

**THE SAGA OF NUR JAHAN IN THE MUGHAL DYNASTY IN INDU SUNDARESAN'S
TAJ TRILOGY**

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Abstract:

Indu Sundaresan's Taj Trilogy is a set of three novels that explores the history of the Mughal dynasty and throws a focus on the existence and presence of women in the Mughal Empire. The Taj Trilogy consists of the works, *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), *The Feast of Roses* (2003) and *Shadow Princess* (2010). Sundaresan's intension in writing this trilogy is to review the historical record blending with fiction by giving Mughal women like Nur Jahan, Jahanara, Gulbaden Begum, Maham Anga, and many others the attention they deserve. Sundaresan contends that women's history should be given adequate space and strives to close the gender gap by giving these women the attention they deserve in her trilogy. The narrative conceives Nur Jahan as the centre in the Mughal era of the first two novels, *The Twentieth Wife* (2002) and *The Feast of Roses* (2003), while the third novel, *Shadow Princess* (2010), focuses on the life of the Mughal princes Jahanara and the construction of Taj Mahal. This paper analyses Indu Sundaresan's Taj trilogy in light of the findings of New Historicism, focusing on Nur Jahan's saga in the Mughal dynasty.

Keywords: fiction, revisiting history, women, Mughal dynasty, harem, new historicism

Introduction

Indian novelist Indu Sundaresan focuses on the lives of Mughal queens, consorts and on the whole women identity during the historical period of the Mughal empire. Sundaresan was raised in India, and she inherited her father's talent for telling fantastic tales. She was brought up on tales, folklore and anecdotes covering a wide range of topics. The University of Delaware in the United States is where she earned both of her degrees. She is currently a resident of the greater Seattle area in Washington.

She won 'The Washington State Book Award' for her novel 'The Twentieth Wife'. *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), *The Feast of Roses* (2003) and *The Shadow Princes* (2010) include Sundaresan's Taj Trilogy.

Among her other notable works include *The Splendour of Silence* (2006), *The Convent of Little Flowers* (2008) and *The Mountain of Light* (2013).

The trilogy tells story of how Mehurunnisa, the daughter of a Persian refugee, gains admittance into the Mughal harem and rises to become the most influential woman in the Mughal dynasty is told in the first two books of the trilogy- *The Twentieth Wife* (2002) and *The Feast of Roses* (2003). She comes into the picture as Jahangir's twentieth wife, but her impact on the empire is not ignorable. Sundaresan's second book, *The Feast of Roses* (2003), is about Mehurunnisa's life in the Mughal court once she achieves real authority and climbs to a position there. She rises to a position, even to sign on imperial documents and mint coins on her name. Story of prince Jahanra, grand-niece of Mehurunnisa, and her involvement in the political conflict among family members to assume the Mughal throne, as told in the third novel, 'Shadow Princes' (2010). Jahanara tends to her elderly father. She is a powerful member of her father's harem, has access to vast wealth, and falls in love with a court lord named Najabat Khan.

Using the available authentic historical sources on the Mughal period, the paper attempts to explore how Nur Jahan was able to occupy the role practically equal to the emperor as described by

Sundaresan in the trilogy. 'The Twentieth Wife' is a highly imaginative analysis of what life must have been like inside harem walls, as 'Outlook' put it.

In the interview with Dina Yuen, Sundaresan makes it clear how she has evolved the idea of *the Taj Trilogy*: "I remembered the book on Mughal harems, and went out researching and reading about Mehrunnisa, Empress Nur Jahan's life and found what I read to be fascinating. Here was this woman, a twentieth wife, who comes into the Mughal harem of Emperor Jahangir very late in his life, who then consequently becomes so beloved that she's the most powerful woman to come out of that era in Indian history." (Dina Yuen)

This trilogy chronicles Mehrunnisa's ascent to the kingdom from humble beginnings, detailing her romance with Prince Salim and the trials she must overcome to achieve her goal. While her family is travelling from Persia to India in 1577, Mehrunnisa is born. Ghias Beg and Asmat, her Persian parents, flee from starvation, poverty and harshness since they are unable to have another child. In Qandahar, Afghanistan, Ghias is helpless since he cannot support his family without a job. Next, he encounters Malik Masud, a businessman who, on his way to pay his respects to Emperor Akbar in Fatehpur Sikri, agrees to take Ghias's family with him to India. The poor parents, unable to care for their newborn, leave her by the side of the road and want to flee with the rest of their kids. As providences have other plans for the baby, the baby again reaches to her parents.

Rather than letting Mehrunnisa die, history keeps her in the kind hands of the Emperor Akbar, who is so taken by the child's dazzling beauty that he agrees to let her stay at court and be raised by his first wife, Ruqayya. In the novel, Indu Sundaresan raves over Mehrunnisa's beauty as she becomes sixteen: "Mehrunnisa - ah, she was now sixteen and seemed to live up to her name. Ghias thought. Sun of Women – she was a beautiful child, physically as well as in spirit." (The Twentieth Wife-P.58)

The court is now well-acquainted with Mehrunnisa, who is known for her stunning good looks. The way she fashions and the way she thinks about the world are both revolutionary. Akbar ensures that the child has a good education, which includes instruction in Persian and Arabic. Because of her intimidating nature, Ruqayya finds her to be inspiring. Every eligible member of the imperial court wants to marry Mehrunnisa now that she's grown into a stunning young woman.

Akbar introduces Mehrunnisa to Ali Quli Istajlu, a Persian soldier whom the emperor employs, as a pair to Mehrunnisa. Ali Quli is older, greedier and dishonest. Mehrunnisa is adamant that she would not marry him, although she has no other option. As she can't disobey Akbar she owes him everything which is why she has no choice except to marry Ali Quli.

The marriage doesn't realise into a happy one as Ali Quli always away from the family. After only five days of their marriage he leaves for a campaign and doesn't return for six months. During those six months Mehrunnisa doesn't know about his whereabouts whether he is alive or dead.

Mehrunnisa longs for a baby but gets miscarriages and they prevent her from becoming a mother. At one of her pregnancies, she goes to home early in the morning to inform her husband on her mother's advise from her parents home but finds her husband sleeping with a slave girl. Instead of repenting, Ali Quli blames Mehrunnisa for not able to give birth to a baby.

Indu Sndersan pathetically visualizes the plight of slave girls in the novel through Yasmin, a slave girl. Yasmin having no liberty on her life or body becomes pregnant because of her master Ali Quli. She is an orphan, no protector and becoming a mother without a marriage-no one cares for her and at the doors of death, gives birth to a baby boy in the shed of hens like a hen laying eggs. Moved by the in human circumstance Mehrunnisa takes the charge of the delivery as no woman comes forward for the delivery.

Ali Quli is killed after it becomes clear that he has been involved in the plan to assassinate Jahangir. As Ali Quli's wife, Mehrunnisa is under the watchful eye of the royal court for some time as they investigate her possible complicity in the plot. She must then demonstrate her innocence and show that she has nothing to do with the betrayal.

Jahangir has already had nineteen wives by the time Ali Quli dies, and he's still looking for more. She realises that she must do everything to save her life and sets out to accomplish it by vying for Jahangir's attention. One evening, Mehrunnisa meets Jahangir to pay attention to her pours wine on him. Jahangir is enamoured with her beauty and wishes to take her into his harem. Mehrunnisa refuses to sleep with him since she is aware of the repercussions of being a concubine. Jahangir, overcome with desire, makes a marriage proposal and she readily becomes his twentieth wife.

Intrigues between men in the royal court between father and son- son and father- siblings, among the blood relations in want of blood is vividly portrayed by Sundaresan. Reflection of the same in harem among the women between queens and wives in the lust of power is shown masterly by Indu Sundresan from the annals of history.

As with Sundaresan's previous novel, *The Twentieth Wife*, the events of 'The Feast of Roses' follow directly from those of the earlier book. After her second marriage to Jahangir in 1611, Mehrunnisa now becomes empress and given the name *Nur Jahan* by Jahngir. Mehrunnisa's story as Mughal Empress Nur Jahan, is elaborated in 'The Feast of Roses'. This is where 'The Feast of Roses' comes in, continuing the narrative of her later life as the Queen of Mughal India in the first half of the seventeenth century. (India Magazine)

Although Jahangir weds Mehrunnisa out of pure affection, his courtiers are now concerned that she may exert undue control over his reign. Since the wedding, the harem has done everything in its ability to undermine, but Mehrunnisa, emerges as Jahangir's most powerful wife and most trusted empress. When Mehrunnisa arrives at the *zenana*, she is older than most of the ladies in the harem, but she is still beautiful and the emperor is contend with her as his adored companion and lover.

Despite Mehrunnisa's challenges in competing with the others, she soon becomes the most powerful woman in the Mughal Dynasty. She controls from behind the screens, forming a junta with her father, brother and stepson to stay in power while she gives up everything—including her daughter—to accomplish what she wants.

'The Shadow Princess,' the last book in the Taj trilogy, depicts the Mughal dynasty in the seventeenth century. The tale, characters and events combine the Taj Mahal's splendour, love, and beauty. The drama is set against the backdrop of the building of the Taj Mahal, the tomb of Mumtaz Mahal. Shah Jahan commissions the construction of the Taj Mahal, the radiant Tomb, in remembrance of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, when she dies giving birth to their fourteenth child. This marble architectural marvel was commissioned by Shah Jahan to honour his wife and to leave a legacy for future generations. Through an imagined tale combined with history about Jahanara's life, the novel also transports the reader to India in the seventeenth century. Among Queen Mumtaz's many daughters, she held the position of eldest. Meanwhile, Shah Jahan's two sons are using the Emperor's grief to position themselves as potential heirs to the throne.

To add creativity to historical facts, historical fiction presents possible perspectives of the past. One could make the argument that history is not a strictly chronological account of previous events. Indu Sundaresan greatly exhibited this strategy in her trilogy.

Through her Taj Trilogy, Indu Sundaresan raises important questions about the depiction of Nurjahan and Jahanara, two strong women in the Mughal court. Neither is given a chance to showcase their ability or given recognition for their deeds in history, even though they are both capable of seeing the affairs as equally as men. As a result, the trilogy challenges the dominance of men throughout time. She brings to mind how gender roles are established, justified, contested and formed. Sundaresan's Taj Trilogy includes a feminist analysis of Mughal history. This demonstrates that the categories of men and women are not represented equally in the historical text and that historical fiction is a rhetorical remake of the past.

Conclusion

In her Taj trilogy, Indu Sundaresan delves deeply into the concept of multiple histories, demonstrating how important it is to have some understanding of both conventional and contemporary methods of writing history. This trilogy exemplifies how the nature, scope, technique and goals of history have evolved in the modern fiction. Indu Sundaresan's faith in penning this trilogy rests on the premise that contemporary philosophical ideas impacted contemporary literature to re-examine traditional historiography, ultimately resulting in contemporary historiography. They believed that only by considering a wide range of different narratives could the present historiography of the past be properly understood. Keith Jenkins makes an important distinction between the past and history in this regard. He says, the past and history are not seamlessly joined together, either, so just one interpretation of the past can be correct. Distance and time separate the past and history like oceans.

Indu Sundaresan has selected the most dynamic period of the Mughal Empire to exhibit contemporary historical scholarship. *The Twentieth Wife*, *The Feast of Roses*, and *Shadow Princess*, written by Indu Sundaresan, call attention to the underrepresentation of women in history and, in particular, to the lack of proper narratives about the Mughal royal women and their extraordinary lives with reference to Nur Jahan's life. In doing so, Sundaresan attempts to unravel the patriarchal structure of the historiography, which neglects women as a historical subject.

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