalised and neglected, and whenever they have been given significance it is only as ideal, domesticated, obedient submissive creatures readily acceptable to the patriarchal setup all over the world. This has remained constant throughout various centuries. However, in the wake of feminism and with writing becoming a tool for women for self-expression there has been a spread of fiction that depicts the strength of women and re-writes history from a new perspective. Culturally speaking the Mughal Era was very orthodox and restrictive about women's behaviour. The purdah system and other customs made women even more housebound than they were before. They were controlled and monitored even in the harems. But, there is writing that has re-created history based on some scanty accounts that are available to authors like Indu Sundaresan. She made full use of this material to write her Taj Trilogy and to show that the Mughal Queens like Nur Jahan were not mere puppets in the hands of their husbands and masters. They were capable of exercising their wills and creating space in a closed world for themselves as wives but also assumed powerful roles as administrators and queens. They reflect women's empowerment at a time when it could not be expected or granted. This paper studies *The Twentieth Wife* by Indu Sundaresan to assess the character of Nur Jahan who was an extraordinary woman in a world that generally was oppressed.

Index Terms: History, Mughal culture, Women's literature

INTRODUCTION

History is a record of historical incidents involving the human race. The social, cultural, political, economic, and religious lives of individuals during a certain era in history are all included in the historical spectrum. Fiction refers to imaginative narratives in prose and verse. In a work of fiction, the characters and the events are invented ones. Even though it may be based on a true story, fiction is not part of reality and does not represent real people or give factually accurate representations of anything. Due to the interweaving of fact and fiction, historical fiction developed into a genre with academic standing and a tool for creativity rebuilding, and remaking the past. The traditional paradigm places literature and history at two opposing poles: literature at the imaginative pole and history at the realistic pole. While history is a true fact of the past, produced via meticulous academic research, literature is a domain of pure imagination. Both are recognized as crossing the boundaries between reality and fiction in the context of modern narrative theory. The past few years have seen an increased entwining of history with fiction, which has been the subject of analysis by novelists, historiographers, and philosophers of history. Historical fiction makes the argument that it reveals hidden aspects of historical figures as well

as more information about the past. The historical fiction by Indu Sundaresan is a synthesis of the social history, political, and cultural aspects of the Mughal Era. The feelings and inner voices of the major and minor Mughal historical figures are depicted by Sundaresan.

Indian-American novelist Indu Sundaresan was born and brought up in India. She grew up with her father, Captain R. Sundaresan, who was a fighter pilot in the Indian Air Force. As a result of his transfers, Indu's family lived practically everywhere in the nation, allowing them the opportunity to see almost all the country's great palaces and forts. Indu grew up listening to stories of India's kings and queens, which undoubtedly influenced her historical sense to a significant degree. Sundaresan has done M.A. in Economics and M.S. in Operations Research in the United States, and she began writing shortly after. Sundaresan has written six books so far. Her books are *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), *The Feast of Roses* (2003), *The Splendor of Silence* (2006), *In the Convent of Little Flowers* (2008), *Shadow Princess* (2010) and *The Mountain of Light* (2015). She received the Washington State Book Award for her first novel, *The Twentieth Wife*, in 2003.

The captivating Mughal empire has been the subject of Sundaresan's writing. She highlights the underrepresentation of women in history in her works *The Twentieth Wife*, *The Feast of Roses*, and *Shadow Princess*. She draws attention to the dearth of accurate accounts of the remarkable lives of the Mughal royal women. Sundaresan exposes the patriarchal historiographic structure that ignores women as historical subjects. Through her Taj Trilogy novels, Indu Sundaresan emphasises the contribution of royal women in running the Mughal Empire. Many writers have researched the Mughal period, but Sundaresan stands out for her discovery of the veiled women's power which had a huge impact on the course of Mughal history.

History books highlight men who made significant contributions in various fields, such as politics, inventions, and transitional periods. Women are commonly portrayed in history books in secondary or insignificant positions, and their acts are frequently criticised. Indu Sundaresan's historical fiction focuses on important women's lives during the Mughal era. She takes a different approach in this regard. In many of her interviews, she admits to intentionally focusing on female historical figures that have historically been under-represented. She aims to present these issues from a female perspective. Sundaresan was captivated by the character of Nur Jahan. Empress Nur Jahan deserves to be remembered as a remarkable woman whose contributions to government and society marked both her and her husband's reign. She was a woman whose genius and determination overcame every impediment to her aspirations, and whose love and loyalty to her husband influenced the destiny of the Mughal Empire. Her role is more than just that of a wife. She is ambitious and utilises her intelligence to gain control of the enormous Mughal kingdom. The author tells a love story in which the woman, despite her limitations of living in a Harem behind a veil, aspires to and achieves the power of dominating the entire country.

Sundaresan has selected a woman who influenced the course of history. She was a remarkable woman who left a lasting legacy for future women. *The Twentieth Wife* is the first novel in the Taj Trilogy. This novel follows Mehrunnisa's journey from childhood to accomplishing her ambition of marrying Prince Salim (Jahangir) and the challenges she faces along the way. She has skillfully and accurately described her protagonist by staying as near to historical facts as possible while bringing her to life through her vivid imagination. In these historical love and fiction tales, her woman character wields power only in the way a seventeenth-century Indian woman could- from behind the veil, entering into the King's zenana ahead of all other women by beauty and brilliance. Mehrunnisa, at the age of 8 years was very clear about her goals. She knew that one who married Prince Salim might also become an Empress. Mehrunnisa's aspirations are clear when she says, "What bliss to be in the Emperor's harem, to be at court." (TTW 21). She began constructing her

dream after learning that princes did not always marry princesses and that such weddings were political. She had a strong belief that Prince Salim would marry her. Even as a little girl, she had self-confidence. Mehrunnisa saw no barriers in her marriage to Prince Salim as she did not consider her father's rank inferior. This young girl's desire to marry Salim is not a mere fantasy. Mehrunnisa kept the dream alive in her heart till it was realised. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* states that "Many girls long persist in stubbornly following their dream throughout the real world: they seek a male who seems superior to all others in his position, his merits, his intelligence; they want him to be older than themselves, already having carved out a place for himself in the world, enjoying authority and prestige; fortune and fame fascinate them." (Beauvoir 372)

Mehrunnisa belonged to a distinct category of women during her time. Young women often associate love with physical beauty, but she prioritized mental strength over physical looks. She believed that physical attractiveness alone could not win a man's heart. She believed that a woman's education, knowledge, and mental capacity were necessary for winning the heart of her beloved. Mehrunnisa's mindset differed from the traditional ideas where "Women are told from infancy" that if "they be beautiful, everything else is needless." to win over men. (Wollstonecraft 33). Mehrunnisa's capacities were developed through education and study. Ghias Beg, her father, treated both his boys and girls equally, unlike many fathers of the period. She was "taught scriptures, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and the classics" at par with male children of the house. (TTW 46). Mehrunnisa valued learning and prioritized it. She learned not just arithmetic and other academics, but also painting, sewing, embroidering, and overseeing servants, which were considered vital qualities for a young girl to have to marry in that society.

Ruqayya Begum served as a living role model for her as she wielded control over all of Zenana and influenced the Emperor himself. Her relationship with Ruqayya grew stronger with age. Ruqayya's approachable nature lets her feel at ease with everyone, including Akbar. "A talent she should learn too, Mehrunnisa decided. One day Salim would value her as much because of it." (TTW 62). This talent helped her in achieving her goal of marrying Salim. She valued Ruqayya's advice on various topics. "'Listen and learn, Mehrunnisa,' she said. 'A woman must not be completely reliant on a man, either for money or for love.'" (TTW 63). Feminism emphasizes economic freedom as a fundamental right. Women believed in economic independence even in the 17th century, which was unexpected. Financially secure women have greater freedom to pursue their desired lifestyle with self-esteem, satisfaction, and self-identity.

Mehrunnisa was lively from a young age. This attitude led her to form a great bond with Ruqayya in the royal harem. Her wedding to Ali Quli was inevitable, despite her reluctance to give her approval. When Ghias Beg tells Mehrunnisa about the Emperor's will and asks if her mother told her, she fiercely responds, "'What does Maji have to do with this? I am the one who is to be married to a soldier... 'Why?'" (TTW 77). She expresses an awareness affirming her right to choose her life mate, which was a radical step at the time, bringing her feminist consciousness to the forefront. According to Simone de Beauvoir, "Resentment is the reverse side of dependence." (Beauvoir 661). Mehrunnisa's resentment demonstrates her independence. Women's independence is often viewed as detrimental to their personality. Mehrunnisa values liberty but also supports societal norms. She cannot oppose her marriage to Ali Quli. Patriarchal arrangements can impact social behavior and lead to conformity. In public, women often conform to patriarchal norms, notwithstanding their personal beliefs. Mehrunnisa's feminism was limited to the social norms of her time. Although Sundaresan's Mehrunnisa protests patriarchal control over her life and openly expresses her feelings for Salim, which was rarely seen at the time, it is only her affection for her

father and concern for his reputation, which she prioritises over her happiness that eventually subdues her. She abandons her aspirations and marries Ali Quli, despite his 17-year-old age difference and lack of compatibility. Thus, Mehrunnisa's feminism stayed within the confines of the established social structures of the time. Though she was not ready to marry Ali Quli, she gave her consent. The first half of the love story ended in a forced separation between the lovers. Mehrunnisa's marriage to Ali Quli was a failure, leading to his death as a traitor. Mehrunnisa returned to the court and she started living with Ruqayya as her lady-in-waiting, along with her daughter.

Despite living in the seventeenth century Mehrunnisa, believes in gender equality. She has a strong desire to enter the masculine domain and go against the restrictions placed on her because of her gender since she was a young child. She has little regard for the advice her mother has given her about how to act like a lady. She aspires to emulate her brothers in whatever they do. In the novel *The Twentieth Wife*, Sundaesan describes that Mehrunnisa used to dress like a man with mustaches go out with her brothers, and used to drink wine. (TTW 41-42). Thus, Mehrunnisa desires to experience the world freely and without any limitations, just like men do. She desires to indulge in activities such as *gilli danda*, which were traditionally reserved for boys. She mastered the game and forced her brother to sew a button that he couldn't. She believed that girls could perform tasks traditionally meant for boys. Mehrunnisa's disguised visit to *nashakhana* demonstrates her keen interest in the man's world. She constantly opposes the secondary rank given to girls in her family. She thinks that emotions are the same for all genders. She is dissatisfied with the constraints imposed on girls and women while boys and men are free to do as they want.

Mehrunnisa freely shares her feelings with her father, Ghias, who informs Asmat, "She asks why a woman has to stay in the house when a man can go and come as he pleases." (TTW 45). Even as a young child, Mehrunnisa's emancipated thoughts cause her to question the double standards prevailing in society. She disregards the stereotypical ideas about women. The limitations become more obvious and tangible as she approaches adolescence. With this newfound insight, Mehrunnisa's love for Salim grows stronger, as she realises that it can also lead to the fulfillment of her yearning for independence and power. Mehrunnisa had moved to her father's home after leaving the harem. A window opens during Arjumand and Khurram's marriage, allowing Mehrunnisa to fall in love again with Jahangir. Rather than approaching her as an Emperor, Jahangir went to her father's house as a suitor several times. Jahangir became increasingly enthralled with Mehrunnisa's intellectual abilities as they conversed, in addition to her extraordinary physical attractiveness. Jahangir asked Mehrunnisa to return to the harem so he could take care of her since he yearned to spend his life with her.

Mehrunnisa was not happy as the Emperor did not mention anything about marriage. She had no desire to be a concubine as they had no title. According to Simone De Beauvoir, "Woman wants a substantial position in the world." (Beauvoir 391). Mehrunnisa also desires the same. She perceived the request to become a concubine as a threat to her sense of self-worth. When it came to defending her dignity, she was never afraid to respond to the Emperor of Hindustan. She pointed out to him that since the passing of her husband Ali Quli, she never relied on the Emperor or her father. Financially independent women tend to have more self-confidence. It gives women power. It is admirable how confident Mehrunnisa is in herself. Mehrunnisa has been portrayed by Indu Sundaesan as a lady of the modern-day era. The reader is reminded of the modern woman by Mehrunnisa's strong will and self-assurance since she has all the qualifications and financial security to be resentful of having to fight up for herself. As Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second*

Sex rightly remarks, “Today it is becoming possible for her to take her future into her own hands instead of entrusting it to a man.” (Beauvoir 392). But, in the seventeenth century, Mehrunnisa was able to free herself from all the emotional grips that were still in place, speak her mind to the astounded Emperor Jahangir of Hindustan, and prepare to face the severity of the outside world because she is a wise lady. This love tale demonstrates her mental toughness, tenacity, and level of focus. Her ascent to prominence as an Empress and her statesmanship were shaped by these attributes.

Despite strong resistance from Jagat Gosini (the second wife of Jahangir), Jahangir married Mehrunnisa on 23rd May 1611. After marrying Mehrunnisa, Jahangir presented her with the title ‘Nur Mahal’. After five years he bestowed upon her another title ‘Nur Jahan’ which means ‘Light of the World’. Ellison Banks Findly in his book *Nur Jahan: Empress of the Mughal India*, writes: “...the new title betokened what in fact Mihrunnisa was almost from the beginning, the legal and emotional wellspring from which the strength of this generation of rule was to emanate.” (Findly 41). Mehrunnisa was thereafter addressed as Nur Jahan. Due to her personality, Nur Jahan became the most influential person in modern history. Jahangir was greatly influenced by her. Nur Jahan was perhaps the only queen to have had such a strong influence over an emperor in the history of medieval India. She was the most well-known and influential empress in the history of the Mughal Empire. After getting married to Jahangir, Nur Jahan swiftly rose to the position of empress, having unlimited influence over the Mughal ruler.

Nur Jahan was a clever, powerful, and beautiful woman who had her husband’s undivided attention. She eventually won the emperor’s affection, making her a powerful woman in the court. She had a significant impact on Jahangir and indirectly ruled the state. She discussed state problems and military matters while sitting next to the emperor, and when necessary, she even presided over independent courts. Jahangir usually sought her advice before making any significant choices. Nur Jahan also had the authority to issue orders. She is the only Mughal empress to have issued a law known as ‘Nishan’, which is a privilege only accorded to male royals. She assumed control of the throne during Jahangir’s rule, being the only Mughal empress to have done so. She was the first Mughal woman to hold a position of great distinction and honour. Her decisive skills were beyond comparison. These incidents are also confirmed by Ellison Banks Findly in his book *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India*, “Her dignity and influence grew day by day. Coins were struck in her name. The name of “Nur Jahan, the Queen Begam,” was jointly affixed to all the farmans. Her power grew to the point that the King existed only in name.” (Findly 43)

Nur Jahan was very creative. Several mentions have been made of her creativity in the novel. She established new fashion trends based on her Persian traditions. Persian art and culture gained great prestige at the court as a result of her position. She was a fashion enthusiast who introduced different forms of clothing that became immensely popular. Her skills in designing, embroidering, jewellery, and stitching clothes make her a trendsetter in women’s clothing and fashion. The clothes that she designed were loved by the harem inmates. She came out with innovative ideas in clothing and jewellery. A famous historian Abraham Eraly also talks about her creativity in his book *Emperors of the Peacock Throne*. Both her beauty and talent were admirable. She was a talented artist who created new carpets, brocade, and lace patterns. Her dressing sense was very modest and elegant. She normally wore white and soft colors. Her designs for clothing and jewellery were in vogue for more than a century. (Eraly 274). As a result, Nur Jahan has indelibly impacted India’s history and culture.

She was a great patroniser of the arts. She ordered the construction of magnificent structures known as sarais that tourists and traders could use as a resting area. Her patronage of architecture was huge and she even built beautiful palaces. She was bold and had excellent administrative abilities. She accompanied Jahangir on his hunting trips because she was a good rider and a sure shot. She was skilled in hunting tigers. Her shooting aim was so sharp that she killed four tigers with just six bullets in a hunting expedition. She used her bravery to protect the Empire's boundaries at the time of Jahangir's absence. She was also renowned for commanding the army whenever required.

Nur Jahan believed in charity. She contributed whatever she could as part of her charitable activity. She was well known for her kindness and was very philanthropic. She collected enough dowries to support the orphans' marriages. Many people appreciated her generosity. Thus, she was not only a powerful ruler but also an exemplary of empathy, kindness, and philanthropy.

Jahangir died in October 1627. Nur Jahan's tomb, which draws a lot of visitors, was interestingly constructed by her. Many novelists and filmmakers have been inspired by Nur Jahan's incredible personality. She has served as the protagonist of numerous literary and artistic works over the years.

Conclusion

In today's world, we come across women desiring to be on par with men. Mehrunnisa embodies the essence of the New Woman, as portrayed by Nayantara Sahgal in the 20th century, who, when it came to her dignity, disregarded both deeply ingrained biases and social conventions. Mehrunnisa displayed the beliefs and deeds of a liberal woman during a time when concepts like feminism were foreign. She stood by what she thought was correct. She was a brave woman. Her interest in state politics and ability to analyse issues were enhanced by her education. She was the one who, within the constraints of her faith, carved out a place for herself in history and shaped it with education, experience, and uncommon brilliance. She has battled to strengthen and regain her identity as a woman. Her gender did not become a barrier to her achievement; instead, she successfully navigated the obstacles put in her path by the patriarchal culture. The fictionalizing of the lives of Mughal queens and princesses has lent new visibility to these almost unjustly forgotten aristocratic women. Their representation is a step towards providing an alternative version of history with a woman in the lead role, the prime focus being their struggles as well as her achievements, her strengths and weaknesses, and her rise and downfall.

Abbreviation used:

The Twentieth Wife- TTW

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