

Contemporary Novelists and their Novels in Indian Writing in English

Indian writing has turned out to be a new form of Indian culture, and voice in which India converses regularly. Indian writer poets, novelists, essayists, dramatists have been making momentous and considerable contributions to world literature since pre-independence era. Indian English literature has attained an independence status in the realm of world literature. Wide ranges of themes and dealt within Indian writing in English. The present book takes its shape with this aim of insinuating contemporary novelists and their novels in Indian writing in English and their contribution to the history of the Indian English literature. The special feature of the book is that the title is discussed throughout from the multi-dimension point of view by the contributors.

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**From Mehrunnisa to Nur Jahan:
The Spectacular Rise of a Female
Protagonist in Indu Sundaresan's
*The Twentieth Wife***

Dr. D. S. Choudhari

The Twentieth Wife is the debut novel of Indu Sundaresan. She was born and brought up in India. She migrated to America for a graduate degree. She mostly writes historical fiction. It is no surprise that her novels are based on historical events and characters as her father told her the stories from history of India's kings and queens. She roamed across India to visit historical places and palaces, forts and places of historical significance with her family. She has so far written six novels. She is famously known for her the Taj trilogy. The Taj Trilogy is a set of novels –*The Twentieth Wife*, *The Feast of Roses* and *The Shadow Princess* which are based on the Mogul empire in India. Especially, the females who left a lasting mark on the history are her main areas of exploration.

She has also written a collection of short stories. Entitled in the convent of little flowers. She has a novel based on the historical past of India during the freedom struggle, entitled *The Splendour of Silence* to her credit. Moreover, she has also written a novel dealing with the topic of Kohinoor diamond, *The Mountain of Light*. For her writing, besides The Washington State Award, she's also recipient of various other awards. The Light of India award for Excellence in Literature is one of them. Her novels have achieved a wide readership both in English language and Indian languages. By her writing, she has become one of the prominent female voices in English literature dealing with the historical past of India. The themes selected by Indu Sundaresan are quite unique in their ways, and her approach to dealing with her subject matter is also quite charming. She has made a

place for herself into the canon of historical fiction, mostly an untrodden path in Indian English writing by female authors.

In the post-independence Indian writing in English much attention has been paid to the kings and queens who fought against the Mogul Empire. However, less attention is paid to the Mogul empire and their harem. She has been the topic of many literary discussions and been interviewed by various print and electronic media platforms. In her interview to the new Asian writing, she commented on her art of storytelling that when she is writing a novel she has a clear idea about “what is fact and what is fiction” and also that, she is writing fiction, not a historical account of an era. Thereby, her “primary focus is to fictionalise the lives of these historical characters, and where I [she] cannot find facts – say in connecting their movements from one historical event to another – I [she] fill(s) it in with fiction. An educated guess, based on what I already know of them.” (New Asian Writing).

As such, Indu Sundaresan mixes fact with fiction, and thereby creates the romance of the lives in dramatic situations. Though every historical fiction is such type of mixture of facts and fiction, what sets Indu Sundaresan apart from others is that, besides fictionalising in only those aspects that have a necessity or possibility for creating dramatic situations, in the rest of the details of the novel, she claims that, she makes sure that all the other details should be as historically accurate as possible (New Asian Writing).

Her debut novel was awarded with The Washington State Book Award and now it has been filmed into a series airing on an OTT platform under the name of *Siyasat*. It is based on Mogul history of India. Especially, the novel is an attempt to bring to light the Mogul harem. The royal harems are only discussed in gossips, and they have never a significant place in the books of history. The members of the royal harem, including the queen, princess or the chamber-maids have hardly been a part of the scrolls of history. Unless a princess ascends the throne of a kingdom, she is never the part of historical discourse. However great an influence a queen or princess may have exerted on a king, it is always hidden from the eye of the public. Indu Sunadresan argued that:

“The women of the imperial harems (zenanas) were dismissed quite lightly in history texts, given importance only if they bore the next heir to the empire. Mehrunnisa (known to us as Empress Nur Jahan) was probably the only empress mentioned who did not produce the all-

important heir to the empire. But she too was given a fleeting “wife of Emperor Jahangir” reference” (Williamson).

Such facts point towards Nur Jahan being a striking character. *The Twentieth Wife*, the title refers to Mehrunnisa who was the twentieth wife of the emperor Jahangir. When asked about her fascination for the character of Mehrunnisa in an interview taken by Asian Fusion Girl website, she answered that her fascination for the Mogul harem came from her personal readings. She expressed her wonder that, during the seventeenth century India, the women had a great influence on the political lives of the kings and emperors. She expressed her fascination for the character of Mehrunnisa in these words.

“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. A love story, and a story of power – all true also; what more could a novelist want?” (Asian Fusion Girl).

The fascination for this character is partly due to the struggle Mehrunnisa does and the heights she reaches in the Mogul harem. The charm and beauty of the life of Mehrunnisa as depicted in the novel is also due to her being at the centre of the power corridors and her active participation in decision making process which was quite a new thing in the entire Mogul history. In the novel, Mehrunnisa stands out as the most powerful woman in the entire empire of Mogul. The members of the royal harem are generally in the margins of the power equations in the course and palaces. The novel brings into light a story of a woman’s rise above her subaltern condition. Hence here, the longest entity of society with subalternity forced upon them – a woman – rises above it and occupies a central place in the reign of a ruler. The life of Nur Jahan is filled with power, struggle, romance and life threatening situations, which account for this fascinating tale of historical romance.

The life of Mehrunnisa depicted by Indu Sundaresan is a combination of both the fact with the fiction. As she mentioned in one of her interviews, that so little is known about the life of Mehrunnisa in the historical documents because she led a very traditional Islamic life of a woman in the public sphere. She was always veiled when in public. As the historical records do not provide enough resources for understanding the personality and life of this powerful woman, what was left for Indu Sundaresan was to use her

imagination supplied by the vast reading on the subject. She explores the situation that Mehrunnisa came so late in the life of Jahangir, because she was earlier married to a Persian soldier. She concentrates the attention of the readers to the history of Nur Jahan when her life with that soldier was full of struggles and hardships. The marriage was unhappy. When she got married to Emperor Jahangir, her age was 34. Despite coming late into the life and harem of the emperor, she became his most favourite and exerted a great influence on his public as well as private life.

Mehrunnisa stands out as an ambitious woman in the novel. The rise of the character starts from an impoverished, Persian noble man's daughter who comes into exile to India to the extremely powerful woman in the whole empire. And her father had to flee their homeland in order to avoid the punishment for not paying the debts regularly. From such humble beginnings, she rises in the ranks of power. Before getting married to the emperor, she was a widow of a Persian soldier. She had a son from her previous marriage. In the harem of the emperor, she was the latest and the least powerful of the rest. In addition to her humble beginnings, her family had fallen from the grace of the emperor because her father was charged with improperly maintaining the accounts of the emperor and her brother had also been charged with attempting the murder of the emperor.

Despite these facts, Mehrunnisa could win the heart of Jahangir. She was quite aged according to the standards of the time when she married Jahangir. Indu Sundaresan clarified this dilemma of why the emperor chose her in her interview. She sees the possibility that perhaps Mehrunnisa's "intelligence, her wit, her abilities as a statesman and a politician" could be the factors that made him take the decision. These may be the only influencing factors otherwise, through "she was lovely, but a beautiful face was not an especially valuable asset in a harem filled with beautiful women" (Williamson). What attracted him the most is:

"It was not just that she was a beautiful woman. Beautiful women he could command at the snap of his fingers, the merest inclination of his head. He admired her fierce independence. Her deep sense of self, her convictions about her actions. She scorned the rules, trod on them" (Sundaresan 353).

About these two novels Indu Sundaresan opines that: "So much of how she is in the two novels is how I imagined her to be" (Wood). As historical fiction is a blend of historical facts and the writers

imagination, Indu Sundaresan's *The Twentieth Wife* fits aptly in the definition of a true historical fiction. The attempt of Indu Sundaresan has been in the novel to stick to the historical dates and places as much as possible which makes this novel more like a documentary with colouring of imagination. She has brought to life the historical conditions during seventeenth century India. Through the novel she has also created a picture of the power corridors, the battles and the households of the most in train shall people during the times. A reader can peep into the atmosphere of the royal harem and the power corridors of the powerful Mogul empire through the pages of the novel. Sundaresan described Mehrunnisa as "a strong, heroic and daring during her lifetime" About her depiction of strong female characters she expressed her fascination for the strong female characters.

Mehrunnisa fits into her definition of a strong female character as she rises above her humble surroundings through her strong-will and determination. She breaks the barriers constructed around the women of her times and leaves a mark behind in the annals of history. Indu Sundaresan's female characters in her Taj Trilogy are her endeavour "to explore in these women the possibilities of stepping beyond society's restrictions and to see then what would happen, how they would react, what would really matter to them" (Girish). Mehrunnisa is a widow who faces death in her early life and also the one who is an unwed mother that carves a way out of adversities and mishaps. These extraordinary conditions through which she has to find a way out is what makes this character one of the most memorable female characters of the Mogul history. She is also the subject of a few Bollywood biopics.

To conclude, Indu Sundaresan creates Mehrunnisa as a character with a strong will-power, intelligence, skilled with handling the power politics of the royal harem. A woman with great ambitions who rises above her humble surroundings less with her beauty and natural charms but more with her hard earned skills and life lessons. From a widow she becomes the most powerful woman in the Mogul history. This journey is fascinating in itself and satisfying as a historical fiction that depicts a detailed study of a character.

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